

HE WHO FIGHTS

WITH

MONSTERS

BOOK SIX

HEADLINE



SHIRTALOON

(A.K.A. TRAVIS DEVERELL)

S H I R T A L O O N
HE WHO FIGHTS
— WITH —
MONSTERS
B O O K S I X



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HE WHO FIGHTS WITH MONSTERS SIX

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Print and eBook formatting by Steve Beaulieu.

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LOOTING A HOUSE AS IT BURNS DOWN AROUND YOU

JACK GERLING WAS A GOLD-RANK ESSENCE USER, WHAT MOST of the world called a category-four essence magician. He was a part of the USA Network branches, who, at least internally, used the same terminology as Jason Asano had learned in the other world. This was due to information these branches had obtained when the United States was still a new nation. This had given them an advantage over the other branches that led to their modern dominance, challenged only by China.

Gerling had been dispatched to represent the US Network in Slovakia, where a magical event was taking place. Outside the city of Nitra, a massive, magical dome had appeared on the plains, consuming kilometres of farmland. This was not the first such event, and the so-called transformation zone would leave an alien landscape behind when the zone finally vanished. After that would come a race for the magical spoils within, most notably, a reality core.

Reality cores were unquestionably the most powerful source of magic the world had ever seen, as well as the very power that had led to Gerling being woken from decades of stasis. His gold-rank power was too much for the world to sustain without a sufficient source of concentrated magic, and the reality cores perfectly fit the bill. Their appearance was causing the US and China to awaken the powerful individuals like Gerling they had secreted away decades ago.

Despite the importance of reality cores and Gerling being assigned to snatch them, they were not what held his interest. His attention was focused on another power altogether. While

the forces of Earth's magical factions swarmed the impregnable dome, Gerling remained in Nitra, sipping coffee at a street café.

Like most places in the world, Nitra had shut down in the wake of the apocalyptic monster waves that had ravaged the world, but the arrival of the transformation zone had been a boon. It attracted powerful essence users, rendering the entire region safe. Further, it allowed the city to open up, in order to serve the wealthy and powerful visitors.

Jack's gold-rank eyesight picked out a tiny black shape in the sky. Air traffic avoided the transformation zones, so Jack knew exactly what the approach of an onyx-black jet meant: the arrival of the power that held Gerling's interest.

"He's here," Gerling muttered, putting down his coffee.

Jason Asano was weaker than Gerling by no small measure, but it was not small enough for Gerling. Asano and his otherworldly companion, Farrah Hurin, shouldn't have been able to put up any kind of fight against him. Yet when they clashed, Jack had to use all his most powerful abilities and Hurin had still escaped. As for Asano, his capture had lasted only minutes before he too escaped, somehow defeating the tools that should have suppressed his powers.

That Asano and Hurin were so powerful when their powers were below his was bad enough, but Asano's ability to do what should not have been possible at all had pushed Gerling over the edge. He knew that when Asano reached the same rank as him, it would swiftly lead to his death in revenge for killing Asano's brother, lover and friend.

Before that happened, Gerling needed to find Asano himself. Not only did he need to kill Asano before his power became too great, but he wanted Asano's secrets. If he could claim that power for himself, Gerling would be able to reign over the other hidden gold-rankers who were being awoken, along with any new ones that cropped up.

His eyes locked on the plane in the sky, Gerling stepped out into the street and launched himself into the air with gold-rank strength, sailing high over the rooftops. As he reached the

top of his arc, he triggered an explosion that sent him rocketing higher through the sky. More explosions continued to send him hurtling towards the giant dome out on the plains.

Jason's dark plane was not an actual jet but an amalgam of the many bodies of his shadow familiar, Shade. As it hurtled through the sky, it disintegrated into a cloud of shadows from which a dark-cloaked form plunged, plummeting through the air like a missile. The cloud of shadow twisted through the air in pursuit, trailing Asano's freefalling form like the tail of a dark comet. It slowly disappeared as it was drawn into the cloak.

Jason didn't slow his fall towards the city-sized dome, even angling his body down to accelerate as his senses took in the situation around the dome. The auras surrounding the transformation zone told the story of the magical factions waiting to exploit it. The contentious Network factions were split into various camps. There were the American Network and the old leadership faction, still calling themselves simply the Network. Jason couldn't differentiate one from another just by the aura of essence users, but the other factions were more obvious.

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

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

Jason's goal was nothing short of saving the world. He'd absorbed the power of a magical doorway that gave him access to a dimension where he could manipulate the fundamental underpinnings of reality. In this node space, he could slowly undo the modifications that had left the Earth in a magically unstable state. This had been done through a link to another world, one that Jason now realised he had ridden when he travelled between worlds by accident.

Jason was working to undo that link by making changes to node space, but even as he was changing it, it was changing him. Spending time in the strange realm where mortals had no place, he was constantly bombarded with dimensional forces. Only the many changes he had undergone over time allowed him to survive.

Jason was not the only one changed by node space. The level of magic rose as Earth grew more unstable, and with it, the node space leaked dimensional energy, creating the transformation zones. This was the source of the reality cores, which were common in node space as an intrinsic part of reality.

Unfortunately, the reality cores were of immense value to Earth's magical factions, leading to the cores being fought over instead of left alone. Each reality core that was taken from where it was exposed only furthered the instability of the Earth. Jason had informed the factions of this, only for them to either not believe him or not care as they scrambled for power.

The magical factions were in flux in the wake of the massive changes taking place around the Earth. The revelation of magic existing brought the factions into the light after centuries, or even millennia, spent hiding in the shadows. The subsequent monster waves, bringing about millions of deaths, likewise brought upheaval to the factions.

The youngest of the magical factions was the Engineers of Ascension, the EOA. They were splintering as the other factions and the world authorities hunted them down. They were the ones who brought down the grid that had helped prevent the monster waves, making them responsible for the

monster apocalypse that ravaged all but the protected cities in which humanity had huddled in confusion and fear.

The oldest faction was the Cabal. Made up of the strange and ancient creatures older than humanity itself, a schism had occurred after the rise of old and powerful vampires within their ranks. Some served the vampires that had wrested much of Europe from the control of humanity. The others sided with humanity.

The most powerful faction was the Network, but their ever-fractious nature had caused them to split as well. Mostly they were gathered into four blocs, the strongest of which were the US branches and the Chinese branches. They had always dominated and had long been prepared to go their own way; the US branches even staged a secret coup of the US government. This had not gone well, however, with civil unrest threatening to spill over into outright civil war. This left China as the strongest faction standing, having already taken a strong hold over their nation.

The other Network factions were led by what had formerly been the International Committee ostensibly operating as the Network leadership. Calling themselves the True Network, they held on to much of the governmental connections the Network had built in recent years. They also retained many of the Network's most powerful members not already affiliated with China or the United States.

The final Network faction were now calling themselves the Global Defence Network, having taken the name the Network used after first going public. The GDN had been made up of large numbers of the Network's rank and file, and had been taking in members of other factions. This was largely members of the EOA who had not realised what they were part of, and they were aligned with the parts of the Cabal also fighting the vampire threat.

Jason could pick out members of the various factions, often telling them apart by aura. There even seemed to be a faction of EOA who had managed to hold together. Jason had met their leader and knew there was more to their origins than even most of their members knew. Their most powerful

members were magically modified humans who could boost themselves with magical drugs and masqueraded as superheroes for publicity purposes.

The EOA had largely abandoned the superhero gimmick to operate more openly. It was a difficult position to maintain when other forces were demonstrably stronger than what were ostensibly superheroes. They now operated more like superhuman paramilitary, although their signature flight and eyebeam powers maintained a superheroic flavour.

The factions were in a general truce as they surrounded the transformation zone dome, saving their strength for the fight over whatever treasures lay inside. There were several gold rank auras present in the vampire camp, but the most powerful aura Jason sensed was approaching at blistering speed from the direction of the nearby city. There were explosions of magic in the distance, one after another. Jason sensed them before the sound reached him. They were propelling the gold-rank aura that rocketed towards the dome at supersonic speed.

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

Without hesitating, Jason opened a magic door with his powers. Instead of the usual freestanding arch, the door he called up this time was set directly into the surface of the dome. Dark, translucent crystal that sparkled with shifting light of blue, gold and silver formed the ring. Within the ring, the glassy surface of the dome was gone, exposing the rainbow energy that roiled and churned like a witch’s cauldron.

Gerling landed heavily on the dome with a gong-like sound, along with a shockwave that whipped at Jason’s blood-coloured robes. Standing on opposite sides of the portal, the two men stared each other down. Gerling was a huge brute of

a man, while Jason was small and shrouded in a dark cloak, speckled with stars. The cloak was not fabric but a dark, magical miasma, looking almost like a Jason was enveloped in black flames. Within the hood, Jason's face was hidden in darkness but for his shining silver eyes.

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

"You don't have the strength for revenge."

"Not today, it's true," Jason said as Shade's bodies emerged to stand around him. "But you don't have a fancy teleport trap in place either. I don't think you can catch me. Neither do you."

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

"I'm not here to answer your questions, Gerling. I have more important things to deal with."

"Like what? Finally joining the fight for reality cores?"

"The cores should be left alone," Jason said. "I've warned you all and no one cares."

Gerling stared at Jason, his expression conflicted.

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

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

Gerling looked down at the portal set into the dome.

"Are you really trying to save the world?"

"Yes."

"From what?"

Jason thumped a foot on the dome.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed,” he said, “but our planet is coming apart at the seams. I’ve been trying to stop it from slowly disintegrating, but now there’s this transformation zone. It’s not like the others.”

“We know. It appeared on top of a proto-space and they’ve merged somehow. Everyone thinks there will be more reality cores than normal when this dome opens.”

“What there will be is a hole in the side of the universe. A hole that, if I don’t close it, will annihilate our planet with dimensional forces of a magnitude that will treat our world like tissue paper in a hurricane.”

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

“Go,” Gerling said. “Do what you have to do.”

“Seriously?”

“I have questions, but I’ll catch you another day.”

“Leaving me to do this doesn’t absolve you for killing my people.”

“I don’t want your absolution,” Gerling said. “I want your secrets.”

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

“He talked to her *after* I killed her?” he wondered out loud.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gerling turned his gaze and his aura on the vampire, who met his eyes for a moment before flinching. Whatever else might be happening, Gerling was still the most powerful being out of the dozens gathering atop the dome. A pecking order had quickly taken shape as the strongest of them had moved closer to the door while the weaker ones had backed off.

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

He leapt back into the air and shot off with a series of explosions, leaving the people gathered around the doorway behind.

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

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

- This area of the local physical reality has been in a state of dimensional flux and has been isolated by [World-Phoenix Intervention].

- This space operates according to an abnormal magical paradigm. Essence abilities will not take effect. Adapt yourself to the environment and the environment to yourself to render your abilities functional.

His aura and perception power were both gone. They were so much a part of him, such an extension of himself, that to suddenly lose them felt crippling. His basic senses were still enhanced by his silver-rank attributes, far beyond what a normal human enjoyed, yet he felt almost blinded.

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

“Oh, what the bloody hell is this?”

Jason knew that the World-Phoenix had done something to stabilise the Earth long ago, after discovering that it was an experiment by the entity that created the universe. Whatever she had done, which pre-dated the human race, was now interacting with the power she had subsequently gifted Jason. She had apparently anticipated this scenario and prepared him for it.

The World-Phoenix's definition of prepared seemed to diverge from Jason's, however. The method he used to cause changes within node space involved leveraging his aura as a tool, something Jason had become increasingly adept at. Now he could no longer do so due to the loss of his aura power, despite that being the entire point of coming into the transformation zone. It left him feeling helpless.

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

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

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

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

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

wouldn't be sensible.”

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

Jason's reliance on his conjured weapon, currently denied to him, meant that his under-ranked sword was the only backup that he had. Even so, the familiar grip in his hand was a reassuring presence when he was alone in what was sure to be a bizarre realm.

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

Bringing up the map in the transformation zone was a little disconcerting. Only the room he was in was marked on it. A fog covered the space outside the room, and the edges of the map were shifting and changing as he looked at them. He checked the listed location.

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

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

As he continued to test his available abilities, Jason noted his power to turn Shade's bodies into vehicles was a non-starter, as Shade was unable to emerge in the first place. His last active power was his spirit vault, which he was hesitant to test. His spirit vault was the doorway to his soul, which he was wary about opening in such a place. The system message had warned him that exerting his soul in this place could permanently change him in unknown ways, so opening a portal to the innermost reaches of his soul was a risk he was wary of taking.

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

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

DOMAIN

JASON WAS IN A SMALL ROOM THAT WAS TRANSFORMING FROM a dilapidated plaster box with peeling wallpaper to a stone room shaped by his own power. He had tried to open his spirit vault, but instead, the space around him seemed to be turning into his spirit vault. It was more than a little disconcerting, although the benefits were substantial. He might have stumbled upon the means by which he could stabilise the transformation zone before it gouged a wound in the skin of the universe.

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

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

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

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

Jason backed up hard against the wall as it rushed him again. He lifted both feet to intercept the creature, pushing back against it to maintain a gap as it shoved him harder into the wall. It snapped its mouth as Jason fended it off with his legs, his sword held overhead in both hands. He started stabbing down, but the blade slid off its rubbery skin, leaving not so much as a scratch.

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

- You have defeated [Living Anomaly].
 - Would you like to loot [Living Anomaly]?
-
- Interaction with [Living Anomaly] has instigated random changes in weapon [Dread Salvation]. Further

interaction will consolidate change.

- Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised and refined changes to weapon [Dread Salvation].
- [Dread Salvation] transformation status: 0.4%.

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

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

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

- [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 0.004%.

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

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

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

He reminded himself to have Dawn thank the World-Phoenix for the power. He knew that generosity was not what motivated the World-Phoenix, but rather the need for a tool that could repair the damage to Earth. He was grateful for the ability anyway, since he would have tried to do it either way. He wouldn't begrudge a mutually beneficial deal, so long as both sides played it straight. The power had shaped him into exactly the right tool for the job at hand and, without it, he would have failed long ago.

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

Jason's independent streak was strong but, for the moment at least, he and the World-Phoenix had the same objectives. He might not trust the great astral beings, with their alien minds

and epoch-spanning agendas, but he was forced to acknowledge that they had done a lot for him. Whatever their motivations, the World-Phoenix brought him both home and back from the dead, while the Reaper brought back Farrah. If the price for all that was saving a world or two, he was happy to pay it.

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

Jason's aura senses had been restored alongside his aura, albeit in a similarly restricted fashion. It was enough to recognise that the anomaly had been silver rank, though. Was that a coincidence? It seemed odd that a reality-reshaping event would be limited to silver-rank power. Was it a factor of Earth's low magical density or was it related to Jason himself? He searched through the system messages again.

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

Did the anomaly appear as a reaction to Jason using his spirit vault power? It made sense to Jason that if the anomaly was triggered by his action, the resulting reaction would share his power level. It seemed likely that more of those things would appear as he attempted to stabilise the space. Hopefully, those still to come wouldn't be much more powerful.

The living anomaly had been very weak compared to most silver-rank monsters, falling into the variety that normally appeared in large packs and was severely lacking in fortitude. Even so, the bronze-rank sword had trouble piercing the creature's skin, forcing Jason to attack its more vulnerable

insides. The anomalies that appeared in the future were likely to be far more numerous as he expanded the stable area and more of them spawned.

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

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

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

- Effect: Use to set up spiritual domains. Expanding spiritual domains requires additional cores based on the size of the spiritual domain.

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

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

Either he would need to completely convert the transformation space or maybe he could just reach some kind of threshold that stabilised it enough that a wound wasn't torn in the side of reality. He just hoped that he could handle however many anomalies came at him while he didn't have his combat powers.

Putting away the core, he got to his feet and sheathed his sword, the blood and gore on it having dissolved into smoke.

He made his way to the door to find what awaited him. He emerged into what looked like a hotel hallway, in the same state of disrepair as the room he just left. The transformation brought about by his spirit vault had stopped inside the room.

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

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

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

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

Jason took some cautious steps forwards and the patchy carpet started squelching underfoot, having become the same paint-like substance as the wall. He backed off, back onto

actual carpet. Checking that he'd been passing through an actual hallway, he identified the point that ostensibly normal hallway gave way to a strange paint-flesh thing. Heading down the other way, he confirmed that in either direction, the hallway started turning strange at points equidistant from his spirit domain, the room in which he had arrived.

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

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

“Sure,” he said.

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

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NEEDS OF THE MOMENT

HIS SILVER-RANK ATTRIBUTES PLACED JASON FIRMLY IN THE realm of superhuman, but attributes alone was a car with a powerful engine and no wheels. If not used to their maximum potential, they were being wasted, which was what differentiated the best adventurers from the worst. This was something Rufus, Gary and Farrah had repeated over and over during his training. From the very start, they had been looking not just further ahead than Jason but even beyond their own progress at the time. Jason was now stronger and more experienced than they had been at the time they trained him, yet their lessons continued to pay dividends.

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

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

When Jason had used the first stable genesis core, his spirit domain had expanded outwards. The smoky glass with the glimmering internal light spread out from the room it had

already taken over and both directions down the hallway. It stopped at the point where the normal hallway gave way to the bizarre, fleshy materials Jason had already discovered.

- Your spirit domain has expanded.
- Interaction with genesis space has instigated uncontrolled secondary evolution of ability [Spirit Vault]. Further interaction will complete evolution.
- Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised and refined the secondary evolution path of [Spirit Vault].
- [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 0.008%.

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

- You have defeated [Living Anomaly].

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With no idea of how long he had to accomplish his task, Jason was concerned. He was confident he could control how much he expanded his spirit domain and how many anomalies accordingly attacked by how many cores he used at once. With no idea of how long he had to stabilise the transformation zone, he felt the need to accelerate his pace but wasn't

confident about taking on more than a few of the anomalies at a time. Even if they were much weaker than equivalent-rank monsters, Jason was much weaker than an equivalent-rank essence user at that moment.

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

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

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

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

He strongly suspected the evolution of his spirit vault was directly tied to his progress stabilising the zone. The minuscule percentage suggested he would need to accelerate the rate of change, but he was already pushing himself dangerously hard. His hope was that the transformation of his sword, which was progressing at a much better pace, would be the change he needed. Until it was complete, all he could do was carry on. He moved up a floor and slogged his way through more anomalies to claim it for his spirit domain.

- [Dread Salvation] transformation status: 68.2%.

Another floor would likely do it, but Jason wanted to stop for a break. Even with his silver-rank recovery attribute and no powers to burn mana on, Jason felt exhausted. With the top floor claimed, he wanted to survey his surroundings from the roof. His aura could extend to any point within his domain and

he could feel the roof above with it; the rooftop was now within his domain.

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

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

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

Looking out at the vast space around him, Jason probed the edges of the domain with his restored aura. With his experience working within node space, he was able to get a sense of what was going on. The transformation space had inadvertently sliced open the astral space and blended the reshaping of the physical reality with that of the astral space. Now they were entwined and neither was able to close.

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

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

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

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

Jason lay on the floor of the newly extended portion of his spirit domain. Normally, after a fight, he would simply use his blood harvest power for massive recovery. It was a power he had taken for granted until it was gone. Without that ability and having suffered severe damage, even Colin's regenerative power was taking time to heal him up.

Jason pulled out a tin of healing ointment and started rubbing it on his legs. It was one of the most common items any loot power produced, and while it was of little use to Jason and his many recovery powers, it was a reliable source of cash if he needed some quick coin. Healing items were always welcome, and Jason accrued so many that he donated most of them. In the other world, he had handed them off to Jory's clinic, while in this one, it was usually the Network or the Asano Village's medical centre.

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

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

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

“Moment of truth.”

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

Jason looked at the simple message.

“Huh.”

He held out his sword to examine it.

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

A sword crafted with gratitude, in hope of it being the greatest use in the moment of greatest need. It was bound to its

wielder and his powers by extreme and unusual forces; it carries the arrogance of one who would remake reality in his own image. Due to the lacking craftsmanship, most of its potential is sealed until the original craftsman demonstrates his growth by reforging the weapon (weapon, sword).

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and cannot be used by anyone else. This bond allows the weapon to share the wielder's ability to ignore rank disparity.
- Effect: You may imbue your aura into the weapon, increasing its damage for an ongoing mana cost. Damage and cost scales with the amount of aura strength imbued, up to the limitations of the weapon's current state. Aura strength over that required for the maximum damage output reduces the mana cost.
- Current rank: Bronze.
- Current maximum damage increase: Moderate.
- Current maximum mana cost: Low. Decreased from moderate by wielder's aura strength. Mana cost cannot be eliminated entirely, regardless of the wielder's aura strength.
- Effect: ??? (Sealed).
- Growth conditions (silver): Sealed.

- [Dread Salvation] has reached the maximum potential of its current form. It must be reforged by the original craftsman in order to advance further.

Jason read over the changes to his weapon. It had lost its old abilities, but that was not a concern, given their limited value to him. He suspected that the sword bonding to him somehow recognised that and changed accordingly, changing into a state that met the extreme needs of the moment. Even in its current sealed state, the weapon was far more useful.

- You have three soul-bonded items. You qualify to use the [Soul-Imprinting Triune].

He had looted the triune from the intelligent gold-rank monster, King, who had been in the proto-space at Makassar. It was an item he had been unable to use, thus it had languished in his inventory. Now that had changed, and he pulled the item out to examine it for the first time since he obtained it.

A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN AND A SACK OF CASH

JASON NEEDED TO CLAIM MOST, IF NOT ALL, OF THE VAST extradimensional space he found himself in. If he failed, a wound would appear in the side of reality, leading to the Earth's rapid annihilation. He could bring about the transformation by expanding what his powers described as a spirit domain, something he only moderately understood. Thus far, he had managed to convert the top three floors of a dilapidated hotel, turning it into a cold place of dark crystal.

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

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

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

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

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

The soul-imprinting triune would allow Jason to turn his soul-bound items into a set. It was an exciting opportunity, but there was also one noticeable problem. One of the items, which were required to be carried directly on his person, was the cloud flask. There was no problem with his amulet or sword, but the cloud flask was the size and shape of a round-bottom boiling flask. It was not exactly the most convenient item to be carrying around in a fight. He needed to weigh up the pros and cons of using the triune now.

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

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

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

Another pro to using the item was that it offered him power now. With his abilities sealed and the world itself at

stake, he needed every advantage he could get. The attendant con was that there were no guarantees the effects would be any good. If he held off until he found a better-suited item, the dividends of patience could be great. Of course, he had no idea when or if he would get another soul-bound item, or if it would be any more convenient to carry around than the cloud flask.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Your understanding of your spiritual domain had improved. Evolution of ability [Spirit Vault] had advanced due to your insight.

- [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 1.784%.

Jason took out his cloud flask and set it on the table. The sword came off his belt and the amulet from around his neck, both of which he laid out as well. He held the triune in his hands.

- You meet the qualifications to use [Soul-Imprinting Triune].

- Use [Soul-Imprinting Triune] on [Amulet of the Dark Guardian], [Cloud Flask] and [Dread Salvation]?

Jason gave his mental assent and the triune dissolved into a mist that spread over him and the objects on the table. They floated into the air and drifted around Jason's body. He felt his soul reaching out to the objects, striving to deepen the shallow connection it already had to them. As it did, he could feel each of the three objects. The mist condensed into lines, connecting Jason to his magical items.

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

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

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

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

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and cannot be used by anyone else.
- Effect: For each instance of an affliction applied to an enemy, gain an instance of [Guardian's Blessing]. You may bestow all instances of [Guardian's Blessing] upon another person by touch.
- Effect (set bonus, Regalia of the Hegemon): For each instance of an affliction applied to an enemy, gain an instance of [Hegemon's Authority].

- [Guardian's Blessing] (boon, holy, stacking):
Instances are consumed to absorb damage from any source. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. For each instance consumed, gain an instance of [Blessing's Bounty].
- [Blessing's Bounty] (heal-over-time, holy, stacking):
Heal over time. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
- [Hegemon's Authority] (boon, holy, unholy, stacking): All allies within your aura have increased resistance to aura suppression. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consume instances of this boon to enhance your aura suppression strength.

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

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

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

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

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

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and cannot be used by anyone else.
- Effect: Use the energies within the cloud flask to create buildings and vehicles made of clouds. Available forms are restricted by rank.
- Effect: Items contained within the cloud construct when it is returned to the flask are stored in a dimensional space and cannot be recovered until another cloud construct is formed.
- Effect (set bonus, Regalia of the Hegemon): Shrouds the wearer in mist. Mist can be controlled through aura manipulation to condense into small cloud constructs. Constructs only provide effective defence against attacks lower than the rank of this item; attacks of its rank and above are minimally impeded. Shroud can be withdrawn into the flask.
- Available forms (iron rank): Cloud house (grand), cloud house (adaptive).
- Available forms (bronze rank): Cloud vehicle (grand), cloud vehicle (adaptive).
- Available forms (silver rank): Cloud palace (grand), cloud palace (adaptive).

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

“Well, that’s convenient.”

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

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

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

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

“Is he...?” Farrah asked of Dawn.

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

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

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

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

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Farrah said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A sword awaiting the chance to be the iron fist of the hegemon. The original creator must demonstrate his growth and reforge the weapon for it to surpass its origins and fulfil its potential (weapon, sword).

- This item is bound to [Jason Asano] and cannot be used by anyone else. This bond allows the weapon to share the wielder's ability to ignore rank disparity.
- Effect: You may imbue your aura into the weapon, increasing its damage for an ongoing mana cost. Damage and cost scales with the amount of aura strength imbued, up to the limitations of the weapon's current state. Aura strength over that required for the maximum damage output reduces the mana cost.
- Current rank: Bronze.
- Current maximum damage increase: Moderate.
- Current maximum mana cost: Low. Decreased from moderate by wielder's aura strength. Mana cost cannot be eliminated entirely, regardless of the wielder's aura strength.
- Effect: ??? (Sealed).
- Effect (Regalia of the Hegemon): Enemies struck with this weapon are subjected to a mild mana drain effect and are inflicted with [Hegemon's Tribute].
- [Hegemon's Tribute] (affliction, magic): Anyone affected by Hegemon's Tribute is subject to a mild, ongoing mana drain effect by the wielder of [Dread

Salvation] so long as they remain within the wielder's aura. If this affliction is cleansed or the subject dies, a final burst of mana is drained.

- Growth conditions (silver): Sealed.
- [Dread Salvation] has reached the maximum potential of its current form. It must be reforged by the original craftsman in order to advance further.

The items stopped floating around Jason as the mist that the triune had turned into faded away. They gently drifted back down onto the table as Jason looked over the extensive description windows. After reviewing it all, he placed the necklace with the amulet and the miniaturised flask around his neck. The sword, he slid back into its scabbard. Then he looked out over the dark landscape that seemed a little less intimidating than before.

“Alright,” he said to no one.

As when he first arrived in Farrah's world, he found himself alone and talking to himself. He was eager for Shade to be released so he had someone to make wildly outdated and barely relevant pop culture references to.

“Time to get to work.”

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YOU HAVE TO BE TRUE TO YOURSELF

THE MIST PRODUCED BY HIS CLOUD FLASK IN AMULET FORM swirled around Jason, mostly gathering around his feet as if only slightly heavier than air.

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

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

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

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

Fortunately, Jason anticipated no shortage of chances to practise. He made his way down the stairs, to the landing

between the third storey, which he already claimed, and the second storey, where his spirit domain currently ended.

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

He gave his mental assent.

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

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

“Nine,” Jason said as he drew his sword.

He started walking down the stairs as they transformed into dark crystal.

- Your spirit domain has expanded.

- Interaction with genesis space has instigated uncontrolled secondary evolution of ability [Spirit Vault]. Further interaction will complete evolution.
- Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised and refined the secondary evolution path of [Spirit Vault].
- [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 1.936%.

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

- Damage of [Dread Salvation] has been enhanced to maximum current level.

- Current damage increase: Moderate.
- Ongoing mana cost: Low.

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

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

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

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

Condensing his mist shroud into a chair, he sat down to take stock of what he had learned. For one thing, the anomalies were even weaker than he thought, despite their

silver-rank auras. Aside from their silver-rank damage reduction, few showed any power beyond that of a bronze-rank monster. With his silver-rank attributes and newly empowered sword, Jason could easily mow through the living anomalies. He had a sneaking suspicion that things would not remain quite so easy as he continued expanding the domain.

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

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

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

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

- You have overtaken a genesis space territory and purged all anomalous elements.

- Completed territory is being remade.

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

It quickly became apparent that the building was transforming into a larger version of the pagoda from Jason's spirit vault. As alcoves for flowers appeared in the walls, this became even more apparent. These were the same flowers that appeared in the gardens that sprawled around the pagoda in his spirit vault.

Jason knew that his task was to stabilise the transformation zone that failed to consolidate due to merging with a proto-space. Now he'd discovered that meant remaking the space in the image of his own soul. The problem was that, as far as he could tell, the proto-space had made the space inside the dome larger than the space it occupied outside.

Jason had no idea how much territory he would have to claim to effectively stabilise the transformation zone. Enough to cover the original space or the expanded area created by the proto-space? What would happen when the dome no longer separated the space outside from the space inside? It didn't take a lot of expertise in dimension magic to realise that the same place trying to be two different sizes at the same time would be very, very bad.

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

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

- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
- Territory has been renamed [Arrival Pagoda].

- [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 4.1%.

- Anomalies attacking as a result of further spirit domain expansion will have increased power.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Gordon, were you in charge of the decoration?”

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

The building wasn't even the same shape as it had been, having changed from a rectangular box to an octagonal design. The roof was no longer accessible, being sloped instead of flat, but each floor had balconies running around the outside. As he wandered around, Jason found the hotel turned into what was a lot like a high-end apartment building.

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

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

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

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

“Huh.”

“Well?” Li Li Mei demanded of the drone operator. They were standing on the curve of the dome, next to the portal. Unlike the portal inside, this one was still a circle set into the surface

of the dome. The drone operator held a tablet that should have been receiving data.

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

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

“Oh, it’s still a circle on this side. G’day, Miss Li. It’s been a while. Do you remember me? It’s Jason. Jason Asano.”

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

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

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

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

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

Jason’s head felt very strange after being displaced from the reality pocket that contained the rest of his body.

“It’s tingly,” he said to the empty room. “I kind of like it.”

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

“That Miss Li still has that formal-yet-sultry thing going on. Too bad she’s evil.”

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

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

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

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

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

“That worked out nicely,” he said, nodding his approval as he put his hands behind his head and relaxed.

He considered the pagoda-shaped residential complex, from the water feature hallways to the ubiquitous wall planters to the vast atrium with its own waterfall. He hadn’t found the source of the water, although he never really looked. At this point in his life, if he investigated every little bit of magic, he’d never get anything done.

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

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

“Don’t open them both,” he admonished himself. “You only need one door. Opening them both would be cheesy and

melodramatic. For once, don't be a chuuni and go through just one door. Like a regular person.”

He walked up and pushed both doors open.

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

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ONE MORE SECRET

JASON LOOKED AROUND SUSPICIOUSLY AT WHAT LOOKED LIKE A modern metropolitan street, with a few anachronistic quirks. Most of the buildings were three or four storeys high, packed close together, and the ground level filled with storefronts.

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

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

He scanned his eyes over the over the street where most of the details looked ordinary and modern. Only a few elements stood out as unusual. The streetlamps glowed with electric light, yet had a strange design like old gas lamps. In the display window of one of the stores was a television that looked right out of the sixties.

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

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

Jason's shoulders slumped as he trailed off, remembering. He could feel the familiars inside him but couldn't call them out, which angered him more than having all his other powers

sealed. More than the powers they offered, his familiars were his ever-reliable companions. Without them at his side, he was truly alone.

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

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

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

He continued down the street, finding another hotel, a café and what looked to be a pharmacy. As he moved, he could only see around a dozen metres through the gloom. Otherwise, all he could see were the stars in the sky and the pale glow of the street lamps, like a procession of willow-'o-the-wisps.

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

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

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

“Mr Chen,” she greeted him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Both men laughed, their smiles not reaching their eyes.

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

The vampires watching on stirred but held their tongues.

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

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

Jason was standing outside the pagoda’s front doors.

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

Thirty-one cores were more than triple what the cost to claim each floor of the building had been, and that was the minimum to expand into the surrounding territory. He certainly wasn’t

going to try using cores above the minimum amount when he had already been warned of stronger anomalies.

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

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

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

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

- Your spirit domain has expanded.

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

That wasn't a big boost to his skill evolution. It appeared that completing territories gave much greater rewards than incremental expansion. This meant that Jason would need to claim a good number of territories in order to stabilise the space as a whole. This fit with Jason's existing assumptions, but it was nice to have some supporting evidence.

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

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

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

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

Once the shapes in the dark started to move, he knew it wasn't just nerves. Suddenly, a rush of figures stormed out of the gloom; a rabid army of what looked like ordinary people sent into a rabid rage, brandishing tyre irons, lengths of pipe, planks with nails and a panoply of sporting equipment. The horde came spilling out of the darkness at the edge of his spirit domain like a wave.

“Oh shi—”

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

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

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

“I cannot be certain,” Chen said. “The senses of my scouting orb were completely blocked. It could only detect the

forces that pressed upon it directly. This is the second problem: I believe that essence powers are suppressed on the other side of the portal. My summon remained intact, so anything already in place is likely to remain, but I doubt new powers can be used.”

“That’s dangerous,” Li Mei said.

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

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

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

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

“How does Asano withstand it?” she asked.

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

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

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

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

“I believe I have what we need,” Chen said. “I have a shield that can protect against abnormal dimensional effects. The only drawback is that it consumes the shielded person’s

mana to negate the forces it blocks. I can place this ability on each of us before we go in, but the mana consumption will likely be large. I can't supplement that, so you will need to manage your own mana. If you stray from the portal, make sure that you have enough to get back to it in time.”

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

Jason was startled by their berserker rage, which left them with no sense of self-preservation. Many were dying or crippling themselves as they launched from high places; survivors dragged themselves forward if they had to. Jason's first thought was that they were the people caught in the transformation zone, but to his senses, they were identical to the living anomalies he had faced in the building. They might all seem like normal, if rabid, people, but their auras were in no way human.

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

His system had warned Jason that the living anomalies would become stronger. Instead, they seemed as weak or

weaker, without any bizarre monstrous forms. They relied on strength in numbers as Jason went from fighting a few at a time in the hotel to facing what was easily hundreds, while keenly feeling the absence of his powers.

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

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INSTINCT IS ALL WE HAVE

SPRAWLED ON THE GROUND, JASON WAS HAMMERED BY A crowd of people-shaped anomalies with planks, pipes and cricket bats. His sword had skewered one of them right through the face, and it fell on top of him. Using the creature as a shield, he pushed up to his feet, although the corpse made a poor barrier. Attacks continued to rain down from every direction, pummeling his head, back and arms. One of the anomalies even bit into him like a zombie.

- You have been afflicted with [Streptococcus].
- You have resisted.

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

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

He was reminded of his first fight with a silver-ranker when his team fought the archbishop of Purity, Nicholas Hendren. Their bronze-rank attacks seemed futile as he took hit after hit without slowing down. Jason absently wondered if

the rabid anomalies felt the same frustration as he continued blowing past them. He doubted they had much capacity to think at all, as they seemed more like meat puppets than people.

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

- You have abandoned your incomplete spirit domain territory while anomalies are present.
- Your spirit domain will retract over time until you return or all anomalies are destroyed.
- If anomalies remain when all non-territory domain space has reverted to genesis space, anomalies will be able to attack your completed territory.

“Oh, strewth,” Jason complained, rolling his shoulders painfully.

The beating he suffered didn't include any critical attacks, but he felt like he'd been repeatedly backed over by a car. He was rapidly healing, though, with the bite wound on his arm already closed. He turned to look out as the crowd of anomalies gathered like a sea around his pagoda. At least he could no longer sense new ones spawning, although perhaps they would if he went back out.

“How am I going to deal with...”

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

“Ask and ye shall receive, I guess.”

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

“Good thing I left the door open.”

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

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

Their powers were sealed off, yet the place was oddly comfortable, in spite of the energy eating away at their shields. In the normal world, the low quality of magic meant that only the power of the reality cores sustained them. The magic in this place was rich and potent, as if it were where they belonged.

Aside from the hostile energies attacking them, there was also an aura pressing in on them that Gerling recognised. Their own auras were completely suppressed, which prevented them

from extending their magical senses. If the aura hadn't been imposing itself on them, they might not have detected it at all.

"Asano," Gerling muttered.

None of them were able to exercise their own auras, making them subject to the aura being pushed on them. It didn't have any deleterious effects they could detect, but it left them uneasy. The aura was complex and authoritarian, with deep veins of resolve and other strange traits they didn't recognise, but were somewhat unnerving.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Right, you lot," Jason demanded. "Come with me."

He turned to leave when Guo called out to him.

"You don't tell us what to do, Asano."

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

“I do now.”

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

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

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

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

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

“You’ll die here too.”

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

“Guo, that’s enough!” Chen barked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How?” Gerling asked.

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

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

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

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

“I used to work in retail stationery,” he mused. “It’s been an odd few years.”

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

“You want something in return for your help saving the world that you live on?” Jason asked pointedly. “Kind of a prick move, but what exactly do you have in mind?”

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

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

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

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

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

Jason pointed to the stone double doors.

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

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

anomalies, but the gold rankers were so powerful that the tighter they clustered the better.

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

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

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

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

They cleared out the open spaces and started going after the ones still in the buildings, with Jason directing the others to where he sensed them. More of the anomalies continued to spawn, but they seemed to do so at a rate commensurate with the number of live anomalies that had already invaded Jason's domain. When the place had been swarming, that swarm rapidly grew. The spawn rate diminished as the gold-rankers aggressively thinned out the numbers. After Jason sensed the

last anomaly fall, he moved to the edge of his domain where it met the dark fog of gloom to be certain.

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

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

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

“So, it’s done?” Gerling asked.

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

“We can return, once we’ve replenished our mana,” Chen said.

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

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

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

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

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

“Poetic,” Gerling said, “but assuming this place has a mind working against us seems like jumping to conclusions.”

“Maybe,” Jason admitted. “But we’re through the looking glass, here. Sometimes instinct is all we have, even if it’s unreliable. I don’t think trying to loophole a gaping wound in reality is a risk I want to take. And I’m not sure it’s working against us. It seems more like a dungeon master trying to balance everything against the participants.”

“Dungeon master?” Gerling asked.

“You never played *Dungeons & Dragons*?”

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

STEP BACK

STANDING IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STREET, JASON LOOKED AT the spheres Tran held, still bloody from where they had been ripped out of the anomalies. As he looked around, it wasn't hard to spot more of the spheres, torn from the anomalies by the sheer violence with which they had been handled. The spheres were the size of the genesis cores Jason had been using, but instead of rainbow colours, the energy swirling within was black and red. Jason suspected that the process of looting them, rather than ripping them directly out of corpses, changed the cores, refining them into a usable state. Since the ones he looted and used were stable genesis cores, it was likely these were the unstable variety.

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

“This place has a lot of secrets,” Jason said.

“As do you, Mr Asano,” Chen said.

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

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

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

“I would very strongly recommend against attempting to use those cores,” Jason said.

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

“I’ll do it,” Tran said. “Anything this Japanese can do, I can do better.”

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

“You’re just trying to hide the benefits you’re taking for yourself,” Tran said.

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

“No chance,” Gerling said.

“You’ll probably be fine,” Jason lied transparently.

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

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

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

“We have a larger duty,” Chen said, even as he backed off.

Guo and Gerling did the same. As they watched, the red light stopped spreading and was instead drawn into Tran’s body. His body started bulging oddly, as if balloons were inflating inside it.

“I think he’s going to explode or go full Cronenberg,” Jason yelled in warning.

Guo, Chen and Gerling retreated to the alley with Jason.

“What does Cronenberg mean?” Guo asked.

“We have more important matters to pay attention to,” Chen said.

Tran had fallen to the ground and was thrashing around, screaming.

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

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

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

“I like *Star Trek*,” Guo said defensively.

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

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

“Seriously?” Gerling asked.

“I like *Star Trek*,” Guo said again.

“Focus!” Chen snapped.

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

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

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

“What?” Gerling snarled.

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

“How is that possible?” Guo asked.

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

“What is a star scream?” Chen asked.

“Screw this,” Gerling said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Watch out,” Jason called.

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

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

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

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

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

Jason came to as he rapidly healed the damage, although he still couldn't hear and it felt like a spike had been driven through his head. Still disoriented, he wondered how he was

even affected like that since he was long past hearing via a vulnerable eardrum.

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

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

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

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

Unhappily, Jason drew his sword and took a fist-sized lump of golden crystal from his inventory. It was his ultimate trump card against vampires, something he had been holding on to for years after winning it as a prize in the Reaper Trials. He had intended it to be his most powerful weapon in the vampire war, but he had no chance of defeating the transformed Tran without it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- You have defeated [Reality-Dysphoric Anomaly].

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You might need us again,” Gerling said.

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

“Mr Asano,” Chen said. “If we do not return with something to show for our efforts—and our loss—then it will

be hard to convince our people not to come after you the moment you leave this place.”

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

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

Jason looked from Chen to the dead Tran and back.

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

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

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

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

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

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

- You have looted [Reality-Dysphoric Anomaly].

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

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GUNS & MONEY

JASON, CHEN, GUO AND GERLING WALKED IN THE DIRECTION of the pagoda, through streets painted with dead anomalies.

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

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

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

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

“What?” Guo asked.

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

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

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

"I'm good," Gerling said.

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

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

"Right," Gerling said. "Need to avoid any mishaps."

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

"What are you talking about?" Guo asked.

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

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

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

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

"Are you fine if we just leave these cores here?" Chen asked Jason. Having prevented Guo from suspecting the cores might be dangerous to carry through, neither he nor Gerling was going to take the same risk.

"I'll take them," Jason said, collecting the cores from Chen and Gerling.

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

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

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

Jason flashed him a snake’s grin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The haul was a huge boost to Jason’s coffers, with ten silver spirit coins and an equivalent value of bronze and iron coming from each one. It reached the point that Jason was glad spirit coins appeared in his inventory as a simple counter or he’d need a storage pit like Scrooge McDuck.

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

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

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

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

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

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

What most caught his eye was the selection of weapons that he looted, nine of them in total. The most attention-grabbing was a very large gun and some kind of bazooka. To Jason, the firearm looked like a steampunk minigun, while the

rocket launcher would be at home in a *Jetsons* spin-off movie where Elroy got drafted and went to war.

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

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

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

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

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

Jason turned his attention to the bazooka.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lightning rifle (weapon, grenade launcher).

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

“Lightning gun,” Jason said reverently.

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

“Homing lightning,” Jason said with a huge grin. The weapon consumed a large amount of his mana, even from a short burst, however.

“Let’s call it an awesomeness tax.”

The arc rifle had a bandolier it came with that didn’t seem to attach to the gun in any way. Instead, it had some metal

disks, the purpose of which Jason was uncertain. He spent some time examining them and realised they were magnetic.

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

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

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

After some debate with himself, Jason risked trying to store unstable orbs in his inventory and found they were perfectly fine. Then the heavy weapons went in.

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

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

Energy pistol (weapon, pistol).

- Effect: Fires a blast of energy at the cost of mana. Basic blasts are an efficient balance of power to mana cost.

- Effect: Change up mana to fire a powerful but mana-inefficient blast.

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

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

The last items Jason had to look at were the two that came from looting the gold-ranker-turned-vampire, Tran. Looting powers on low-rankers only rifled through their possessions and dimensional storage space, if they had one. High-rankers, including Jason himself, were different. From a purely physical perspective, there was little difference between the body of a gold-ranker and a monster; looting powers affected them the same way. The magic they were made of was converted into useful items by the looting power, rather than simply dissolving it all into rainbow smoke.

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

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

powerful enemies. That item was a lamp made from silver and gold, with sapphire settings.

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

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OLD HABIT

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

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

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

The new anomalies weren't just different from the previous ones in outfit and weaponry but also behaviour.

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

“I have to check that out after I have this shootout with that small army of astronauts.”

He paused again.

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

Jason waited for a group of the astronauts to walk past the doors of the department store before he approached the doors himself, causing the motion sensor to slide them open. He briefly peppered the astronauts with blasts from the pistols held in each of his hands before ducking out of the way as they swung their weapons to return fire.

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

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

Jason could already sense more anomalies approaching the store, drawn by the gunfire. The retro sci-fi blasters weren't as

loud as ordinary guns firing supersonic slugs but neither were they quiet. He needed to take out the group he had already started on before more of them arrived.

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

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

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

For his first attempt to take one out, Jason attacked on an open street. He picked his ambush location and waited for it to walk past, accompanied by a trio of rifle anomalies. He rose up and fired both pistols, landing multiple hits on the lightning gun anomaly's head. The bolts struck the slow-moving astronaut's helmet straight on; it was scorched and blackened but not broken. The whole group turned their weapons on Jason, who ducked down and rolled away from the car.

Energy blasts sizzled past Jason or were blocked by the car. The arc from the electricity gun curved to latch on to the car, just as Jason had intended. He had immediately realised

upon using the lightning gun himself that the homing feature was both a strength and weakness, due to its indiscriminate nature.

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

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

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

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

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

Jason fell to the ground, barely managing to pull out a pistol to shoot the lightning gun anomaly's companions as they rushed around the car to attack him. He managed to gun them down but took blasts to the leg, shoulder, and gut in the process. After chugging one of his few silver-rank healing potions, he painfully stowed the minigun, staggered into an adjacent building and rode its elevator up to the roof. There he hit the emergency stop to prevent it from being used to follow him.

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

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

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

Jason was uncertain how well he could handle them, given how many of the anomalies had come together. He would need to move before they completely converged on the rooftop. While Jason's raw physical and perceptual advantages helped him use guns with superhuman accuracy, he had no grasp of firearms tactics. He had been relying on variations of his usual stealth tactics, essentially treating the pistols as long, loud swords. It played to his strengths but would be less effective

against larger groups where hit-and-run tactics would be harder to execute without being pinned down.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“...no idea where the tentacle monster on top of the dome came from, but the gathered forces fight it even as it continues

to grow...”

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

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

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

“I haven't done this in a while, the magic being kind of crap in my world so the recording crystals don't work so well,” he said to the crystal. “I'll catch you all up at some point but I'm kind of in the middle of something right now. I guess I can hit the highlights. Farrah's alive; that's a winner. So am I, for that matter, which may be more surprising. I die kind of a lot. Is three times a lot? I mean, three isn't a big number, but not many people hit the triple when it comes to carking it. I think three counts as a lot.”

He controlled the crystal with a gesture to pan around.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He looked at the building he had been blasted out of. The side where Jason woke up had been utterly devastated. When he circumnavigated the building, he discovered that the other side was completely gone.

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

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

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

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IT'S STILL NOT ABOUT KILLING MONSTERS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Given the distances involved, Jason commandeered one of the cars out on the street. He could have used his silver-rank speed to sprint around the space, but the cars were just there, so he decided to use them. They were rather science-fiction-looking cars, which he didn't hate, but he had no keys. Seeing as the car was part of his domain, he concentrated on controlling it and the door clicked open. It took longer to get the car to start, but after a minute of prodding with his aura, the electric engine hummed to life.

The ride wasn't as smooth as in Shade's car forms, but it was still an easy journey out through the streets of Jason's

expanded domain. He stopped the quiet car a few hundred metres short of where he sensed the closest anomaly and progressed on foot. Compared to the human-shaped anomalies of the last few expansions, Jason could already tell these were different.

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

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

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

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

“Crap.”

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

The pistols singed hair but didn't seem to impede the creature at all, which vaulted onto the flat roof as Jason

scrambled back, dropping his pistols. He smoothly pulled the lightning gun from the magnetic clips on his back and fired.

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

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

- You have defeated [Living Anomaly].

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

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

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

This was a trend as Jason's powerful minigun made short work of the larger hybrids. More troublesome were the

smaller, faster ones that were hard to pin down with the unwieldy weapon. The worst were the fox hybrids, who were only the size of children but still boasted strength at the low end of silver rank. Their speed was closer to the high-end, making them agile enough to avoid the heavy minigun.

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

Eventually, Jason had defeated all the anomalies. Things got hairy at the end as they started converging and attacking in groups, but the minigun was a specialty tool for handling clustered enemies. Only against a mixed group of five, including some devilishly elusive fox hybrids, was Jason ever worried about the outcome.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He dropped in an unstable core and fired it. The lumbering giant did not even try to dodge. It was struck dead centre, its torso and head immediately wiped out in a blast that still had enough force to whip violently at Jason's hair and clothes, even from so far away. Gobbets of something black, wet, and stinking rained down from the sky; the core explosion had almost evaporated the giant. Only its legs and its severed hands remained, all dropping to the ground. The legs toppled like felled trees, one of them crushing a house.

"That was surprisingly straightforward," Jason said to himself.

- You have defeated [Greater Anomaly].
- You have overtaken a genesis space territory and purged all anomalous elements.

- Completed territory is being remade.
- Return to core territory to initiate transfiguration of new territory.

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

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

He frowned as a thought occurred to him.

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

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OPEN TO THE UNANTICIPATED

JASON EXAMINED THE LOOT FROM THE SHADOW GIANT AS IT dissolved into rainbow smoke behind him. It was a dark sphere, just large enough to fit in one hand. It was cool and glassy to the touch.

Item: [Dark Orb] (unranked, uncommon)

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

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

“Yes.”

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

The orb melted into Jason’s hand in a sensation reminiscent of when he had absorbed awakening stones in the

early days of his magical life. As the orb was fully absorbed, Shade emerged from Jason's shadow.

"Mr Asano."

"Shade!"

Jason enfolded his familiar in a hug.

"Ooh, you're quite squishy. It's nice."

"This is rather awkward."

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

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

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

"Quite."

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

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

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

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

"Maybe he got dumped."

“That seems unlikely.”

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

- Initiate transfiguration of new territory Y/N?

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

A column of glorious sunlight beamed down on the pagoda, then slowly expanded out to touch every part of the city. Wherever it reached, gold, silver and blue mist rose from the ground, as if the light were evaporating away its impurities.

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

In the sky above, the sunlit blue sky extended as far as the great circle of stars, at which point the previous void of night continued to surround it. Only Jason’s domain stood in the

light, while the night's gloom continued to hold sway in the regions around it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
- Territory has been renamed [Soul Haven].

- [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 38.6%.

- Evolution of ability [Spirit Vault] is tied to the transformation zone. If the transformation zone is stabilised before the ability completes its evolution, the evolution will fail.

- Anomalies attacking as a result of further spirit domain expansion will have increased power.
- You have claimed sufficient territory to stabilise the transformation zone and separate it from the convergent astral space.
- Separating the space with the current territory will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the surrounding reality. Claim additional territory to reduce the severity of this effect.
- Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone
Y/N?

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

Soon Jason was driving through the transformed streets in one of Shade's car forms. The road surfaces were still dark crystal, now in flagstone-style bricks. The cars were gone from the streets and most of the storefronts were now empty. On spotting one that wasn't, Jason excitedly called for Shade to stop, leaping out while the car was still in motion. Jason dashed up to the door, holding himself back from smashing

through the glass as he waited the second it took for the door to slide open. He rushed inside and madly searched, only to let out a cry of anguish as he found a small shelf label.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The boss monster this time was not something he could just blast away with the core launcher. It was a single hybrid, no larger than the others, but with the speed of a fox hybrid and the strength of a bear hybrid. Jason fought it amongst the

trees, a contest of agility, speed and skill that left him a bloody wreck by the time the creature fell.

- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
- Territory has been renamed [Tranquil Shadow Woods].

- [Spirit Vault] evolution status: 84.7%.

- Evolution of ability [Spirit Vault] is tied to the transformation zone. If the transformation zone is stabilised before the ability completes its evolution, the evolution will fail.

- Anomalies attacking as a result of further spirit domain expansion will have increased power.

- You have claimed sufficient territory to stabilise the transformation zone and separate it from the convergent astral space.

- Separating the space with the current territory will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the surrounding reality. Claim additional territory to reduce the severity of this effect. Current severity reduction: 13.7%

- Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone
Y/N?

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

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

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

“You should rest,” Shade told him.

“I am resting.”

“Proper rest. Return to the pagoda and sleep.”

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

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

“I'm barely an essence user right now.”

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

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

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

“Yeah,” he said happily. “That’s the stuff.”

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

“Because I’d fall asleep. This is super comfy.”

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

“Shade!”

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

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

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

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

Jason felt the first anomalies cross the border into his domain as he arrived at a farmhouse, leapt off his horse and threw open the door. Rushing through the building to the auras he sensed, he found a group of people standing around, looking at each other in confusion. Each had pale skin and brassy, metallic hair matched perfectly by the colour of their eyes, marking them as not humans but celestines. They all turned as Jason burst in.

“Come with me if you want to live.”

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I'M GOING TO BET ON MYSELF

AFTER A MOMENT OF STUNNED SURPRISE, THE FAMILY OF celestines Jason had found in the farmhouse erupted in questions, from where they were to what had happened to them. Jason delicately used aura suppression to calm them down and fix their attention on him.

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

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

“You’re Jason Asano,” she said. “I’ve seen you on television.”

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

“Where’s your magic cloak?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nikoleta."

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

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

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

"We were in one of those domes?"

"You still are," Jason said.

Nikoleta looked out the window at the sky.

"I don't see any dome. I didn't think anyone woke up inside one either."

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

“I didn’t think anyone could go into the domes. How is this happening?” Nikoleta asked.

Jason flashed her a grin.

“I’m not just anyone.”

She narrowed her eyes at him again.

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

Jason let out a laugh.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, I am.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Right, yes."

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

Jason gave the best explanation he could in the little time he had, given that every moment he spent out of the newly

expanded region of his spirit domain, it was shrinking away. The family would be safe inside a completed territory, but Jason needed to go. Flying back towards the conflicted domain space in Shade's helicopter form, Jason voiced a concern he had.

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

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

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

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

“I know,” Jason agreed.

“Your priority must continue to be stabilising the dimensional boundary.”

“I know.”

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

“I know.”

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

“Bloody hell, Shade, I know!”

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

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

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

“Yeah,” Jason said with a resigned sigh. “I do. And thanks, Shade. For keeping me on the right track.”

“I am not infallible, Mr Asano.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I don’t think I can take another territory without them.”

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

The core launcher had felled the boss monster, but it was showing some dangerous warping. After claiming his new territory, Jason had followed Humphrey in gaining a second evolution of the same ability. As for the nature of the ability, Jason was unsure what to make of it.

Ability: [Spirit Domain]

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

While impressive, this ability couldn't help Jason immediately. He wasn't sure exactly how useful a spirit domain was outside of trying to patch a hole in the side of reality. It seemed unlikely that Jason would maintain his current domain size once the transformation zone was stabilised since it eclipsed the space of the dome covering it by

a vast margin. It also exceeded the limits of his ability by a factor of almost ten thousand.

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

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

- Separating the space with the current territory will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the surrounding reality. Claim additional territory to reduce the severity of this effect. Current severity reduction: 41.8%

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

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

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

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

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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.

“You’re right,” Jason said, holding out a hand, 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 a floating 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 an 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 Hurin 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.”

“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 light-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 for 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 eyes has 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?”

“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-storey 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?”

“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, with other people who have gone through a similar change. 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.”

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 also in the design aesthetic. With 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 he has become more circumspect. Now he 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 forwards, 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. 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 for 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.”

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STILLNESS

JASON KICKED THE ZOMBIE CYBORG IN THE CHEST AND IT stumbled back off the edge of the roof, falling to the concrete below.

- You have defeated [Unliving Anomaly].

“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 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; 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 powder 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.

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): Upon 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.

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'd been 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 forced him to fight differently, forced him to grow in ways outside of his usual patterns. The price of failure was unconscionable.

Jason emerged from the building with his armour in tatters and painted in his own blood. His wounds 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 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 powdered 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.

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

- 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.

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 out bodies 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.

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

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.

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; it is 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 across the cosmos; 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 stronger Jason grew, 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-sparred 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.”

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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 the ring, cleaning up the anomalies. It was grim slog through a bleak environment full of abhorrent foes, making him 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 ammunition belts. The belts ran from metal slots grafted into the abomination's body, into the guns and then back into its body. Like everything about the anomaly, it was a grotesque display of industrial cybernetics.

"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. It'd be an easy target."

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

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

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

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

"As we have already established," Shade agreed.

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

"Oh dear."

Jason sprinted through the building as a stream of bullets tore into it, ripping through the steel wall. The near-immobile anomaly let its bullets do the chasing, walking its gun across the building to let a stream of ammunition pursue Jason. Flame spat from the rotating barrels as the bullets poured out, the

belts replenishing inside the grotesque body to allow the continuous firing. The anomaly didn't pause as the barrels grew glowing hot.

As Jason ran through the building, when he came to a hole in the floor, he didn't avoid it or leap over. Instead, he took the opportunity to drop down to the floor below, making himself harder to track for the anomaly. Even so, the line of bullets continued to trail him as he dropped down and turned to run 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 had immediately swung its guns on him the instant he came into range.

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 killed hundreds, if not thousands, of anomalies finally took it past its limits.

Jason was forced to drop the weapon and run as bullets screamed 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 have defeated the point of playing decoy.

A dark shape dashed from the shadows of a building to approach the boss anomaly, moving close to its bulbous body. 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 the incorporeal familiar could lift with his limited ability to impart physical force.

Shade dropped in an unstable genesis core and fired. 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 painting the abomination across walls on the opposite side of the street.

- 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 goblet 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.”

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.

From that distance, they could not see the subsequent changes, although there was an industrial clanking that must have been cacophonous to be audible 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. 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 the family. “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. 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 of you,” Shade said, another body rising from Jason’s shadow.

“Yes, they could. 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 said, raising his voice to almost a yell. Jason’s head turned with a jerk, like it had been yanked with a string.

“No one could ask for more,” Shade repeated, his voice once more composed. “Whatever we face in this place, we face together.”

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

nodding to himself.

“Stabilise the transformation zone.”

Outside the dome, the vast corpse of the tentacle monster lay sprawled where it had slid off the dome after being killed. The combined forces of the gathered magical factions had faced it in a pitched battle and had already carved large chunks from the corpse to take for study.

The tentacle monster that had once been the gold-ranked essence user, Guo. Affected by the unstable cores he carried through the portal, he had been warped into what looked like a three-storey 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, around a hundred metres from the base of the dome. His explosive powers had been critical in slaying the massive creature.

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 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.

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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. Jason saw 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 as it was remade. 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, Jason 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 inflicted 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.

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 more than willing to do.

Gerling only paid half-attention to Cleary, his handler, as Cleary briefed him on the directives of the US Network leadership. 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.”

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 of states that was simultaneously completely opposite in nature yet unified in being. The difference between the universe and the astral was the divide between the physical and the 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, rather than the body-and-soul dual-state in which most physical beings existed. Knowing that blending the physical and spiritual was possible was not the same as understanding it, 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.

Jason withdrew his senses. Startled at the intrusion and angry at the interruption, he turned to face the owner of the voice.

Jason had sensed neither 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. It looked like a pile of 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," the 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 for 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 turned 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 worlds of their astral spaces, killing people in job lots in the process. What’s the death toll 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?"

"You're damn right I don't. Thus far, everything I've gotten from the Builder has either killed me or tried to back-door my soul."

"This gift was sent with gratitude, not malice."

"Oh, 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's aura crushed down, suppressing Jason's aura in an instant. He held out a hand and Jason felt Shako's aura somehow grab him and yank him towards the diamond-ranker, his neck falling into Shako's grip.

"So, more Vader than Obi-Wan," Jason said, his voice unstifled by the hand around 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, 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 inept 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 in an almost casual-seeming backhand strike. It caught Jason's head, splattering it like a rotting melon.

Jason's neck chain fell to the floor as Shako then palm-slapped Jason's headless corpse, 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 gathered 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.

“You've gone too far, Shako.”

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A SLIVER OF HOPE

JASON'S STAR PHOENIX FORM WAS IMPERVIOUS TO ALMOST ANY form of attack, but transcendent damage was 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 emerged from a shimmering portal.

This was not an avatar that allowed her to operate on Earth but her true body, in the fullness of its power. Her porcelain skin was lit up by her gemstone hair, glowing like fire. Her matching ruby eyes fixed on 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.”

“The Builder left it to be taken. If Asano did so without setting off the traps the Builder left behind, that is no excuse to kill him. And 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 act so superior, without knowing what your World-Phoenix has done and even as you and your master rely on the Builder's actions. Without the Fundament Gate the Builder forged, Asano would never have been able to affect this place and remake 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. Now the task falls to a child and you go and kill him?"

"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 a vessel's 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 had 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.”

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 his own word, so why would he keep yours? Even if he 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. He was meant to use it, not claim it entirely. You know the authority it contains is not for someone of his level.”

“If the Builder didn’t want a mortal to have it, he shouldn’t have given it to them. Instead of doing his job, he played games and he lost.”

“It was the Builder’s to give or take. Asano should not have absorbed it.”

Dawn laughed, bringing a surprised expression to Shako’s face. He hadn’t seen her laugh in centuries.

“If the Builder thought that mortals would only use what he gave them for the purposes he intended—especially that mortal—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. He showed not so much as the shadow of an aggressive move.

“I don’t know why you brought 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 a similar 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 complementary item that works with it.”

“That is not within my power 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.”

“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. The great astral beings require a certain level of mortal perspective from their agents and I was losing mine. 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 conceded, although his expression was unwilling. “Again, though, I have to ask why. Asano 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?”

“Yes.”

Shako narrowed his eyes.

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

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

“It won’t be a challenge, Dawn. He’s already lost without even realising he’s in a fight. He’s been someone else’s weapon from the start and he doesn’t even know it. You haven’t told him.”

“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.”

“That won’t be enough.”

“I know. But it will at least give him a chance.”

“To do the impossible.”

“He’s done the impossible before. Did you ever imagine the likes of you and I having this discussion about a silver-ranker?”

“No. You would give up the chance to send all your forces against us for this slender, forlorn hope?”

“The World-Phoenix is not the Builder. She prefers to avoid such crude methods as invading a world. But I will need another concession as well.”

“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 the item you craft based upon it is designed such that once it is complete, Asano’s ability to enter and manipulate the fundamental realm is revoked.”

“Acceptable,” Dawn said. “When the task is complete, he has no need to enter that space again.”

“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 stolen the resurrection that was given to him as compensation for becoming the agent that resolved your mistakes. 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. We both know that will be almost constantly, so that should not be an onerous concession. But you cannot pit anyone against him that is greater than his own rank. Not your own people, nor anyone you send.”

“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. “And you don’t understand what your own master has done.”

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. He hung them back over his neck.

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, confirming his guess that it was a portal. Like Shako’s portal, it was diamond rank. As he contemplated it, Dawn stepped out. It was the first time Jason had seen her true form, glorious hair dancing like fire. She wore a flowing yellow robe trimmed with flaming colours of orange 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. It’s part of you now, and even a glimpse of 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.”

A smile teased the corners of Dawn’s lips.

“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 in 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 the fundamental realm—what you call 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.”

“You will make your own way. Once you have modified the link enough that this world no longer soaks up magic from the other, 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 protected by you.”

“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.

“I’ve left a final message for you in your cloud boat. 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, right now.”

“You’re going to warn them about the Builder?”

“After years of being in readiness for a monster surge that never comes, the other world will not be prepared when it

finally does. It will take you another six months to finish repairing the link. I have that time to prepare them.”

“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’ll see they get it.”

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.

“Buggering 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.”

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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 ostensibly sent Shako 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 a looming 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 it was no longer a danger to him. 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. By modulating the energies around him, it became an environment in which he could thrive.

- 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; he was not 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 was 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 now 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 watched 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. He felt 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. 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.

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 fairy tale 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 US 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 shoulders 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 affects 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, Colin 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 celestine family down into the vault, please?”

“Of course, Mr Asano.”

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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 less than two weeks earlier.

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. It got worse the longer I was in there, this growing dread that something bad was going to happen. Some kind of retribution. The worst part, the thing that got me to turn around, is that whatever was going to

happen, I kind of felt like I deserved it. That creeped me right out and I bailed.”

“Like you deserved it? Retribution?”

“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 it coming.”

“Like a sin,” Gerling said.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Clint said, jabbing his finger. “I never grew up religious, but yeah. It’s like trespassing on that place is a sin. How does that even 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.”

Cleary 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.

“A sin?” Cleary asked, sharing a look with Gerling.
“Asano?”

Gerling nodded. “He’s clearly in control.”

“Couldn’t you have taken control while you were in there?” Cleary asked. “You’re stronger than him.”

“You may have noticed, Cleary, that Asano is neck-deep in mysteries. He’s the one who opened the place up and he could control our comings and goings. He understood that place. 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, having calmed down. “I’m going to put a moratorium on our people going in until we learn more. No point sending them to die when we don’t even know what’s in there. In the meantime, could you get closer without going in? 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 flew 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 had a little tug-a-lug?”

“Excuse me?”

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

Chen looked incredulous. “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 here.”

“Why bother letting this weakling prattle?” one of the vampires asked. “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 land 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 this place is doing to you 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 pillaging rights.”

“This man blathers nonsense,” the injured vampire said, even as his 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. I won’t make that mistake again.”

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 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 crossed and arms behind his head as if he were still in a chair. Eventually, he tilted his weight to flip himself over and look at Venice sprawled out below. 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 after two weeks.

“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 publicly 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.”

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 from Asano 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’t 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.”

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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): Upon 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.

“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 me. 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.

“This is potentially a huge boon for us,” Farrah said. “Only the weakest vampires will be affected by sunlight in most places on Earth, even with the magic level rising. 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 auras 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 everyone in the city?"

"Everyone still alive."

Jason woke up in a cold sweat. He didn't even think he could sweat anymore, but his nightmares clearly had 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 concurred 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 skin, congealing 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.

Farrah nodded. "I'll help Erika gather the others up. Pick an evacuation point and open a portal."

He didn't suggest trying to place them in the spirit vault. It was already questionable whether his family could still enter after seeing him kill people on television, and suffering from his aura would only make things worse.

As he had 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 to Farrah. “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. If it’s just you, it’ll be 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, lingering from the nightmare. 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 something stupid better. We need to be our own voices of caution now.”

“Meaning?” Farrah asked.

“There will be another day for vampires, and moving forwards from the back foot isn’t smart.”

“Meaning?”

“We don’t go after the vampires. It’s a crappy choice, but as bad as it is to say, we have larger concerns that we need to stop being distracted from. We’re all getting 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.

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 had enjoyed a delightfully ordinary holiday together. It was not too long before the Network's grid went down, making those 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 helped 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, which looked like a model bridge in a bottle.

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

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

- Effect: ???.

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. He had Dawn's tutoring, the books from

the goddess Knowledge, covered in Clive's insightful notes. With 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.

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.
- 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:
- [Path of Shadows]: You can manipulate the fundamental realm 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.

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 forwards.

“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.”

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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 and our primary objective is back on track, 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 before they start making more trouble. She at least agrees that it would be best if that push isn’t the populations of Europe and South America being turned into undead monsters.”

“Things are busy now that monsters and essences are manifesting directly?”

“Yes, but at least individual manifestations are easier to deal with than whole waves. Plus, the general monster level is lower than the proto-spaces.”

“For now. We need to repair this link so your world stops raising the magic level of this one.”

“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. Their purpose was to turn unseated reality cores—meaning ones that had been plucked from where they were doing their job holding reality together—into something he could hopefully use to repair the damage that unseating the reality cores had done in the first place.

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

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

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

Jason 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 myself.”

“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? I’d like you to, but expect you to? No. You wouldn’t still be you. But don’t expect me to accept that his role in messing up the world is enough to act as stupidly as 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.

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, however, were the soft textures and fairy tale colours of the magical building made of clouds.

The building reflected 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 it 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. They’re not even really eyes, are they?”

“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 about you. 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 out 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 more than the rest of us and, to be honest, 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’s 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. 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 humanity,” Erika 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.”

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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 looked 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 bugged 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 going dark. The information coming out online was mostly from private individuals, detailing 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.

Jason had been refining his methodology of identifying nodes for repair while Farrah collated information 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 that it only had 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 Emi 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 serious 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."

"On the way to your 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...”

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 being minimal would be best.”

“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.”

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INTENTIONS

THE TRANSPORT HELICOPTER CARRIED EIGHT PASSENGERS, descending into what had once been a grassy paddock, close to the Global Defence Network camp.

The helicopter landed and the passengers disembarked. Akari Asano was the first to step out, her eyes panning the landscape. She took in the pastoral surrounds and the city of Nitra in the distance. The research camps set up by the magical factions gave each other a comfortable distance, arrayed around the strange, colourful town she had observed from the air.

Following Akari was Annabeth Tilden, Craig Vermillion and Taika Williams; the helicopter noticeably shifted as Taika's huge bulk exited. Now that he was bronze rank, Taika was still huge but was less rounded and more a mountain of muscle.

With them were four others, one of whom was a representative from the Engineers of Ascension. He went by the name Alexander Clerck and rarely spoke. More imposing was William Spencer, an Englishman who was one of the much-feared ancient vampires. The others were wary of him, especially Vermillion, as the other vampire present.

The last two members of the eight were former members of the EOA. They had been part of the exodus from that organisation when it was revealed to be behind the monster waves, eventually joining the GDN although neither individual possessed any magic.

One of the pair, Dashiell Bexton, wore a white suit and pastel shirt. He was unhappily distracted by what the wet ground had done to his shoes and pants. The other, Adam Cosgrove, was a man in a slightly dishevelled suit who somehow looked like a neater one wouldn't fit him quite right.

As the helicopter loudly wound down, a pair of SUVs came driving towards them from the nearby Global Defence Network camp. It threw mud up from the wet earth as it pulled to a stop and Akari made a horizontal chopping motion with her arm. A wave of force blasted the mud back to spatter over the vehicle, saving them from an unexpected mud bath. Their liaison from the GDN stepped from the first SUV and ushered them into the two vehicles before driving them to the GDN's camp, where they were shown into a large prefab building and offered tea and coffee.

“Sorry, I only drink blood,” said the vampiric Spencer.

“Tool bag,” Vermillion muttered, then gave their liaison a winning smile. “Tea, please. Lots of sugar.”

“Most weaker vampires know their place,” Spencer said.

“My place involves a power saw and your neck, so you should be happy I'm going with a cup of tea,” Vermillion shot back.

“Craig...” Anna said.

“Anna, once you see me playing nice with a guy who tried to control you through your blood, I'll be happy to listen.”

“That was one lapse of judgement,” Spencer said, unapologetically.

“Give me a chainsaw and your head will lapse off your neck, you dusty old—”

Taika's regional municipality of a hand came down on Vermillion's shoulder.

“We get it, bro: you don't like him.”

Vermillion seethed but fell silent. They all sat in folding chairs as the liaison briefed them on the situation around the

magic town, including the disposition of the Network factions and the known effects of entering it.

“The town’s defensive mechanisms seem to be of a type with Asano’s powers. We believe he can shield people from them on an individual basis, which we assume is what he will do for you, so you can meet him there without your flesh rotting off your bones.”

“You assume?” Spencer asked. “Assume is not a word that engenders confidence.”

“Asano hasn’t exactly been open to diplomatic contact,” the liaison said. “We had to import you all from Australia just so he’d meet with anyone.”

“Bro, the Network keeps trying to kidnap him,” Taika said. “They even succeeded a couple of times, even if he does keep escaping immediately.”

“That wasn’t us,” Anna said, getting a flat look from Craig.

“Alright,” she admitted. “It was kind of us the first time.”

“So, how do we proceed?” Spencer asked.

“I would suggest a car,” Shade said, emerging from one of the room’s shadows. “Unfortunately, the road infrastructure has suffered some mishaps while Mr Asano was away.”

Only the man calling himself Alexander Clerck had noticed his presence, but he had made no mention of it. Clerck was masking his own aura to pass himself off as one of EOA’s enhanced humans.

“Shade!” Taika said. “G’day, bro.”

“Good day, Mr Williams. Mr Asano will be happy to learn of your presence. He requests that you all make your way to the pagoda at the centre of the city. He apologises for the condition of the roads, but there have been a number of discourteous visitors in his absence.”

“What about the magic that eats people?” Taika asked.

“It only affects those that are hostile to Mr Asano, his domain or any of his existing guests,” Shade said. “Those with good intentions have nothing to fear.”

“And who decides if someone’s intentions are good?” Anna asked.

“They decide for themselves,” Shade said. “I am sure the people here can direct you to the pagoda. They have taken quite a thorough look around, as you will no doubt see.”

“Can’t Asano give us safe passage?” Anna asked.

“He can, but he won’t. He is letting your good intentions be the shibboleth.”

Shade turned to Spencer.

“Why is there an ancient vampire amongst you?”

“He’s working with us,” Anna said. “Is that a problem?”

“On the contrary,” Shade said. “Mr Asano’s last ancient vampire spoiled while he was here dealing with the transformation zone. He has been looking for a fresh one.”

The rest of the group turned to look at Spencer as Shade vanished back into the shadows.

“Is it just me, or did Shade seem kind of passive-aggressive?” Vermillion asked.

“It felt a little more like regular aggressive to me,” Spencer said.

Vermillion turned to the liaison. “What exactly did your people do?”

“They’re your people too, now, Craig,” Anna said.

“That’s what I’m worried about,” Craig said. “It’s like you’re trying to make him mad.”

“Those were other branches and other Network factions,” Anna said.

“Don’t worry, Jason,” Craig said. “That wasn’t our Network that tried to kidnap you. Again. And kept your friend in a hole and tortured her for weeks. That was a different

Network. Oh, the difference? Well, we don't like that other Network very much. I mean, yes, we work with them a bit, when we have to. Otherwise, how are we going to get those reality cores you told us not to take? What? Killed your brother, your friend and your girlfriend? That definitely wasn't us. I mean, yes, it was the Network, but there are degrees of separation..."

"That's enough, Craig," Anna said.

"Is it?" Craig asked. "The guy built a magic town that eats people and we keep doing things that make him angry. And now we're going into that town?"

"You think this is news to me?" Anna asked.

"Do you remember what he was like when he first got here?" Craig asked.

"Yes, Craig. He went to where my wife works. He showed up in my kitchen in the middle of the night."

"You should be grateful that's all he did," Craig said. "I had to stop him from fighting an EOA collection team in the middle of a café. You may recall what he did next from the news. A rolling gunfight in the middle of traffic? He came back to this world as a naked blade whose first instinct was to cut anything put in front of him. His family calmed him down, but then we went and killed one of them, as part of what appears to be a campaign of methodically convincing him to massacre us all with his apocalypse butterflies."

"Your point is taken," Anna said.

"Really?" Craig asked. "I'm pretty sure that every time the Network screwed him over and he let it slide because they're the ones fighting the monsters, someone would have said the point was taken. How far do you think we can push before Jason takes that point and impales us all on it?"

The group of eight were in the back of a flatbed utility vehicle as they approached the edge of the town. After the ute slowed

down and stopped, the liaison got out of the cab.

“This is as far as I go,” he told the people on the back. “One of you will need to drive the rest of the way. The car is heavy-duty enough that you should be able to handle any terrain issues. If any of you feel like something is wrong, like you’re trespassing, trust that instinct and turn back. If you ignore it, you won’t like the results.”

Another person from the camp rode up on a quad bike, which the liaison climbed onto and they rode away. The eight people left behind stood up in the back of the ute to look at where the gravel track turned to asphalt as it entered the town. Large portions of the road, along with footpaths and garden, had been violently ripped up, making what should have been easy navigation more treacherous.

“Anna,” Craig said. “Explain to me again how we aren’t actively trying to piss Jason off. Or will you need to concentrate on driving us through his town that we dug up like a pack of malevolent monster moles?”

Anna grimaced, not responding as she dropped off the side of the tray.

“If anyone needs to go back, just tap on the cab window,” she said, then climbed into the driver’s seat and shut the door. She started up the ute and drove it carefully into the town, avoiding road hazards.

The passengers tensed as they passed into the town and immediately encountered Jason’s aura. For Craig, Taika and Akari, it felt benevolent, while the others felt more oppressed. None of them experienced the sense of trespass that the liaison described.

Alexander Clerck looked around curiously.

“Oh, dear,” he muttered to himself. “She’s not going to be happy about this.”

This drew attention as the man had been all but mute through the entire journey from Australia.

“Something to share with the group?” Akari asked him. She, like the others, didn’t trust the EOA representative

amongst them.

“I was just marvelling at what Mr Asano has accomplished here. He’s rather jumped the gun, however, and this will draw attention I hope he’s ready to endure.”

“What kind of people has he drawn the attention of?” Taika asked.

“I never said they were people,” Clerck said.

Akari narrowed her eyes at Clerck.

“You know Jason,” she said.

“We met once, briefly. I helped him find something he was looking for.”

“You didn’t tell us that,” Akari said.

“It was less complicated this way.”

“It doesn’t make us any more inclined to trust you.”

“You don’t need to trust me. This place knows my intentions.”

“Unless you can fool it.”

“Nothing can hide its intent, here, no matter how powerful,” Clerck said.

“So you say,” Akari said. “Jason has enemies outside this world with power beyond imagining.”

“You speak of gods and beyond? Such entities cannot send their avatars into this place.”

“You expect me to believe this place is powerful enough to fend off gods?” Akari asked.

“Believe what you like,” Clerck said. “It is not a matter of power, but of nature. A god cannot walk into this place any more than you can blink my eyes.”

“What does that mean?” Taika asked.

“It means that there are higher rules for higher beings,” Clerck said. “What is impossible for us is negligible to them,

while the same can be true for them and us, despite their power. We can enter this place, while they cannot.”

“Who are you?” Adam Cosgrove asked. He was not a magical being and had been keeping his mouth closed and his ears open around the incredibly powerful company he was in. He was both a former detective and a former EOA member, though, and his instincts told him that Clerck was more dangerous than the fourteenth-century vampire he was sitting next to.

“That will be clear soon enough,” Clerck said. “For now, I will reiterate that if this place does not reject me, then you can be assured that my intentions are not hostile, whatever my agenda may be.”

“Should we kick him out here?” Taika asked.

“If Asano’s familiar didn’t see fit to reject me, why should you?” Clerck asked.

“Shade knows who you really are?” Taika asked.

“As I said: I have met Mr Asano once before.”

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I NEED THAT SONG TO PLAY OUT

THE UTE PULLED UP A LITTLE WAY FROM THE PAGODA, DUE TO the level of destruction around it. The gold-rankers trying to dig up any treasures had focused on the pagoda itself, the area around it looking less like an urban street than a motocross arena.

Vermillion continued his discontented mumbling as he hopped out of the tray, while Anna got out of the cab, looking around. She was concerned that Vermillion might well be right about Jason's general receptiveness. She led the group in, picking their way between the gaping holes and mounds of earth to reach the pagoda doors, which slid open at their approach.

They stepped into the atrium, their attention caught by the waterfall spilling into the pool in the middle of the floor. Shade was waiting for them.

"This way, please. The conference room is on the second floor."

As they walked down the hall, Dashiell Bexton, one of the two normals in the group, ran his fingers over the wall.

"What is this made of?"

"Clouds," Taika said.

"Clouds?"

"Clouds," Taika confirmed.

"How does that work?" Dashiell asked.

“Magic, bro. Are you new?”

Most of the others had been inside cloud constructs before, although it was still an unusual experience. The ancient vampire, Spencer, was particularly unsettled. He came from a time when he was the dominant magical power and this was one more reminder that the world he had woken up in was very different.

They entered a room that, in design, was an ordinary conference room. The colourful cloud-stuff from which everything from the furniture to the walls was made gave it a slightly alien feel, however. One wall was a window looking out over the hacked-up streets.

“Please sit,” Shade said. “Mr Asano is on his way.”

“Ooh, I missed this,” Taika said, settling into a cloud chair.

“This is startlingly comfortable,” Dashiell said, turning to the other normal, Adam Cosgrove. “Adam, we should have looked your old friend up a long time ago.”

“She’s not an old friend,” Cosgrove said. “We just helped each other.”

“I’d like to think of us as friends,” Erika said as she walked into the room with Jason, Farrah and Yumi. “It’s very nice to see you again, Detective. Sorry, Mr Cosgrove. May I call you Adam?”

“Sure,” Cosgrove said. “It’s nice to see you too, Mrs Asano.”

“It’s Erika, please. Could you ever imagine we’d be here like this, the last time we met in that café?”

“We’re a long way from that day,” Cosgrove said. “The whole world is.”

“Very true,” Jason said, holding out his hand. Cosgrove shook it. “Thank you for helping my sister when no one else would.”

“Our interests happened to align. This is my partner, Dash.”

Jason shook Dashiell's hand.

"Nice to meet you, mate," Jason greeted him. "Why are you participating in this?"

"Adam, here, is a goodwill ambassador," Dashiell said. "I thought it was a bit odd they wanted him just for his connection to your sister until your mate Vermillion started listing off all the stuff they did to you. It sounded like they needed all the goodwill they can get."

"You're not wrong," Jason said. "Never picked up any magic during your time in the EOA?"

"All that human modification stuff sounded a bit iffy to us," Dashiell said. "We were really in it to peek behind the curtain."

"They wouldn't have been accepted anyway," Alexander Clerck interjected. "Independent thinkers are always rejected. We want our powered people to be compliant. The process also seems to dampen intellectual creativity, as well. These two were much better as agents."

"You seem to know a lot about us," Cosgrove said.

"Because of your connection to Mr Asano, here, tangential as it may be," Clerck said, turning to Jason with a smile. "And how have you been, Mr Asano?"

"Oh, I'm sure you've been paying attention," Jason said. "Do they even realise who you are?"

"They're all suspicious, but I don't think any of them have figured it out."

"Why are you here?" Jason asked.

"My organisation wanted to get some information to you. I was aware this meeting was being arranged, so I presented myself to the fine people of the GDN who were organising it. I decided to deliver it in person because, to be honest, I wanted a look around. A spirit domain, Mr Asano? Very presumptuous."

"Who is this guy?" Taika asked.

“This is Mr North,” Jason said. “First among equals of the EOA, if you’re willing to believe that horse crap. How’d you be, Taika?”

Taika caught Jason in a big hug.

“All good, bro. You doing alright?”

“Oh, you know. Keeping busy.”

Taika let out a rumbling chuckle.

While Jason and the others greeted Akari warmly, most of the group was staring at Mr North. The revelation of his identity pushed even the presence of the ancient vampire temporarily out of mind.

“What?” Mr North asked innocently.

Jason and his companions joined the rest in sitting around the table.

“Introductions, first,” Jason said. “For those of us who haven’t met, I am Jason Asano.”

“They’ve seen you on TV, bro.”

“This is my sister Erika.”

Jason glanced at Taika.

“You may have seen her on TV too,” Jason continued. “This is Farrah Hurin and my grandmother, Yumi Asano.”

All eyes went to Yumi, who looked no older than Jason.

“Grandmother?” Dashiell asked.

“It’s just shape-shifting,” Jason explained. “She’s really an old lady.”

Yumi rapped Jason on the arm and he flashed her a grin. The grin faded as he turned back to his guests.

“Now, if someone would care to explain what the head of the EOA and an ancient vampire are doing here, that would be appreciated. I recognise that you haven’t come here with hostile intent, so I’m at least willing to hear you out.”

“It’s about the vampires,” Anna said. “It’s no secret that they are ramping up for a play at global dominance while the opposing magical factions have made less than stellar progress towards unifying against them. You sent us some details of the operations in Venice and this was, as we’ve discovered, only a tertiary program.”

Jason turned to the vampire, Spencer.

“I assume your unexpected presence is to shed some light on this?”

“Yes,” Spencer said. “Not all of the Arisen, as we call ourselves, want to participate in this plan for global dominion. For one thing, vampires are increasingly territorial by instinct as we grow stronger. Working together does not come naturally.”

“Which is most likely why the vampires haven’t made a move already,” Vermillion said. “The ancient vampires are instinctually competitive with one another, while their attitudes cause friction with the non-vampiric portions of the Cabal. The Cabal was always a loose collection of factions and, like the Network, has fragmented. Some have broken off to form a non-vampiric new Cabal, while others have joined the Global Defence Network.”

“There are those of us who do not wish to participate at all,” Spencer said. “We recognise that the world has changed and that we are no longer the dominant force on it. While most of the Arisen are blind to the new world and the dangers it presents to them, those of us that do see realise that the vampires cannot overcome all the forces arrayed against them. Even if the magical factions are disparate now, a common enemy will unite them. The only questions are how long a war takes, how much damage it does and what comes after.”

“So you’re looking to carve out a place for you and yours after the vampires as a whole have lost,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Spencer agreed. “We have no altruism or desire to help humanity. We simply recognise that so long as we are accepted, there will be power and influence for us to hold, even if we are not rulers. I’m willing to choose limited power

when the other option is death, and there are others amongst the Arisen who have chosen the same. For most, however, they cannot overcome the inherent desire for dominion.”

“Well,” Jason said. “I’m not going to sit here in the middle of my personal magic realm and claim that dominion is not intoxicating. I understand that you make for powerful allies, both in personal capability and the information you bring to the table. My question is: what does any of this have to do with me? I’m not opposed to facing off against some vampires when the opportunity crops up, but I have larger concerns.”

“Larger than a world ruled by vampires and filled with unliving ghouls?” Spencer asked.

“Yes,” Jason said, meeting his stare.

“Mr Spencer and... Mr North,” Anna said, “have brought critical information to us that warrants action. That is where you come in.”

“Oh?” Jason asked, turning to face her.

“Spencer has revealed the location of the vampires’ primary logistics operations. They’ve created a secure location in which they are producing enhanced blood, lesser vampires and ghouls.”

“Lesser vampires?” Erika asked.

Jason turned to Vermillion.

“Craig, could you explain the difference, just to make sure everyone is on the same page?”

“Sure,” Vermillion said. “At the top of the food chain, you’ve got the greater vampires. That’s me and dust-bucket over there. We went through a voluntary process of transformation and started weak, growing stronger over time. You can accelerate that process by drinking powerful blood, but there hasn’t been a lot of that floating around. Also, if you start preying on the Cabal or the essence users, you end up dead rather than powerful.”

“It was easier in the past, when the Cabal was a series of fractious groups,” Spencer said.

“Probably one of the outside pressures that pushed the Cabal to unite,” Jason surmised.

“Next,” Vermillion continued, “we have the lesser vampires. These are the ones turned against their will. They start with whatever power level they had before being turned, although they lose their original powers. Unlike greater vampires, they do not gain bloodline powers to replace them. They’re also more subject to control by greater vampires.”

“The powers aren’t lost,” Farrah said. “They’re sealed. Lesser vampires are vampires in body, but not in soul. It’s why they can’t grow stronger. It’s also why the process can be reversed if you get to them fast enough.”

“Lastly, you have ghouls,” Vermillion said. “These depraved mockeries are what happens when you try and create a lesser vampire that’s stronger than the person you’re trying to turn. Ghouls are harder to wrangle and significantly less intelligent, but if you want greater power from lesser materials, that’s your option. You can make ghouls directly, or turn lesser vampires into ghouls.”

“And that’s what the vampires are doing,” Jason said. “Turning Europe into a factory for ghouls and blood enhanced by reality cores.”

“At first, it was of limited concern,” Vermillion said. “Even considering all the newly appeared Arisen and the existing Cabal, there were only so many greater vampires. There is a cost to creating minions, even for those with the ideal bloodlines, and the scale could only be so big.”

“Those of us preparing to switch sides,” Spencer said, “were gathering information for when we did. Bringing a gift to the table would get us a better seat, after all. We discovered that operations were scaling up to a far greater degree than should be possible.”

“How?” Jason asked.

“We couldn’t find out everything before we were forced to make our move when the others grew suspicious,” Spencer said. “We discovered two critical factors. One was that there is

an alternate means for ghoulish creation, requiring far less from each vampire per ghoul created. Second was that there is now a method for strengthening lesser vampires. It makes their behaviour more feral and ghoul-like, but they retain most of their intelligence.”

“I’ve seen the results in Venice,” Farrah said.

“Those smaller-scale operations are appearing across Europe,” Spencer said. “We couldn’t find out how these processes were developed.”

“Which is where I come in,” Mr North interjected. “I believe you know, Mr Asano, about a joint research operation from decades ago, involving the Cabal, the EOA and the Network.”

“It’s where you developed the first magically augmented humans,” Jason said.

“Just so. There were many projects involved with that operation, including the animation of the dead.”

“Necromancy,” Farrah hissed.

“There was a researcher from that operation. We believed he was long dead, until the events at Makassar. Our best guess is that he was unable to resist so many fresh dead as a test platform for whatever he has been working on in the intervening...”

Mr North trailed off as he felt pressure bearing down on him. Jason’s aura had blended with that of the entire town and was boiling over with fury. Cosgrove and Dashiell opened their mouths in silent screams, while even the more powerful people went off-colour. Only the gold-ranked Spencer and Mr North were able to fend off Jason’s aura with their own, but even that was a struggle.

“JASON!” Erika yelled.

The moment passed. Everyone but Jason slumped in relief, with even Spencer and Mr North having lost their equanimity. The two normal-rankers had fallen out of their chairs and were throwing up on the floor. Jason stood up and walked to the window, looking out with his back to the room.

“I apologise,” he said. “I should not have lost control like that.”

“No kidding,” Mr North said. “There’s a reason you aren’t meant to have a spirit domain.”

Anna tried to get the meeting back on track, despite her pale, bloodless face.

“This man that North is talking about,” she said. “Using information given to us by the former Mrs South, the Network has been looking for him since Makassar. We had some indications that he was with the Cabal, but that’s where we dead-ended.”

“Concealing information has long been the Cabal’s greatest strength,” Vermillion said.

“Is this man in France?” Jason asked, still gazing out the window.

“How did you know?” Anna asked.

“Because you would only come to me if you needed something. What can I do that no one else can? I can enter a sealed astral space, like the one in Saint-Étienne where Adrien Barbou sent Farrah.”

“You’re right,” Spencer said. “We never discovered how the process was developed, but we did discover where. After the Arisen took France, the astral space was used as a secure location for the main hub of the operation. That’s where they develop the infrastructure for the satellite operations, as well as produce more empowered lesser vampires, ghouls and enhanced blood than anywhere else. We also believe that they’re stockpiling enhanced blood there, as an emergency reserve.”

“So you want me to go there and put an end to it,” Jason said. “That place is probably crawling with gold-rank vampires.”

“No,” Spencer said. “As I said, we are too territorial. There will only be a few. Two, maybe as many as five. They will likely be stronger than most, though.”

“And you expect me to beat them how?”

“Don’t act like you haven’t already decided to go, Asano,” Mr North said.

Jason turned around to face him.

“There’s a price,” Jason said. “I want Adrien Barbou.”

“Revenge, Mr Asano? Aren’t you above that kind of thing? You let Gerling skip off out of your transformation zone.”

“Gerling can fight vampires. Barbou isn’t that strong.”

“It’s my revenge he’s asking for,” Farrah said. “And I’m definitely not above that kind of thing.”

“The answer is no,” Mr North said, not breaking his gaze from Jason. “You’re going to do this because it needs doing, Mr Asano, whether I give you Barbou or not.”

“And what is to stop me from holding you here and melting you in chunks until you give him up?” Jason asked.

“The fact that you invited me here in good faith. You are going to let me go because you aren’t willing to be the person who didn’t. Of course, if you prove me wrong, that’s exciting too. I’d be willing to give Barbou up to see that.”

Jason turned his gaze from Mr North, his face twisted in a frustrated snarl. Mr North laughed.

“And there he is. Be wary of your principles, Mr Asano. I might use them to be assured that you enter that astral space, but someone was already playing them like an instrument before I found you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, I’m not going to tell you that. Like the World-Phoenix, I need that song to play out. We all do.”

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WASH THEM FIRST

JASON DIDN'T ASK ANY MORE ABOUT MR NORTH'S CRYPTIC clues. Unless he was willing to try and torture the information out of him, he wouldn't be forthcoming, and Jason wasn't ready to take that step. In any case, Mr North seemed to know more about spirit domains than Jason himself and had entered Jason's anyway. To assume the North had not taken precautions would be foolish.

"Will you act on our behalf?" Anna asked.

"No," Jason said. "I'll act on my own."

"You will go to France, though," she clarified.

"Yes. But I want something in return."

"I can't force him to give up Adrien Barbou," Anna said. "We would if we could. We'd quite like to get our hands on him ourselves."

"Anna, don't you dare," Farrah said quietly. "Barbou belongs to me."

"Spicy," Mr North said. "Jason, I like her."

"I've paid the price for running my mouth when I shouldn't, Mr North. It's time for you to go before you learn that lesson for yourself."

"Do you regret it, though?" Mr North asked.

"Sometimes the cost of staying silent is worse than the cost of speaking up, whatever that price may be," Jason admitted. "It doesn't make the cost any less real."

- You have designated [Rune Spider (variant)] as hostile.

Jason gestured at the window and the transparent cloud-stuff dissipated, letting in the breeze.

“You can show yourself out, Mr North; I’m sure you’ll find your way. I have more to discuss with Mrs Tilden.”

“Very well,” Mr North said. “But since you and I are not likely to meet again before you return from the other world, a final piece of advice: don’t build your bridge here. Put it somewhere that people aren’t going to get hurt.”

Mr North leapt out the window, which was restored at an absent gesture from Jason, who was contemplating North’s departing words. The implications of the insight he continued to demonstrate were troubling, but Jason put them aside to concentrate on present issues.

“Anna,” Jason said, turning his inhuman eyes on her. “You want me to do this, and I will. But I want something in return.”

“I told you that Barbou is not within our power to give,” Anna said.

“That’s not what I’m talking about. We’ve been discussing opening this place up to the civilians affected by the transformation zones. A place where they can be safe and welcome.”

Anna looked out the window at the ruined streets.

“Safe?”

“Mr Spencer,” Jason said, turning to the vampire. “I hope that you find equanimity with this world you have come back to after so long. Thank you for coming. I’ll see to the return of the others, so you may take the car if you wish.”

“I’ve been buried under a church since the rule of George the Second,” Spencer pointed out. “I do not know how to drive an automobile. As I am faster than a car, however, I shall make do and walk. Like a peasant. You aren’t going to make me jump out the window as well, are you?”

“Certainly not,” Jason said. “Shade, please escort the gentleman out.”

After Spencer was guided away by Shade, Jason turned his attention back to Anna.

“I have something to show you.”

“How big is this?” Anna asked as she looked out over the city from Shade’s zeppelin form. As with the world outside the astral space, it was deep into the night and the empty city was a sea of lights. The rest of the group was in the main passenger cabin while Jason and Anna spoke alone in a small observation room.

“The city is large enough that we can take in as many transformed as choose to come,” Jason said. “For the foreseeable future, at least.”

“I don’t have anything like the authority to make something like that happen,” Anna said. “Every country, every magical faction has their own policies and even laws regarding the transformed.”

“I know. It will be a lengthy and complicated process to even begin.”

“You don’t have time for that.”

“Nor the patience. I’m better at spotting politics at work than wading in myself, I’ve discovered. I’m too enamoured of bold moves and more than a little imperious at times. That’s why I will give my grandmother the authority to act on my behalf when it comes to administering this place.”

“Then shouldn’t she be in here with us?”

“I haven’t told her yet,” Jason said.

“Are you certain she’ll agree to do that?”

“She will if I threaten to do it myself.”

“The most I can do is start putting you in contact with people. Governments, the UN.”

“I’m not looking for you to get it done. What I want from you is to make sure that this is taken seriously.”

“People take you seriously.”

“This is a different thing.”

“Yes,” Anna agreed. “I’ll do what I can.”

“That’s all anyone can ask,” Jason said.

After a quick sky tour, the group returned to the pagoda for a social gathering in the mezzanine lounge with Jason and his family. Refreshments were set out, mostly magical fruit collected from the astral space. The forested areas had wild fruits and berries while the pastoral regions featured orchards.

“I’m sorry I never had the chance to introduce your wife to Dawn,” Jason told Anna. “She’s gone off to the other universe.”

“And you will follow?” Anna asked.

“In time. I’m close to securing the stability of Earth, at least in the short term. Around half a year, then I need to go to the other side to finish the job. To be honest, I’m more than ready to go. I’m tired, Anna. Tired of nothing but going from one fight to the next. Of always watching my back in case some gold-ranker finds me or the Network betrays me again. You know that I’ll have to check out France to make sure it isn’t some kind of ambush.”

“You really think I would do that?”

“Do you remember the night we met in person?”

“In my kitchen.”

“I’d just escaped a Network kidnap and extraction team. It was not the last time I was kidnapped by the Network either.”

“That was the French and American branches.”

“If you hang the Network shingle, you’re responsible for the Network’s actions, Anna. Are you asserting that you’ve never done something you disagreed with because one of your bosses told you to?”

“Of course I have.”

“So, yes, Anna. I really think you would do that.”

“I’m sorry that it’s come to that, Jason.”

“I’m past sorry. If I didn’t have to stop the world from breaking down like a biscuit in milk, I’d be long gone already. I thought I’d stay and help with the vampires, but once I’m done in France, that’s as far as I go. I probably wouldn’t even go that far if it weren’t for the man behind the Makassar undead. I won’t let him do that again.”

“Doing that again is exactly what he wants.”

“Which is why I’m doing this. Then I’m finishing my task and leaving.”

“Will you ever come back?”

“Yes, but not for a long time. You should hope that it’s long enough that I’m no longer looking to settle old scores because I’ll come back strong enough that I can.”

“Speaking of old scores, I have news on Jack Gerling. He’s gone rogue.”

“Rogue?”

“Since the magic changed, gold-rankers can get by on silver-rank spirit coins now, albeit a lot of them. Thirty a day isn’t cheap, but it’s enough that they no longer need gold coins, let alone reality cores.”

“What’s he up to?”

“No one knows. From what I’ve heard, he’d been quietly suborning people for a while and took off with his assistant, a cluster of silver-rankers and a couple of the best ritualists the US had.”

“Great,” Jason said. “He’ll be coming after me, if he isn’t already.”

“Why?”

“Because, unlike the Network, he hasn’t been distracted by vampires and reality cores. Remember why you were kidnapping me in the first place? Before the world blew up, you all wanted my secrets. He still does.”

While the others were meeting and talking, Akari and Jason quietly took a walk outside. They discussed the combat trance that Jason had recently been able to touch on but was as-yet unable to fully use.

“We call it the sword Zen, in my family,” Akari said. “Obviously, people not dedicated to the sword call it other things. My father is the expert; I only managed to reach that state recently myself. After Gerling killed Asya, Kaito and Greg, I went into intensive training with my father and was finally able to achieve it. I’m surprised you could as well, given that mastery of technique is not your central focus.”

“I recently had the opportunity for some quite intensive experience with the sword,” Jason told her.

“Oh?”

“When this place was still covered in a dome, it sealed the powers of whoever was in here. My sword was all I had, at first, and even as more options became available to me, it remained critical until the end.”

“And how much fighting was there?”

“Quite a bit. I only achieved the combat trance shortly before I came out, when I was pushed to the absolute limit. I’ve managed to touch on it since, but only sporadically. Farrah has helped, but her combat style is, in many ways, the opposite of mine. It’s almost like there’s a translation issue.”

“I don’t have much more experience at this than you,” she said. “My father is the expert. If you spent some time with him, it may help you.”

“I don’t have that time, and I may not go back to Asano Village for a while. Probably not until right before I leave this world.”

“I used to want to go with you,” Akari said. “An alien world full of strangeness and adventure.”

“But not anymore?”

“My fight is here, now. The vampires are coming sooner, rather than later. You’re not the only one standing up to save the world.”

“I really would like to thank you again,” Jason said to Cosgrove. They were still in the mezzanine lounge and dawn was starting to poke its head over the horizon. “You may as well all stay for the day. Craig will need to stay inside until it’s dark again at least.”

“Damn right,” the vampiric Vermillion said. “The magic here does bad stuff to the light. I can feel the dawn coming like a chill climbing up my back.”

“It’s strange meeting you like this, Mr Asano,” Cosgrove said. “Your disappearance set me on a strange path. It seems odd now, thinking back on how the cover-up of one little magic event involved so many people. Police, federal police, government. It seems like a lot of effort given that it’s all out in the open now.”

“It used to be a lot easier,” Vermillion said. “In a world before mass communication and people carrying cameras around in their pockets. The Network’s balancing act of keeping everything secret had been close to toppling for a long time.”

Vermillion sat a hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“Then this guy came along. I won’t say he’s the one who made them tip over, but he definitely added some wobble.”

“I’d like to give you something, Mr Cosgrove. Your partner, too, as a gesture of my gratitude. Of course, the concern is that anything I gave you would be confiscated the moment you leave, so it needs to be something you can use here.”

Jason gestured and a portal arch appeared. Two of Shade’s bodies stepped out, each carrying a large duffel bag.

“We’ll have to do it all at once, which isn’t ideal,” Jason said. “It also means that I’ll be picking everything out for you.”

“What are you talking about?” Cosgrove asked.

Shade set the bags on the floor and Jason crouched down to open one. He reached in and took out a cube shining brightly enough that it was hard to look at.

“I’ve picked out two sets,” Jason said. “You can choose between them for yourselves. One is the sun essence, the blood essence and the life essence. It combines into the avatar confluence and is about as perfect an anti-vampire set as you’ll find. The other set are all cheap essences; gun, hand and adept, combining into the master essence.”

“The John Wick special,” Anna said.

Jason put the sun essence back in the bag and closed it.

“If you’re willing, I’ll essence you both up before you go. There’s enough awakening stones in there that we can send you off with a full set of powers. Rushing things like that isn’t the best, but I’m guessing you former EOA guys are pretty far down the list when it comes to getting resources from the Global Defence Network.”

“No kidding,” Dashiell said. “They say we’re all one big family, but I haven’t seen anyone that didn’t come from the Network originally getting magicked up.”

“It’s not that bad,” Anna said.

“Sure, it’s not,” Dashiell said. “If Adam didn’t know Mrs Asano, do you think we’d be doing anything but scut work?”

“Are you sure about this?” Cosgrove asked Jason. “These are valuable resources.”

“Mate, I’ve got them coming out my arse. Not literally; you won’t have to wash them first.”

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THE LANGUAGE OF PASSION

JASON HAD BEEN THROUGH MONTHS OF UNRELENTING pressure, fighting and walking the knife-edge between life and death. He'd even slipped off it, but unlike Kaito, Greg and Asya, he'd climbed back on.

Taking a day to spend time with friends and family was like opening a release valve. Although the setting was anything but, there was a blessed normalcy to sitting around talking, preparing a big meal together with his sister and niece. It wasn't anything elaborate, since all they had was a lot of fruit and the food they stocked for Emi, who couldn't live on spirit coins. Even so, the process was more important than the result and, with Erika on hand, it still worked out pretty well.

Eventually, night came, and Jason opened a portal to the Global Defence Network's camp. Jason had a sense of loss as everyone but Farrah and his family made their farewells and stepped through. He felt the responsibilities he had been able to ignore for a day looming over him once more as his gaze lingered on the portal.

"Jason, are you alright?" Farrah asked.

"I don't have time not to be," he said dismissing the portal with a flicking gesture.

"You can't force yourself to stay functional. Not forever."

"I know. We might be up against a lot, but we at least have the power to fight for our own fates. There's a world full of people that don't have that luxury right now. I won't lie and

tell you that I'm in a good place right now, but days like today will get me through."

Jason's father Ken was on a pagoda balcony, looking out over the heavily damaged town. He started slightly as Jason moved next to him, not having heard his son's silent approach.

"Time to go, Dad."

"I think I'd like to stay," Ken said. "I may not be a fighter, but my abilities can repair all this damage. With enough time, and a good helping of elbow grease."

"No," Jason said, his voice soft but unyielding.

"You're worried about our safety."

"Yes," Jason said.

"I don't think anyone wants me, Jason. I can't open the portal to your magic city. I don't know any grave secrets and I can't do anything special. I'm not valuable to anyone."

"You're valuable to me. Normally, I would let it go, but Jack Gerling is out there and he's working towards his own agenda now. An agenda in which I seem to play a central part."

A rare expression of rage crossed Ken's face. Only his ex-wife and the man who killed his eldest son could put it there.

"Gerling has the strength to come in and take you hostage if I'm not here," Jason said. "If you start fixing the town up, he'll learn that you're here sooner or later. Once he's dealt with, you can take all the time you like, here."

Ken placed a hand on Jason's back.

"Alright, son. You get that prick."

"You know I'm not just going to catch him, right? No prison can hold someone like that. Not in this world. Even if there were, the Americans would just step in and take back

their errant gold-ranker. When the time comes to deal with Gerling, I'm putting him in the ground."

"I don't like the idea of killing people," Ken said, "but the world isn't the way we'd like it to be. Now more than ever."

"I know. It feels like the stronger I get, the harder it is to roll the boulder up the hill."

Jason's spirit vault remained after the ability went through its second evolution to become a spirit domain. It was still a sprawling garden centred on a pavilion, but now it was more like a botanical garden that would have been right at home in Jason's magical Slovakian town. During his periods of turmoil, it had gone through inhospitable changes, but now Jason was more settled and he had more active control over the space.

Even so, Jason's family was living in his cloud constructs now. No one brought up the spirit vault, in which only Jason, Farrah and Ken continued to enter. Jason was unwilling to put the rest of his family's trust in him to the test. If, deep down, they could no longer accept who and what he'd become, he knew he'd handle it badly, if he could handle it at all.

Jason took the time to wander through his own soul for the first time in a while, under a night sky reflective of the one over his town. Farrah walked alongside him.

"We both have people in the other world we want to reunite with," he told her. "But I also need to get away from this world. I need to not be rushing around, putting out fires, because no one else can or will. No one but you."

"You do remember that we'll arrive in the middle of the worst monster surge in the history of the world?"

"But that isn't on us to fix," Jason said. "We'll do our part, sure, but we can be just two more adventurers."

Farrah knew it wasn't the moment to prick a needle into that balloon, so she changed the subject.

“So, France, then,” she said. “Dealing with this vampire stronghold.”

“No.”

“No?”

“How many times do the Network think they can come to us, apologise for the last crappy thing they did and then tell us to solve their problems?”

“You told them we’d do this, and we should,” Farrah said. “What’s waiting in that astral space needs to be stopped.”

“Yeah, but we’re not doing it their way. Even with the sun lamp, do you think taking on as many as five gold-rank vampires and who knows what else is a smart plan?”

“Of course not. You have a better one?”

“Germany.”

“Germany?”

The ancient vampires had, in general, not taken well to modern technology and what was, to them, its magic-like capabilities. Much of Europe had gone dark as they took down power and communications infrastructure, although their limited knowledge left patchwork pockets of communication in place.

Only a handful of places maintained any level of normalcy. Slovakia was now too high-magic for even powerful vampires to retain their full strength during daylight. In Germany, different Network factions had collaborated to hold the country as a beachhead into Europe for the coming conflict.

“After they stopped digging through my spirit domain, the gold-rank Network people were all withdrawn,” Jason said. “The US is focused on clearing out their domestic vampires while China is wary of Russia, which the Cabal pretty much openly runs now.”

“How does that help us?”

“Gerling was the only gold-ranker permanently stationed in Germany. They got lucky, since the area has a higher than

average magic level, so only the strongest vampires can operate in daylight without dropping in strength.”

“But now Gerling has gone off on his own,” Farrah said.

“Leaving us with a small window before Germany gets reinforced to slip in and take some of what the US and China left behind.”

“Which is?”

“Magically enhanced heavy ordnance. It was developed to fight gold-rank monsters, but now it’s being stockpiled for use against the vampires.”

“You want to shoot a missile into the French astral space?”

“Not exactly,” Jason said. “What we’re after is a magically enhanced SADM. Basically, a nuclear bomb in a backpack. I sneak it into the astral space, set the timer and get out. Preferably without anyone realising I was ever there.”

“You think it will go that smoothly?” Farrah asked.

“No,” Jason said. “A guy can live in hope, though. Plan and adapt.”

“Are you even sure they have this weapon in Germany?”

“Yep. I’ve had Shade spying on all the Network camps since we got here and they’re all based out of Germany. I know which base to go for and even roughly where on the base to find it.”

“We should be going before we miss our best chance, then,” Farrah pointed out.

“Yeah,” Jason agreed, his voice heavy with reluctance but also a resigned determination. He cast his head back to look at the starry sky. “It was a nice break, though, wasn’t it?”

“It seems we aren’t the only ones looking to jump on the Network’s moment of exposure,” Farrah said over voice chat.

They were plunging through the dark sky over an airbase lit up below them. With their silver-rank perception, they were able to make out the battle being waged between base personnel and the attacking vampire forces, most of which was made up of bronze-rank ghouls.

The base had the advantage of numbers, with no shortage of essence users, along with regular soldiers armed with magical firearms. The vampires had the advantage in individual strength, however, and the normal soldiers were especially imperilled. Unable to use anything stronger than iron-rank weapons, they were holding through training, discipline and superior numbers, focus-firing the unthinking ghouls.

Jason's aura senses took in the base and he detected a pair of gold-rank vampires. It was likely that similar attacks were taking place at other Network strongholds in Germany or there would have been more.

"I think the vampire war just started," Farrah said. "Do we intervene or grab what we came for in the chaos?"

"What do you think?"

"I say we help," Farrah said. "We can't do anything about wherever else they're attacking, but losing Germany would be a huge blow for the side that doesn't eat people. I'm always ready to kill some vampires. The sun lamp won't help us at night, but all these flunkies will help me charge my bracelet and you to stack up power."

"Alright," Jason said. "Let's clear out the riff-raff, then, and let the gold-rankers come to us."

"We're really going to take on gold-rank vampires, two-on-two," Farrah said.

"The person who thinks something is impossible fails before they even start," Jason told her.

"That person also doesn't get turned into a beverage for their hubris," Farrah said.

"Just try not to think about that part."

The two gold-rank vampires were hunting the strongest essence users while their forces of lower-rank vampires, lesser vampires and ghouls overran the base. The Network's silver-rankers had gathered at the edge of the base to form a united front, inflicting enough harm that it took eating them for the vampires to recover.

"The rise of these new magicians in our absence has been a nuisance," one of the vampires said as he dabbed his mouth with a napkin. "I'm starting to come around on them, though. Their blood is an absolute delight."

"Yeah, they're tasty," the other said, roughly wiping the blood from his face with his sleeve as he tossed aside a loose arm. "Ellie, this is taking too long. The normal humans and their magic weapons are doing far too well against the ghouls. You know what herding ghouls is like, and we need to be sealed up in the transports before dawn."

"My name is Élie, not 'Ellie.' I'm not an English peasant girl."

"Still bitter about the French Revolution? Just be glad you fell into slumber beforehand. Otherwise, those peasants you hate so much might have taken your head, Ellie."

"Élie!"

"That's what I said. Ellie."

"Élie."

"Isn't that what I'm saying?"

"No."

"It feels like that's what I'm saying. Say it again?"

"Élie."

"And what am I saying?"

"Ellie."

“You’re just saying the same thing both times.”

“I hate English so much. Can’t you learn French?”

“Can’t you learn Russian?”

“Why would I want to learn Russian? I already speak French.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s the superior language. The language of passion, of sensuality. Everything you say in Russian sounds like you’re telling off your dog when he doesn’t deserve it.”

“Russian is the language of men, while French is the language of women!”

“Yes,” Élie said with a smile. “They do rather like it.”

Andrei opened his mouth to retort but turned his head, distracted.

“What?” Élie asked before noticing it for himself. The auras of the ghouls were growing weaker and then vanishing in a slowly spreading area. The vampires there were panicked and scattering, fleeing the area.

“What is that?” Élie asked.

“I don’t sense an aura,” Andrei said. “Some kind of magic effect.”

“I take back what I said,” Élie said. “These new magicians are trouble.”

The vampires exploded into action, making their way across the base in a blur of speed, soon finding the source of the problem. They came to a stop as they found a sea of ghouls, wreathed in fire. Lighting up the dark sky above them was a swarm of orange and blue glowing butterflies that dropped onto the ghouls from which even more were rapidly spreading.

“I think this is fine,” Andrei said. The aura of the butterflies was clearly of a lower rank than him. So long as there were no gold-rankers or a large group of capable silvers, he was not concerned.

“This doesn’t worry you at all?” Élie asked.

“We’ve done most of what we came here for. Killed the strong ones and made a big, wet mess. We don’t need the ghouls to trash all the magic weapons and it’s easier to organise leaving if all these ghouls are burned up,” Andrei said. “They’re a pain to control and organising so many of them is annoying.”

“The others are not going to like losing so many,” Élie said.

“It’s not our fault. We didn’t set them on fire.”

“We should at least find out who did, though. I only sense one person behind the ghouls and she’s weaker than us.”

“There are two,” Andrei said. “The other one masks himself very well, despite also being weaker than us. I can barely sense him.”

“Trouble, then.”

“It’s that man.”

“What man?”

“The man with the magic butterflies, obviously. He’s the one from the events in Moravia.”

“Where?”

“Great Moravia.”

“Great Moravia hasn’t existed for a thousand years. The Hungarians conquered it. Are you saying this man’s a Hungarian?”

“No, he’s from that island. The one the English took and killed most of the black people.”

“That hardly narrows it down, Andrei. The damnable English.”

“You have a problem with colonisation?”

“I have a problem with the spread of English cooking.”

“Perhaps we should focus on the present?” Andrei asked.

“Who was that man again?”

“He was the one who went into the big dome everyone was so obsessed with.”

“Didn’t several of people go into that? I heard one of them came back and turned into a giant octopus.”

“That doesn’t matter. There’s a man, he’s here, and clearly, we need to kill him.”

Lower-rank vampires came running out from amongst the ghouls only for bloody strips of cloth to whip out, grab them and drag them back, screaming.

“Yes, Andrei. I do rather see your point.”

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FORTHRIGHT HONESTY

THE TWO ANCIENT VAMPIRES WATCHED THEIR SMALL ARMY OF ghouls burning and rotting at the same time. The ghouls were eerily quiet; they burned and died with only the crackle and pop of flames burning their flesh. It was the screams of the lesser and lower-ranked vampires caught amongst the ghouls that punctuated the distant gunfire of soldiers and more ghouls fighting elsewhere on the massive base.

Vampires did not have the power to sense magic, but their sensitivity to life force was very strong. The gold-rank vampires could sense the life force of their weaker brethren, caught amongst the ghouls. That life force was being rapidly drained, vampire by vampire.

Above it all were the blue and orange butterflies, shining brightly in the night even with the glow of flames below them. Some of the butterflies flew in the direction of the two gold-rank vampires, but Andrei held out a hand and blood droplets shot from his palm, exploding the butterflies before they came close.

“Keep an eye on them,” Élie said. “There are quite a lot.”

“Oh, thank you,” Andrei said. “I hadn’t noticed the giant swarm of glowing magic butterflies.”

“Something in there is draining life force,” Élie said. “Are you sure it’s a magician and not one of us?”

“Yes.”

“Should we go in and fight them?”

“Everything’s on fire,” Andrei said. “I’d rather wait for them to come out.”

“I don’t disagree,” Élie said, “but shouldn’t we go in and save the other vampires?”

The two vampires shared a glance.

“Life is challenge,” Andrei said.

“They’ll be all the stronger for overcoming it on their own.”

The ghouls were rapidly dropping, unmoving but still burning on the ground. After most of them had fallen, a cold voice rang out from within the ghoul pack.

“As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest.”

Andrei and Élie shared another glance.

“Is he talking to us?” Andrei asked.

They sensed what remnant life force remained in slain ghouls and vampires get sucked away all at once. They could even see it, moving through the air like red streamers. It gathered into a single point and was absorbed by a shadowy figure, standing amongst the dead. Even with their exceptional vision, the vampires could barely make it out.

“Are you, perchance, experiencing an ominous premonition?” Élie asked.

“Now that you mention it,” Andrei said, “I do believe I am.”

“It suddenly occurs to me,” Élie said, “that if two people less powerful than us decide to engage us in battle, they’re either very foolish or know something that we do not.”

“That is very sound reasoning,” Andrei agreed.

They looked behind them, then back at the shadowy figure standing amongst the dead ghouls. Now that most of them had dropped, they could also see more people, to match auras they had already sensed. There was another magician, clad in stone armour and wreathed in flame. Her aura held the promise of

consuming fire, the last thing a vampire wanted to encounter. Behind her was a mound of glowing lava, moving like a living thing.

A floating figure was surrounded by orbs that matched the colour of the butterflies. Its aura was alien, unlike anything the vampires had encountered before. The other looked human, aside from its red-purple skin, yet was anything but. There was hunger and blood in its aura that made even their own vampiric auras pale in comparison. They were also able to barely sense another aura, dark and hidden, seemingly many places at once.

The dark figure at the front was difficult to sense at all and, despite their superior power, the vampires could barely sense the domineering will it was currently holding in restraint. They turned and dashed in the other direction as quickly as their gold-rank speed would let them.

Jason and Farrah stepped out of the sea of burning ghouls. Jason pushed back his hood and absently scratched his head as he sensed two vampiric auras shooting off into the distance. Colin and Gordon, along with Farrah's magma elemental, were finishing off stragglers.

"They've scarpered," Jason said. "They did a runner."

"Saves us a fight," Farrah said, dismissing her armour. "Works for me. My bracelet is nice and charged up now and I didn't have to burn the charge fighting those two."

"But why did they run?" he wondered.

Farrah looked back at the carpet of dead ghouls and vampires, plus the ceiling of magic butterflies.

"No idea," she said. "Still, now we can go find your magic bomb. Should be easy enough to get it and go in the chaos."

Jason nodded.

“There are still some ghouls and weaker vamps running around, but the Network personnel should be able to handle it.”

Travis Noble was twenty-one years old and a category two magitech weapons engineer from California. He was also having a very bad month. The day after he arrived in Germany, his supervisor went AWOL when the base's category four essence user ran off and took a handful of people with him, including Travis' boss. Noble was perfectly happy when the Germans put one of their own experienced and qualified people in charge of his department, only for his bosses to insist that an American be in charge instead.

That was how Travis wound up in charge of the Special Munition Stockpile Division, leading of a bunch of people that all hated him. The Germans hated him because one of theirs was kicked out, while the other Americans hated him for being queue-jumped by a guy on his first day. This didn't even make sense. The regulations required the person in charge to be a magitechnician, while the other Americans were administrators and logistics supervisors. The lack of magitech experts was the reason Travis had been sent in the first place. This did not lead them to cut Travis any slack.

The people he got on best with were the soldiers and tactical specialists who were guarding the stockpile but whose chain of command was separate from Travis' departmental hierarchy. He now found himself huddled inside the main stockpile warehouse with the security detail, minus their silver-rankers who had left to meet up with the others on base and confront the vampires as a unit.

The stockpile warehouse was the most secure building on the base, with magical protection designed to hold up against all but the most powerful attackers. Unfortunately, those most powerful attackers had turned up. The department staff were hunkered down in the offices, while Travis himself was in the main warehouse with the security team and the weapon

stockpile, in case his expertise was required. Even in their current situation, Travis couldn't help but be distracted by the head of the security team, Ingrid. The defeminising tactical outfit currently left her almost indistinguishable from the male soldiers, but Travis had been working up the courage to ask her out for a week.

“You know,” Farrah said as she drew a ritual diagram on the wall in chalk, “this is some impressive protective magic.”

“You can get in, though, right?”

Her head turned to give Jason a flat stare, her hand not pausing as she continued to draw without looking.

“Sorry,” Jason said, holding up his hands in surrender.

“You can get in, right?” Farrah muttered, turning her attention back to her work. “You don't hear me questioning whether you can slowly and horrifically kill someone, making their final moments of life a terrifying ordeal of pain and despair. I just trust you to do what you do.”

“That's a little hurtful,” Jason said. “I said I'm sorry.”

“Sorry enough to make a strudel?”

“If I can get the ingredients, sure. Food distribution is still a mess, although we do still have those nice apples from the astral space.”

Farrah spoke a short incantation and previously invisible runes lit up all over the building before fading again.

“That'll shut it down for about an hour,” she said. “Wouldn't want to permanently drop the protections, given all the stuff in here.”

“Good thinking,” Jason said.

They moved along the building to the main doors, which were large enough to drive a large truck through with clearance to spare. On top of being heavy, they were still

locked, even with the magical protection gone. The lock broke as if it weren't there as Farrah lightly pushed the sliding doors apart.

When the walls lit up with magic runes that quickly faded, the security team's tension went from high to razor-sharp. Guns were hefted at the ready and they positioned themselves to shoot from cover on command.

“What's happening?” Ingrid whispered sharply to the magitechnician.

“Someone just dropped the magic defences,” Travis said. “Someone who knows their business, because they were turned off, not broken through.”

“Could they have been turned off from the inside?” Ingrid asked. “By one of your people?”

“The head of the German contingent is the only one other than me who could do that,” Travis said. “You know him, right? Think he'd betray us to the vamps?”

“No,” Ingrid said, “but today is not the day for assumptions. Bernd, Karl. Go bring Lukas here, and be careful. If he's betrayed us, he may have tricks up his sleeve.”

Two of the security team made for the offices.

“Do you have a gun, techie?” Ingrid asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “And it's Travis.”

“Can you shoot it without hitting your own team?”

“Yes, ma'am. No promises on hitting the other team, though.”

“Just pull it out and do your best,” she said. “No one is expecting much.”

“I wish women would stop telling me that,” Travis muttered.

Travis opened his dimensional space, which took the form of a holographic cabinet with a door that slid open. He reached in and pulled out what looked like an oversized, high-tech revolver where the spinning bullet chamber had been replaced with a belt-feed mechanism. A long belt of ammunition dangled from it, each bullet engraved with intricate runes.

“Is that a belt-fed pistol?” Ingrid asked.

“I call it the Compensator,” Travis said.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Ingrid said.

“What? No, not for that. I’m fine in that area. Perfectly fine.”

“It’s alright,” she assured him.

“No, it’s... look, I’m better at building guns than using them, so I made one where aiming was less of an issue. To compensate for my crappy marksmanship. Thus, *Compensator*.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I don’t have a small...”

Travis trailed off and everyone tensed up as they heard the main doors slide rapidly open. Voices echoed through the large warehouse.

“So, we left the magical protections in place and broke the lock,” a man’s voice said.

“You think a lock is going to stop anyone looking to rob this place?” a female voice shot back.

“I guess it didn’t stop us.”

“It didn’t stop who?”

“Okay, it didn’t stop *you*. I’m going to break into the next place.”

“That’s an astral space; that doesn’t take skill. You’re just using your absurd magic power.”

“I only got that magic power to go in that very same astral space and get you!”

“Oh, look at me. I’m Jason and my version of sacrifice is getting amazing magical powers.”

“You’re going to talk to me about sacrifice? Do you know how many times I’ve died?”

“With how often you bring it up? Every time you go and get yourself killed, you come back from the dead and somehow you’re complaining?”

“The first time wasn’t my fault! And the second time, I brought you back with me.”

“That was nice, actually, yeah. You know all the people in here are getting pretty nervous, right?”

“Yeah, hang on. Uh, excuse me, everyone. Please don’t shoot us; we’re just here to steal a nuclear weapon.”

“What are you doing?”

“I thought they might respond to forthright honesty.”

“Yes. They’re going to respond by shooting us.”

“You say that as if you were worried about bullets.”

Ingrid stepped out of cover, levelling her rifle at Jason and Farrah. Farrah was no longer in her armour, while Jason still had his cloak and blood robes, but the hood was pushed back to reveal his face. The weird energy in his eyes undercut what he hoped was a friendly expression.

Jason’s familiars had been returned to him, other than a few Shade bodies scouting out the base. Ingrid’s gaze fell on Farrah’s magma elemental in the warehouse doorway. It was a mound of lava the size of a bakery van with arms and what roughly looked like a face. She ignored it for the moment to stare at Jason.

“You’re Jason Asano,” she said.

Jason turned unhappily to Farrah.

“Is there something about my face that makes me seem really, really forgetful? People keep telling me my own name as if I somehow don’t know what it is.”

“You do seem like an idiot,” Farrah said.

“Hey...”

“Remember the day we met? You kept getting knocked out by that guy with the shovel. It didn’t make a great first impression.”

“Okay, yes. Escaping took me a couple of goes, but I was new to a life of derring-do. Oh, did I ever tell you what happened to that guy?”

“The one with the shovel?”

“Yeah. Turns out he joined the Builder cult and—”

“Excuse me,” Ingrid called out and Jason turned back to her.

“Oh, sorry,” Jason said. “If you could just point us to a conveniently sized nuclear bomb, that’d be great. Preferably one with instructions. They don’t have to be in English.”

“You think I’m going to just hand over a nuclear weapon?” Ingrid asked.

“No,” Jason said. “Fortunately, you and your squad back there aren’t dangerous enough that I’ll need to hurt you badly when we take one.”

“What do you even want with a nuclear weapon?”

Jason glanced at Farrah.

“You’re the one who said forthright honesty,” Farrah told him.

“Alright,” Jason said. “I’m going to blow up some vampires. They have a stronghold that only I can get to, so I’m going to go there and nuke it into glass. The good thing is that the reason only I can get there is that it’s sealed in an isolated dimension. That means no blow-back on Earth.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Your belief is irrelevant,” Jason said. “We’re taking what we came for. We were hoping there would be a nice quiet vault

to raid with no one here. You'd be well-served by pretending we were right."

"That's who you are?" Ingrid asked. "A man who comes in, using his power to take what he likes?"

Jason bowed his head.

"I never wanted to be," he said softly, and then looked up, meeting Ingrid's blue eyes with his alien gaze. "But yes, that's who I am. So, shoot me or don't. Either way, we're walking out of here with what we came for."

"Wait," Travis said, coming out of cover, waving his arms. "Oh, this thing is heavy."

He set his gun down on a crate and moved up next to Ingrid.

"Techie, get back," Ingrid hissed. "What are you doing?"

"Uh, hi," he said, ignoring Ingrid's order. "G'day, mate. That's your thing, right? You're super-Australian, even though you're kind of Japanese."

"Okay, a few things, cobber," Jason said. "One, Aussies hate it when seppos say g'day. It's like nails on a chalkboard."

"What's a seppo?" Travis asked.

"You are, mate; don't interrupt. Two, I'm not Japanese. I've been to Japan exactly twice and someone poisoned me in a resort hotel. Didn't love it. Three, where did you get that gun? It looks super-sweet."

"Jason..." Farrah said.

"Right, sorry. Look, mate, what are you doing running out like that? We're having a very serious discussion, here."

"If you're looking to blow up some vampires," Travis said, "I can help you. I'm your guy."

"Travis!" Ingrid barked.

"Ingrid, do you know who this is? It's Jason Asano. He's the world's first superhero. He's been to another universe!"

“Travis, this is not for you to interfere with. You know the things they say about him.”

“That’s all made up by people who want to diminish his influence,” Travis said.

“I wouldn’t say *all* made up,” Farrah said.

“Whose side are you on?” Jason asked.

“Okay,” Farrah said. “How about we all take a step back, put away our guns and our...”

She looked around, seeing that she and Jason had already dismissed their conjured weapons. She looked back at the open doors of the warehouse.

“...giant lava monsters and talk about this calmly.”

Farrah looked from Jason to Travis.

“Preferably you and me,” she said to Ingrid, “while these two sit quietly and don’t make trouble.”

“My job is to protect this facility,” Ingrid said.

“And that’s what you’re doing,” Farrah said. “You can’t stop us with force, you have to know that. That makes your next-best choice to negotiate. Buy yourself some time and mitigate as much damage as you can.”

“Why would you allow that?” Ingrid asked. “There are vampires out there, as well as our silver-rankers.”

“The vampires are dead or escaped,” Farrah said. “What’s left of the base personnel is mopping up the scattered ghouls left behind. We didn’t get here in time to save your silver-rankers, though, I’m sorry. They’re gone.”

Ingrid paled but kept staring down the sight of her rifle at Farrah.

“How do I know that you weren’t the ones who killed them?”

“Because we didn’t kill you,” Farrah said.

Farrah waited a long moment until Ingrid dropped the barrel of her gun to aim at the floor.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s talk.”

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PERTINENT FACTOR

“THERE ARE OFFICES IN THE BACK OF THE WAREHOUSE,” Ingrid said. “We can sit down and talk there.”

As acting head of security for the weapon stockpile facility, Ingrid directed her team to secure the warehouse now that Jason and Farrah were no longer the chief concern. Ingrid knew that there was nothing she could do to stop them, so trying was pointless. Negotiation was her only recourse.

“You don’t need to worry about the door we left open,” Farrah said. “My magma elemental will handle anything that comes that way.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t put all my faith in a giant pile of lava,” Ingrid said. “While I’m sure it’s very powerful, we don’t know the conditions around the base.”

“I can help you with that,” Jason said. “Shade, give... Ingrid, was it? Give Ingrid a status update on the base.”

Ingrid’s people stirred as Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow and started reeling off the disposition of the surviving base personnel, ghouls and vampires located in it. Ingrid organised two teams of her people to go out and assist.

“Tell you what,” Jason said. “As a gesture of goodwill, I’ll send my lads off to help your people out. They can run around with your teams.”

Jason conjured up Colin from his own blood, looking like a blood clone of Jason. Gordon manifested from Jason’s aura, strange and alien. Two Shade bodies emerged from Jason’s shadow.

“My mates can help you out,” Jason said. “Shade can guide your people where they need to be, while Colin and Gordon can be the muscle.”

“I’m not sending my people out with your pet monsters,” Ingrid said.

“Farrah,” Jason said, “Are you getting an Anisa vibe off Ingrid, here?”

“A little bit, yes,” Farrah said. “Didn’t your friend Humphrey...?”

“He did, yeah. Let’s hope this works out better.”

Ingrid sent her team off and Jason sent his familiars out separately to operate alone.

“I have to say, I’m a little offended,” Jason said. “You Network people are on our side, you know. At least, you should be. Except when you periodically decide to come after me for whatever reason, obviously. Because let me tell you, I’ve had about as much of that as I’m willing to put up with. The next time you all—”

“Not the time, Jason,” Farrah chastised.

“Sorry.”

In a farmhouse in Austria, abandoned since the monster surges, Gerling and his people had settled in to plan their next move. Gerling was being briefed by one of the people he had recruited from the Network. Jeff Campbell was underwhelming as a combatant, but an expert at intelligence gathering.

“Are you sure?” Gerling asked.

“This comes from people we planted in the Network branches years ago and are now highly placed in the Global Defence Network,” Jeff said.

“We planted?” Gerling asked.

“Sorry, boss; that the US Network put in place. The plants are still using the old communications protocols, or they were, at least. I’m pretty sure they know we’ve gone rogue by now, so anything they feed us going forwards is questionable. This was the last intel we grabbed before the news went widespread. There is a chance this is some kind of trap, but I’ve had enough independent verification that I’m confident it’s solid.”

“Do we have a timeline?” Gerling asked.

“No, boss. You know better than most what it’s like trying to get Asano to do what you want. When they went to pitch this to him, they rounded up everyone they could that he wouldn’t punch on sight. Flew them all the way out from Australia.”

“And this permanent dimensional space in France. It’s a known factor?”

“Yes, boss. It has two apertures, both of which have powerful sealing magic put in place from when the Lyon branch was keeping it a secret.”

“We’re going to want to catch Asano inside,” Gerling said. “You are looking into getting us past those seals, right?”

“Of course,” Jeff said. “I’ve been looking into high-level members of the Lyon branch from that time, but after they were found out, the International Committee spirited them away. My contacts in Europe aren’t as solid as the US, so I haven’t had any luck digging them out.”

“Then why are you smiling?” Gerling asked.

“Because the guy who was running the whole secret dimensional space project for Lyon was never caught. He got out early and defected to the EOA. He’s currently one of their leaders and we have a line on him in Los Angeles.”

“He’s protected, I take it,” Gerling said.

“Yes, boss. The best protection the EOA has to offer.”

Gerling grinned.

“Is that all?”

Ingrid took Jason and Farrah to the offices in the back of the warehouse, where the rest of the department staff were still holed up. They went into a conference room where Jason and Farrah were on one side of the table while Ingrid and Travis sat on the other.

“Who are you, exactly?” Farrah asked Travis.

“Travis Noble. I know who you are, of course. You’re Farrah Hurin and you were born in a whole other universe. I’d love to get your perspective on what—”

“Not the time, Travis,” Ingrid said.

“Sorry,” Travis said.

“This is the acting head of the Special Munition Stockpile Division,” Ingrid said.

“Neither of you are the permanent occupants of your positions,” Farrah observed. “Did your bosses go off to fight the vampires?”

“My commander did,” Ingrid said. “The previous department head for the SMSD went AWOL with Jack Gerling.”

“Please tell me he didn’t take a bunch of dangerous weapons with him,” Jason said.

“That’s an odd position, coming from someone looking to steal a nuclear bomb,” Ingrid said. “Why not just ask the Network for one, if you’re using it for legitimate reasons?”

“We don’t work with the Network anymore,” Jason said. “They asked us to do this and we agreed, but we’re doing it our way. The Network is neither trustworthy nor reliable.”

“The Network has been protecting the Earth from magic for centuries,” Ingrid said. “Surely you can see we’re needed now more than ever?”

“Which Network?” Jason asked. “The GDN? The True Network? The Chinese, the USA? Not exactly acting with singular purpose, are you? Which one do you even belong to?”

“This is a joint facility that ignores factional disagreements. To act with that singular purpose you wanted.”

“Jason,” Farrah chided, “we did not come here to make this woman question her loyalties. You’re taking us further from what we want, not closer to it.”

“Ingrid, you won’t get them on board with the unity line,” Travis said. “The Network has kidnapped Mr Asano twice, along with killing his friend, his girlfriend and his brother. They only kidnapped Miss Hurin once, but they tortured her for several weeks. Sorry to bring it up.”

Ingrid looked from Travis to Jason and Farrah.

“Did that truly happen?” she asked.

“Yes,” Farrah said and looked Travis over. He looked about nine years old with his boyish features and overeager expression. She was catching the same smell off him she got from Itsuki, the Japanese essence user fascinated with Jason.

“Want to guess how much of that was for the sake of protecting the world from magic?” Jason asked.

“Jason,” Farrah said forcefully. “I get it, but that’s not why we’re here.”

“You were right,” Jason said, standing up. “I’m not going to be helpful here. You sort it out while I go help my pet monsters clean up the leftovers.”

Shade rose from Jason’s shadow. Jason stepped into it and vanished, after which Shade disappeared into Farrah’s shadow.

“Jason understands very well what it is to be powerless,” Farrah told Ingrid and Travis. “Now that he has power for himself, he finds feeling powerless increasingly intolerable. It’s something of a rite of passage for the strong. Given how weak everyone in this world is, he feels a constant temptation to just do and take what he wants. He knows that it’s wrong, but until we leave for the other world and he’s surrounded by

people truly more powerful than him, he's going to keep sliding."

"Why are you telling us this?" Ingrid asked.

"Because I need you to understand that we're not negotiating over what we came here for. We're taking it and you don't get a say. We're negotiating over how smoothly that goes and you have very little to offer."

"It's even less than you think," Ingrid said. "We can't access the most dangerous weapons. They're in an underground vault with physical and magical protections that make this warehouse look like an open-air café. The only people who can access it are dead outside."

Farrah looked to her shadow, as if waiting for something.

"What is it?" Ingrid asked.

"I was waiting to see if Jason would come back," Farrah said, her voice cold. "He can sense every aura on this base and individually observe them across distances that normally you don't see until category four. Your aura control is not bad, but he knows that you just lied to me as well as I do. He's also listening to us through his shadow. I don't know if you're stalling for time or trying to bluff me, but now we've reached the point where negotiations have broken down. You are going to answer my questions, and if you lie to me again, I'm putting you down. If you refuse to answer, I'm putting you down. If you try to stop me, not only am I putting you down, but I'm putting your people down, and none of you are getting back up again. You have no further chances to push my forbearance, is that understood?"

Ingrid stared at Farrah before finally and reluctantly nodding.

"Alright," Farrah said. "I can break into this vault, but having you open it up would be much easier. What does that require?"

Ingrid looked at Travis.

"As department head, he can do it," she said. "He requires two access keys, though, which we don't have."

“Who does?”

“The commander and deputy base commander each have one, carried around their necks.”

“Silver-rankers?”

“Yes.”

“Shade?” Farrah asked.

“Mr Asano is working on it as we speak, Miss Hurin.”

“Thank you, Shade. Next question.”

Farrah turned to Travis.

“You seemed very convinced that you could help us. Why is that?”

Ingrid gave Travis a sharp look and Farrah slapped a hand down on the wooden table between them. Under Farrah’s palm, the wood started to blacken and smoke. Ingrid grimaced but said nothing.

“Travis?” Farrah asked.

“I was brought here as part of a project to rework our enhanced ordnance,” Travis said. “I was never meant to be in charge. I was chosen because of my college research on creating specialised weaponry using quintessence.”

“You studied magic in a school?”

“My family were part of the Network going back to before the Revolutionary War,” Travis said. “The US has had magical teaching institutions for more than a hundred years. These days, we mostly pass them off as fake colleges.”

“Fake colleges?” Ingrid asked, despite herself.

“Yeah,” Travis said. “Scam colleges, like those places that give out shady doctorates to religious nuts so they can pass themselves off as scientists. Or the ones that are straight-up confidence schemes. There are so many and they hardly ever get cracked down on, so we pass ours off as just more of them. If the FBI or someone does take a look, they get gently nudged in another direction.”

“That sounds incredibly corrupt,” Ingrid said.

“You’re surprised?” Jason’s voice came from Farrah’s shadow.

“Jason...” Farrah chided.

Shade rose again and Jason emerged, this time with his hood up and his eerie eyes shining in its impenetrable darkness. He dropped two keys onto the table, both wet with blood.

“The gold-rank vampires got to them before we arrived,” Jason said. “I’m sorry.”

He vanished once again and Farrah turned to Travis.

“Tell me about your research,” she said.

“Well,” Travis said, “the basic premise is to not just make weapons that will harm higher-ranked enemies but to have the exact right properties to face specific opponents. In the last few decades, the entities appearing in dimensional spaces have grown stronger at a rate that exceeds the weapons we’ve developed to fight them. Many people are working on ways to make weapons stronger, but the tiers of magic always present a bottleneck in advancement. My approach is to avoid that bottleneck through specialisation. Improving effectiveness without needing to increase the power. At least, not as much.”

“Through quintessence, you said?” Farrah asked.

“Exactly,” Travis said. “Quintessence is perfect because it holds such specific energy. Take your standard magic energy pistol that fires off blasts of force and heat. They’re efficient and effective against most things, but their power is limited. If we give up the force and heat for energy infused with sun quintessence, though, it loses out against most things but becomes much more powerful against vampires. I’ve already stocked an armoury here on base with anti-vampire weapons. Ingrid, could you take out your pistol?”

Ingrid pulled her pistol and placed it on the table. Her assault rifle was leaning against her thigh, her hand having not moved from it since they sat down.

“I made this gun,” Travis said, tapping the pistol with a finger. “Fire quintessence like this one has is much easier to come by than sun, but it’s still quite effective against vampires. Plus, it retains more general usability because most things don’t do well when set on fire.”

“We were surprised at how well the normal soldiers were holding up against ghouls,” Farrah said. “We need something a lot more powerful than a few enhanced guns, though.”

“That’s been my big project,” Travis said. “It’s why I knew I could help you. I’ve been working on a nuclear device where the modifications are much more comprehensive than just adding flavour to the damage output. I’ve been working on converting the power of a nuclear detonation into sunlight power, using a special matrix of category-three sun quintessence. Category four would have been better, obviously, but the supply is so scarce that they won’t let me have any until I get a working prototype.”

“If it doesn’t work, why are we talking?” Farrah asked.

“It’s not that it doesn’t work,” Travis said. “You’re not from our world and I don’t know if yours has an equivalent, but a nuclear device is unconscionably powerful. Too powerful to just go setting off anywhere. It’s why I’ve been working on completely converting the output into energy that only affects vampires. The goal is to take it into the middle of a city, wipe out the vampires and leave the people and infrastructure untouched. It’s not currently usable because while it will wreck vampires, it’ll also still turn wherever it is into a hole in the ground.”

“Sounds like a winner,” Jason’s voice came from Farrah’s shadow. “We’ll take that, thank you.”

“You still need our cooperation,” Ingrid said. “You can take the device, but that doesn’t mean you know how to use it.”

“I’m willing to help,” Travis said.

In a flash of movement, Ingrid had the pistol pointed at Travis’s head.

“Ingrid?” Travis asked, his voice having gone up an octave.

“Now,” Ingrid said, staring at Farrah. “Let’s revisit that negotiating position.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t have done that,” Farrah said, getting to her feet. “I can’t help you now.”

“Without him, you can’t make the device work,” Ingrid said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Farrah said. “You shouldn’t have turned on your own guy. You’re just one more Network lackey with no loyalty now. Jason’s not going to concede anything, whatever you or I say. To be honest, I’m fine with that.”

“He doesn’t have a choice. If he thinks he can teleport in here and take my gun before I pull the trigger, he’s very much mistaken,” Ingrid said. “I have the swift essence. I’m almost as fast as a category three.”

“You’re underestimating Jason’s willingness to suffer the consequences of his principles,” Farrah said. “Put your gun down or he’ll kill you, whatever you do to Travis, here. I might even save him the time.”

“Uh, I think there’s a pertinent factor that both of you have already forgotten,” Travis said.

“And what’s that?” Farrah asked, her eyes not leaving Ingrid.

Travis snapped his fingers and Ingrid’s pistol fell to pieces.

“I made that gun,” he said.

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MORE OF A FOCUS ON NIPPLES

TRAVIS SKITTERED AROUND TO FARRAH'S SIDE OF THE TABLE.

“Ohmygodthatwasterrifying.”

He warily glanced over at Ingrid.

“And weirdly kind of hot.”

Ingrid and Farrah both turned flat looks on him.

“What?” he asked them.

“I get it,” Jason said, appearing from the shadows and patting him on the back. “Not super appropriate, but I won't go throwing stones in that regard.”

Jason turned his gaze on Ingrid. All she could see under his hood was the shifting blue, silver and gold of his eyes.

“So, this is where you kill me and all my people?” she asked.

“Yes,” Farrah said.

“No,” Jason said.

“But I promised,” Farrah said.

“We're thieves and she's doing her duty as best she can. Who am I to begrudge someone a bold, desperate move?”

“Yours keep getting you killed. How are people going to learn consequences?”

“How does dying teach you consequences?”

“You're teaching the next person,” Farrah said.

“If you kill them, how’s the next person going to find out?”

“There’s usually someone who gets away. I really thought you’d come down on the other side of this after she turned on one of her own people.”

“She sucks, yeah, but you don’t execute prisoners because they suck.”

“I am never getting used to this world,” Farrah said. “I want to go home.”

“We will. Soon. You probably still shouldn’t execute prisoners there either.”

“What if she tries something again?” Farrah asked.

“At that point, she’s just asking for it,” Jason said.

Farrah turned an eager gaze on Ingrid.

“So,” Jason said. “Where is that vault?”

Knowing he had limited time before Asano made his way into the astral space, Gerling had ‘borrowed’ the fastest magically enhanced plane the Chinese Network had in Europe. The Chinese Network didn’t share the joint operation bases in Germany with the other Network factions, having set up their own outpost in Austria. Just across the border from eastern Slovakia, it was another zone with higher than average magic.

Gerling used the plane for a whirlwind visit back to the US, grabbing Adrien Barbou and getting back out of the country within an hour. Speed, however, came at the cost of discretion.

“You should have come along quietly,” Gerling said. “Dead superheroes don’t look good on the news.”

Barbou was handcuffed and suppression-collared in a seat of the plane. His clothes were dusty and torn, with bloodstains—all that remained of superficial wounds that had already

healed. Gerling sat across from him, their seats facing one another over a table.

“The building did have a door, you know,” Barbou said.

“Not on the nineteenth floor,” Gerling said. “I guess it doesn’t have a nineteenth floor anymore either.”

“You’re a mindless thug.”

Gerling sneered.

“You kept a woman in a basement and tortured her for weeks and you want to criticise me about brutality?”

“Is that what this is about? The outworlders? You’ve run into Asano twice now, right? Are the other category fours making fun of you because you can’t catch him?”

“Let me be clear, Barbou: you’ll be doing two things during our time together. One, whatever the hell I tell you. Two, shutting the hell up. Note that neither of those things includes asking questions.”

“They do if you tell me to ask questions,” Barbou said. “You need to be more precise with your rules, Gerling.”

Barbou didn’t see the punch coming. Gerling’s gold-rank speed had him back in his seat before Barbou’s senses registered impact.

“I hear Asano is mouthy too,” Gerling said.

Barbou winced as he pushed his nose back into line with his cuffed hands, which were wetted by the free-flowing blood.

“You’re going to help me access the permanent dimensional space in Saint-Étienne,” Gerling said.

“You want to catch Asano while he’s going after the vampires there?” Barbou asked with a wince. “You shouldn’t be going after him, Gerling. Not yet.”

“And why is that?”

“He’s not lying about saving the world. I’ve learned only a little about what he’s doing and how. If he fails, we’re all

done.”

“I do believe that he’s saving the world,” Gerling said. “He keeps getting distracted, though. Not only is he going to France to kill some vampires, but he didn’t even head straight there. Right now, he’s in Germany. The vampires started the war by hitting up the Network strongholds in central Europe and Asano is there fighting them off.”

Gerling got up and left the cabin, coming back shortly with a beer.

“Picked up a taste for the German stuff while I was there,” he said, holding up the can. “Hard to get reliably just now, but my assistant is a resourceful woman.”

He took an appreciative sip.

“Very nice. Now, Asano. He’s letting himself be distracted, time and again, which tells me that whatever he’s saving the world from, he’s not in a rush. And the fact that he’s always been vague at best about what he’s saving it from and why tells me that there’s a reason he doesn’t want us to know. This means that whatever he’s doing and however he’s doing it, it’s vulnerable somehow. The power can be taken from him and I’m going to take it. I’ll save the damn world myself.”

“It can’t be taken,” Barbou said. His bronze-rank recovery had repaired his nose; Gerling had held back to teach a lesson rather than do real harm. Healing did not clean the blood from Barbou’s nose, however, which had painted his mouth and chin red.

“What do you know about it?” Gerling asked.

“Not much,” Barbou said. “My boss never told me much, presumably because of a potential situation like this one.”

“Your boss Mr North?”

“Yes. He doesn’t share secrets, but I’ve put some pieces together. Things he’s told me in passing or let slip in conversation. I think he’s lonely.”

“Lonely?”

“I’m quite sure he’s older and more powerful than anyone realises,” Barbou said, “and I’m certain he’s not human. I believe he’s older than the Network itself. He’s mentioned the Network founder few times and I think Mr North knew him, and knew him well. Hated him, but loved him too, I think.”

“Would your boss want you telling me this?”

“I’ve ever been a vessel subject to the prevailing winds,” Barbou said. “Network, EOA. I’ll jump ship to the vampires if they win. Right now, the prevailing wind is you.”

“Then tell me more. Everything you know about Asano and his secrets.”

“I don’t know what it is that Asano is using to save the world,” Barbou said, “but originally it should have been possible to take it from him. Mr North always intended for Asano to have it, but it was always meant to be possible to take it away.”

“A contingency if Asano didn’t do what North wanted,” Gerling surmised.

“Exactly,” Barbou said. “I only learned any of this because North was flustered when he returned after Asano claimed the item. Told me things I don’t think he otherwise would have. Asano somehow absorbed the item, permanently claiming its power for himself. That disturbed Mr North. I’ve never seen him shaken like that, before or since.”

“So, the item is gone?” Gerling asked.

“Yes,” Barbou said.

“Convenient,” Gerling said. “Your boss just happened to have a slip-up and reveal the exact right information to dissuade me from doing the exact thing you just told me I shouldn’t do?”

“The fact that I knew that is why I said it,” Barbou told him. “If you want to argue yourself in circles to do what you want, regardless of the truth, you don’t need me for that.”

“Very true,” Gerling said and punched Barbou again.

“Madam?” Farrah asked as she shrugged on what looked like an oversized and overstuffed hiker’s pack. The pack was extremely rugged, due to the hundreds of kilograms it was holding up. It was designed such that only superhuman strength could carry it as a backpack.

“Medium Atomic Demolition Munition,” Travis explained. “M.A.D.M. We call it the madam. Well, I do. The base commander called it ‘stop fanning about and get back to work, Travis.’ Or he used to, I guess.”

“I don’t think he was calling the bomb that,” Farrah said.

“No, I’m pretty sure he was,” Travis said. “Those were his exact words when I asked him about it.”

“He literally said your name,” Farrah said.

“I did think that was odd,” Travis admitted.

Farrah ran both hands over her face.

“I know this feeling,” she complained.

“What feeling?” Travis asked.

“Never mind. Let’s just get out of here.”

“Okay,” Travis said as they walked out of the vault.

Farrah moved carefully. While the pack might have been easy to lift with her strength, the weight distribution threatened to topple her over. Jason was keeping an eye on Ingrid in the control room of the underground bunker that contained the vault.

“You can lock it up,” Travis called out and Ingrid pressed the button that set the ponderous door to slowly shut. She looked at the two access keys in the control console but didn’t take them.

“Go ahead,” Jason said. “Give them to whoever ends up in charge of this place.”

Ingrid hesitated a moment before taking the keys and hanging their chains around her neck. She ignored the blood as she slipped them under her tactical vest. All four people went up the stairs from the underground bunker, back into the main warehouse. Ingrid's security team looked unhappy, but none were foolish enough to make a move.

"I'm sorry it worked out this way," Jason said to Ingrid. "Not enough that I won't do it, but still."

"Individuals shouldn't have the kind of unfettered power that you have," Ingrid told him.

"You're right," Jason said. "But institutions inevitably focus more on perpetuating their influence instead of whatever their original ideologies may have been. People and rules. The answer is somewhere in the middle, but it's always in flux and never quite right. People need rules or we turn into monsters, but if we choose rules over people, people get ground up in the machine. In the end, we do the best we can with what we have."

"Do we?" Ingrid said.

"I hope we do," Jason said. "I'll mess it up, you can trust that."

He glanced at Farrah.

"Find people you trust to keep yourself in check, Ingrid. Otherwise, you'll find yourself pointing a gun at the nice boy who has a crush on you."

"What?" Travis asked as he and Farrah stepped into the control room. "I mean, who? What? I have no idea what you're..."

He sighed.

"...oh dear."

"You need to work on that aura control, Travis," Jason said with a chuckle. "Your emotions are a little too on your sleeve."

"Let's get out of here," Farrah said to Travis. "Is there anything you need to take?"

“Wait,” Ingrid said. “Travis, you’re going with them?”

“Ingrid,” Travis said. “After all this, the work I came here to do isn’t going to resume anytime soon. I could sit around playing stockpile administrator while whoever ends up in charge sorts out the mess, but every single person in my department would be better at that than me. Instead of counting crates, I’d rather use what I’m good at to make a difference.”

“You just want to go off and play hero with your new celebrity friend,” Ingrid accused.

“Yeah, probably,” Travis admitted. “But look around, Ingrid. The world could use a few more heroes.”

“Oh, nice,” Jason said. “We could call you Gun Man, but he’s a villain.”

“From *Tongan Ninja*?” Travis asked.

“You’ve seen *Tongan Ninja*?” Jason asked.

“Only about twelve times.”

“We should watch it on the plane,” Jason said. “You need to grab anything on the way out?”

“My research notes. Oh, and my sandwich from the break room. It’s hard to find good food these days, and I put a lot of effort into getting the ingredients.”

“Oh, nice,” Jason said as the pair headed off. “You know where a guy can get some flour around here? I’m going to make a strudel.”

“That makes sense,” Travis said as they walked away. “We are in Germany. Do you have apples?”

“Magic apples.”

“Oh, wow. Wait, aren’t magic apples usually evil?”

“These are the good ones,” Jason said.

“That’s exactly what you’d tell someone if you wanted them to eat an evil magic apple.”

Farrah shook her head and followed after them.

“Great,” she muttered. “There’s two of them now.”

“The runway is probably damaged and there’ll be ghouls everywhere, alive or dead,” Travis said. “Taking off might be hard. Maybe your familiar should turn into a helicopter instead of a plane. He can do that, right?”

“He isn’t a runway kind of guy,” Jason said.

Darkness stormed out of Jason’s shadow and took the form of a plane hovering in the air.

“Your familiar turns into a VTOL private plane?” Travis exclaimed. “It looks like a spaceship designed by a ninja. Are you Batman?”

“Batman doesn’t have powers,” Jason said.

“And Jason doesn’t have ice skate boots,” Farrah added.

Jason and Travis turned to look at her.

“Since when do you know anything about Batman?” Jason asked her. “And why is that the first thing that comes to mind about him?”

“People kept talking about Batman,” she said. “I looked him up. There was more of a focus on nipples than I expected.”

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THE JOB THAT'S IN FRONT OF YOU

AFTER ARRIVING IN FRANCE, JASON CREATED A MODEST BOAT from his cloud flask on an isolated stretch of the river Furan. The plan was to get some proper rest and make plans before heading downriver to Saint-Étienne. It also gave Travis time to modify the nuke, as well as instruct Jason and Farrah on its use.

The three were out on a covered deck. It was a cold winter day, but that didn't worry the essence users. Jason and Farrah were in chairs while Travis sat on the floor in front of the semi-disassembled atomic device.

"The first thing I need to do is disable the function that stops it from being placed in dimensional spaces," Travis explained. "It's a safety feature to prevent people quietly pocketing a nuclear weapon, but that's exactly what you'll need to do."

"I don't think that lugging it around on my back is a good plan," Jason agreed.

"I'm still not sold on you going alone," Farrah said.

"The key is going to be stealth, not power," Jason said.

"I can be stealthy," Farrah insisted.

"Yes," Jason said with a wry smile. "The volcano essence is famous for its discretion. If we get discovered after sneaking into the middle of a vampire nest, we aren't fighting our way back out. If I get found, I can get myself unfound."

“Fine,” she conceded. “But you have to promise me something.”

“What’s that?”

“There’s going to be people in there; regular people that they’ve rounded up to turn into ghouls or lesser vampires. Even just to feed on. Don’t try and rescue them.”

“Farrah…”

“No,” Farrah said. “I know what you’re like. You’ll go in there, see people caged up or some such and get it into your head that you can somehow get them out before you set off the bomb. You can’t. You have a problem with understanding your limits and that pushes you forward, but this isn’t about you. It isn’t even about the victims in that astral space. It’s about all the damage the things in that place will do if they aren’t stopped. It’s about striking a heavy blow against the vampires, especially after the attacks in Germany. The goal is to arrest the momentum of the vampires before they sweep over countless people.”

“But if I see a way—”

“No,” Farrah said. “It’s not a choice of saving them or not, Jason. It’s a choice of a quick, clean death in white-hot fire or being turned into a monster. Or food. That’s all you can do for them.”

Jason hung his head.

“Fine,” he mumbled.

“I need to hear you say it,” Farrah said, unyielding.

He looked up at her with angry eyes.

“I said fine.”

“Promise me, Jason.”

His face twisted in a snarl.

“I promise, alright? I’ll go in there and kill a bunch of innocent people who, even as we speak, are probably hoping that someone like us comes along to save them.”

“Okay,” Travis said, getting to his feet. “I need to go in the other room. This is getting awkward and I left my thinly-veiled excuse to leave you two alone in there.”

They watched him go, the tense atmosphere at least a little diffused.

“You’re not a superhero, Jason, whatever they might say on the television. That’s just an image being sold. A story you tell yourself.”

“Like adventurer? It doesn’t matter what we call ourselves, Farrah. It’s what we do that matters.”

“No, Jason. What’s important is the consequences of what we do. It doesn’t matter if you try and save those people; it only matters if they get saved, and they won’t. Even if you somehow extracted them from the astral space, this is vampire territory now. You think that the astral space apertures are just sitting out in the open with no vampires guarding them? You and I might be able to handle it, but what about the people you have somehow managed to sneak away from the army of enemies? You just told me that I couldn’t go in because I wasn’t stealthy enough.”

“I know all this, Farrah.”

“Of course you do; you’re not an idiot. You have this bad habit of acting like one, though. That’s fine when the only person you’re putting on the line is yourself, but those days are behind you. Rufus told you from the very beginning that if you choose this life, you’ll end up responsible for others. You can ignore that, and plenty do, but is that the person you want to be?”

“No,” Jason said.

“Of course it’s not,” Farrah said, her voice softening and her shoulders losing their tension. “Look, Jason, I know that you want to be the guy who saves the day with some crazy plan. It’s nice when you can do that. You saved my life because you walked back into a sacrifice chamber full of cultists when any sane person would have run like the wind. That’s amazing, but sometimes there is no crazy plan.

Sometimes you just have to do the job that's in front of you, even when the job is awful."

"You sound like Rufus," Jason said.

"When I have to," Farrah said with a smile. "Look, I never liked the Network's plan to have us strike-force our way through this astral space. I don't think they ever really bought the whole saving-the-world thing. Their idea feels like a long shot they were happy to take because they know we're done with them and don't care if we die trying. If we do, they can just try the bloody invasion approach and spend the bodies it takes to get it done instead. But now we've got Travis and his bomb. Sneak in, sneak out is a plan that actually sounds workable."

"He's a good kid."

"Of course you like him," Farrah said. "He's basically you from when we first met. It's a good thing he's eavesdropping because he could stand to learn the lessons you have trouble taking in."

They heard someone tripping over in the cabin next to them.

Jason went over the arming sequence with Travis until he was confident he would get it right, even if he found himself doing so under extreme conditions. Without more information about what awaited him in the astral space, he had to assume things would go wrong.

"I've stripped out everything I put in to limit the physical blast," Travis explained. "The force quintessence you gave me should enhance the blast instead, although it was a bit of a rush job. Without extensive testing, I can't be sure how effective it will be. I can guarantee you a great big blast, infused with a boatload of sun magic. It's only a question of how big. The best estimate I can give you is very."

Farrah handed Jason some sheets of paper.

“Study this,” she said. “If you perform this ritual before placing the bomb, there’s less chance of it being discovered in the time between you setting it and your getting out of the astral space.”

“If I’d only kept my damn tongue in front of the Builder’s lackey, I could have set it off on the spot and made sure,” Jason said. “There are worse ways to spend a life.”

“If you’d held your tongue, you wouldn’t have been you,” Farrah said. “And if you weren’t you, I’d have died in the desert and some blood cultist would be running around with your apocalypse monster.”

“His what?” Travis asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jason said.

“She just said apocalypse monster. I worry if someone puts mayonnaise on my sandwich and you want me to ignore an apocalypse monster?”

“Stop talking about him like that,” Jason said. “You’ll hurt his feelings.”

“It’s an apocalypse monster,” Travis said. “Do its feelings matter?”

“It’s an apocalypse monster,” Jason said. “I’d say they really, really do.”

“It’s time to go,” Farrah said.

“I think this warrants more discussion,” Travis said.

Jason shook his head.

“Just tell him the story while I’m gone,” he said. “Maybe show him some recording crystals.”

“While you just casually head off for a stroll, yeah,” Farrah said. “Just remember that the priority is coming back alive.”

“Don’t worry,” Jason said. “I’m definitely not the kind of guy who goes off and gets himself killed all the time.”

Unlike a proto-space, Jason couldn't just slip into the French astral space from anywhere. A stable astral space required him to enter through an aperture, but he could ignore any seals on it. He had claimed that power to save Farrah from this very astral space and it was why the Network had come to him for the task at hand.

The astral space had two apertures. One was in Saint-Étienne, while the other was more isolated. Jason chose the Saint-Étienne aperture because it would likely be more guarded. He could gather intel that might help him, and if he couldn't slip through undetected, the other aperture was still there to try.

Saint-Étienne was almost unrecognisable from Jason's previous visit. It had been a major centre of Network activity from the moment it was discovered that the Lyon branch had been hiding the astral space, just weeks after Jason's return to Earth. The Network's International Committee had purged the Lyon branch and seized control, turning the astral space into a spirit coin farm.

The vampiric takeover in France had been one of the most hard-fought in Europe, pitting some of the Network's most powerful people and resources against many of the strongest ancient vampires to arise. The gold-rank vampires were relatively small in number, but without gold-ranked essence users to confront them, the Network had been pushed out in a series of destructive clashes.

The Saint-Étienne astral space was a critical strategic asset, so the city had suffered more than most in the struggle to control it. Jason found it looking more like Beirut in the eighties than the French metropolis it had been. The resemblance to a war zone didn't stop with the destroyed buildings either. The city was thick with an occupying force, vampires of all ranks keeping both normal humans and ghouls penned up in cages.

For the humans, their cages were more like chain-link pens that would be easy enough to escape for anyone willing to brave the razor wire at the top. The patrolling vampires were the true disincentive to escape. The ghouls were in actual reinforced cages with thick metal bars.

The magic around the astral space was very low, barely increased despite the general increase in magic levels worldwide. This meant that even low-rank vampires were largely unimpeded by the sun. Combined with the presence of the astral space, it became obvious why the vampires had fought so hard to claim the area.

Jason had no problems moving through the shadows of the ruined city, scoping out the terrible conditions. The humans in their huge pens were left largely exposed to the elements, with only a scattering of blankets. He sensed dead among them that the vampires hadn't bothered to remove, the old and young too weak to resist the winter.

Examining the ghoul cages from relatively close, Jason realised that, while they looked strong, they should not have been enough to hold the ghouls. The bars were magically enhanced, with faint runes carved into the metal.

This started to answer the question of how vampires, with their lack of ritual magic, managed to use the sealed astral space apertures. The Lyon branch had established permanent seals that could be open or closed but would take a very long time to break into with ritual magic.

The Cabal, including the vampires, had little to no ritual magic expertise. The materials were generally sourced in proto-spaces, over which the Network had held a monopoly. Jason had heard of some vampires wielding blood magic, but material reinforcement rituals, while ordinary to the Network, were beyond the Cabal.

It seemed likely that the vampires had seduced away or suborned some of the Network's ritualists during their conquest of Europe. Jason had not extended his senses to search for essence users because vampires had sensitive aura senses and could possibly detect him.

Exploring the occupied section of the city for more information, he discovered that it was serving as a transport hub. Along with people being trucked in and ghouls being trucked out, there were also crates with some kind of equipment. Discreetly opening one for a look, Jason thought the contents had the appearance of medical equipment. It was imbued with magic, however, and Jason suspected it was part of the program to make ghouls on a wider scale than vampires could on their own.

While searching around, Jason spotted some of the ritualists he had postulated about. They appeared to be enslaved, iron-rankers in foot manacles being forced to perform magical tasks like checking and maintaining the ghouls cages.

The essence users he'd seen around didn't seem up to the task, after he'd observed them at work. He guessed there were more capable ones inside the astral space, probably ones who had been part of the team managing the astral space before the vampires took over.

The aperture was contained in the only newly constructed building he had seen, which appeared to be a brick warehouse. From the crude and functional aesthetic, it was clear its construction had prioritised speed and sturdiness. The magical alarms in place were clearly slapped together, to the point that Jason could bypass them just by manipulating his aura a little.

From listening in on the vampires, Jason discovered that the aperture was only periodically unsealed, at which point there would be a flood of activity in and out. During those periods, the aperture was heavily guarded and could be resealed at a moment's notice, should anything like a Network attack take place. Outside of those times, the guard was reduced but not entirely removed.

It was not hard to infiltrate the building, and Jason slipped through the aperture without so much as a ripple of aura.

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GOING SUSPICIOUSLY WELL

THE ASTRAL SPACE WAS A FOG-FILLED REALM OF DILAPIDATED manors and ruined castles, rising from a sea of mist. They were connected by crumbling stone bridges that spanned between them, and Jason's instincts told him that descending into the mist would be a Very Bad Idea. With poor visibility and murky light, it looked like a place that should have had vampires all along.

Jason's previous visit was one of his most violent episodes, when he had slaughtered Network personnel and EOA superhumans alike in his bloody determination to rescue Farrah. The environment was perfect for a shadowy stalker of Jason's ilk, which had not changed. This time, he didn't slaughter his way through but moved unnoticed, another unremarkable shadow in the mist.

As he and Farrah had surmised, Jason found pens for humans, like those outside. For good or ill, these were mostly empty, while the ghoul cages here were filled to capacity. He estimated they would likely open the astral space to ship out more people soon. Jason unhappily but resolutely left them be, seeking out the place where the conversion process took place.

The primary goal of Jason's mission was to eliminate the infrastructure that allowed the ghoul creation process to be franchised out. The secondary target was the operation already pumping out undead monstrosities, along with the man behind it all.

The people of Makassar were victims twice over: once when they were killed and again when turned into the unquiet

dead. They still haunted Jason's dreams and he would very much like to send the man who desecrated them to meet Shade's father. His preference would be for a long, personal encounter, but he would accept nuking the man into atoms. Any ghouls and vampires that died in the process were gravy.

Gerling and his small team of silver-rankers chose differently from Jason when it came to invading the astral space. They chose the more isolated aperture and they chose assault over stealth. After eliminating the vampires guarding the entrance, they put Barbou to work cracking open the seal.

"I can't even be certain that I will still be able to access it," Barbou warned as he finished drawing the ritual circle. "Unless they haven't reconfigured the seal at all since..."

The moment he completed drawing out the ritual diagram, the invisible aperture shimmered into being.

"I guess they haven't," Barbou said. "That's just unprofessional."

The Chinese gold-ranker, Chen, was travelling along a French road in the back of a van. His fellow occupant was unusual, but someone Jason would have recognised.

"You have executed the design adequately," Shako said, looking at the device in the van with them, strapped in place.

"And if I do this, you will deliver me the power that Asano is using to save the world?" Chen said.

"Yes," Shako said. "While Asano is still able to act, I am unable to intervene. He stole the device to repair this world from its creator and antagonists prevent him from making another. Only once Asano dies and the device is lost, will my master be permitted to create another, for this world will still need to be saved."

“Asano is elusive and resourceful,” Chen said. “The place he has claimed is a stronghold for him. This is a rare chance to catch him exposed, but could we not just send gold-rankers into the astral space?”

“Asano is slippery,” Shako said. “Even death has failed to stop him. He must be annihilated by forces that make sure his soul leaves for the realm of the dead, never to return.”

“Couldn’t you go in yourself to make sure?”

“I am restricted twice over,” Shako said. “This avatar you see before you is merely a weak projection. The entry of my true self would damage your already fragile world. I am also bound by the same restrictions that protect Asano. I can teach and guide, as I have in helping you construct this device, but I cannot act.”

“I’m worried that this will be dangerous if our world truly is as fragile as you say,” Chen said. “A dimensional bomb, fuelled by a reality core.”

“It is not a bomb, as you understand it,” Shako said. “It will break down the astral space, annihilating everyone and everything inside. Asano will be gone, Gerling will be gone and you will have struck a great blow against the vampire threat. Your nation will be on the path from leading the world to dominating it. Then you will save it, not just solidifying this outcome but positioning you as the most prominent member of the most dominant force on this planet.”

“I don’t do this for my own glory,” Chen said.

“Of course not,” Shako said.

“Loud explosions are for the outside,” Gerling said. The vampires just inside the aperture had been eliminated with speed, but Gerling held off on using his abilities. His explosive powers would be like sending up a signal flare.

“We move fast and take down who we must as quick and quiet as possible,” Gerling said. “The objective is to find

Asano.”

Gerling had recruited someone very specific for the purposes of chasing down Jason. A silver-ranker with the light and trap essences, he was an expert in purging shadows.

“You realise this plan is idiotic,” Barbou said. “You think you can just randomly find him by checking shadows? You don’t even know if he’s here yet, or been and gone.”

“We’re doing more than checking shadows,” Gerling said. “We’re going to lace the shadows around this aperture with light traps that will reveal his location to us.”

“And if he uses the other aperture?” Barbou asked.

“My second team is attacking it from the outside,” Gerling said. “They’ll use a device that destabilises apertures, making it unusable for hours.”

“You have a second team? Are you sure they can handle the vampire forces at the other aperture?”

“They’re silver-rank elites from the US,” Gerling said. “They scouted it out and signalled me the good-to-go before we came in.”

“And if Asano doesn’t show up in your window?”

“He’s already inside. You see, all those people studying the magic town Asano made haven’t been idle. They might not have deciphered much, but they did find a way to tell whether Asano was in direct contact with the town. Something about magical resonance; I don’t pretend to understand. What it means, though, is that they can detect when Asano goes out of range, and they’re confident that Asano’s range covers the planet.”

“So, if he’s out of range,” Barbou realised, “he’s entered a dimensional space.”

“Now you’re getting it,” Gerling said.

“Surprisingly well-prepared, for a semi-shaved ape.”

Gerling punched Barbou in the face again.

When Gerling had assaulted the area external to the astral space aperture, he had used his powers to full effect. With the aperture sealed, no communication was possible, so he had been free to go all out. It had originally been a nondescript spot by an empty road, outside the city. After it was revealed to the International Committee, a secondary outpost was built, which had been taken over by the vampires. The outpost was now in ruins, and what was left was painted red by the combination of Gerling's explosive powers and the vampires that previously occupied it.

Chen's van arrived after the fact. The normal van was not as fast as a gold ranker but was far less suspicious should a gold-rank vampire be around with their powerful senses. There were plenty of delivery vehicles on the road since the humans held prisoner needed to eat or die.

"He hasn't changed," Chen said, looking around the ruined outpost. "Such a barbarian."

The van had contained only Chen, Shako and a silver-rank driver, who was carrying the drum containing the dimension-collapsing device.

"My information is that the seal is sophisticated and difficult to open," Chen said as he and Shako looked at the spot in which the invisible aperture resided. Shako snorted disdain and held out a hand. Stone lines in the shape of a ritual circle rose from the concrete floor and the aperture bloomed into being.

"Didn't even need an incantation," Shako said derisively. "What passes for magic here is an embarrassment."

Chen went through the aperture to make sure nothing was waiting for them on the other side. He found the vampires there dead and came back.

"Do we need to take it deep into the dimensional space?" Chen asked.

“No,” Shako said. “You can set it off right on the other side.”

“You heard him,” Chen told the driver. “Set the timer for ten seconds and get out.”

“This is going surprisingly smoothly,” Jason whispered. There was no one close by, but he was not going to tempt fate and the hearing of gold-rank vampires.

“This appears to be the least trafficked room within this central area,” Shade said. “The bomb is unlikely to be discovered in the time it takes to exit the astral space.”

They were in an old wine cellar, the racks mostly rotted and the only bottles remaining in shards on the floor. What had once been a manor above had been completely wiped away and replaced with the most disgusting place Jason had encountered since the kitchen of a cannibal cult. Somewhere between an abattoir and a manufacturing plant, it combined grisly exsanguination with industrial production.

Jason completed the ritual to hide the bomb’s presence then activated it according to Travis’s instructions. He had gone over it again and again until he remembered the relatively simple process perfectly, but he checked it against his notes anyway. Once he was certain, he set the timer and left.

Slinking through the dark, he restrained his aura as much as he could, knowing there were gold-rank vampires about. Restraining his aura diminished his supernatural senses that relied on it, but he only needed to sense far enough to avoid danger. As he made his way from the most populated, and therefore most dangerous, area, things were going suspiciously well. Just as he had that thought, he sensed a powerful wave of dimensional energy move across the astral space like a tsunami.

“Oh, come on,” he complained. “I didn’t even say it out loud.”

- A dimensional event has triggered the collapse of the astral space you are in.
- Your ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has a stabilising effect on the immediate space around you and will maintain a section of physical reality around you that will not collapse.
- The presence of physical space that cannot be collapsed has anchored the collapsing astral space. Due to conditions in the physical reality to which the astral space is connected, a transformation event has been triggered.
- A transformation zone has been triggered. Due to being coterminous to an area of disintegrating dimensional space, the transformation zone will demonstrate abnormal properties.

“Are you kidding me? Again?”

Jason looked around as the ubiquitous fog started to take on a rainbow hue. He was standing atop a stone spire rising from the fog and covered by a castle, most of which had collapsed away. The fog started to coalesce, almost into a liquid, and rolled away from him to reveal more of the collapsed castle.

The castle itself started to change, dissolving into mist as well, but this did not share the rainbow colour of the space around him. It even retained the shape of the castle from which it had dissolved and then expanded to replace the missing sections.

- The transformation zone has formed an abnormal genesis space. Your ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised a section of that space.
- Your ability [Spirit Domain] is asserting authority over the stabilised space and forming a spirit domain. Abnormal effects will not occur within your spirit domain but anomalous effects will attack your spirit domain in an attempt to homogenise it with the remainder of the transformation zone.

Jason watched as a castle made of clouds was made from the ruins of what came before. The rainbow energy forming from the fog became a bubble surrounding the castle.

- 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: 3287%. Increase your rank to increase your maximum total spirit domain size.
- Once genesis space has formed territories, abnormalities will begin to attack your spirit domain. You may expand your spirit domain by expanding it into other territories within genesis space.

Jason ran a hand over his face.

“Farrah is going to be so mad I didn’t bring her. Wait, what about the nuke?”



Outside the astral space, Shako looked at the dissolving aperture, his face filled with rage.

“No! What is this? WHAT DID YOU DO?”

“We have to go!” Chen yelled.

The mass of dimensional energy was plain for both of them to sense, like the outer edges of a tropical storm. Shako ignored him and Chen shot away, as fast as his gold-rank speed would take him. Only when he was well clear of the dimensional forces did Chen stop and turn around. Initially invisible, those forces had taken on a rainbow hue before being sealed away inside the dome of a transformation zone as it shimmered into being. Chen trembled as he looked at it.

“What did I do?”

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ONE OF ASANO'S SECRETS

BY THE TIME JASON EXPANDED HIS SPIRIT DOMAIN INTO A fourth territory, the enemies were growing truly dangerous. Although extremely weak for their rank, they were still gold-rank entities, and with each territory Jason claimed, the attacking anomalies grew stronger. In the previous transformation zone, Jason had sent off the gold-rankers before the transformation zone reacted by creating anomalies at that rank as well. Jason assumed that since the anomalies here were gold rank, the transformation zone was reacting to the most powerful of the vampires caught up in it.

If it weren't for the fact that Jason retained all his essence abilities this time, he would have struggled to handle even the first territory. Possessing the spirit domain power from the inception of the transformation zone shielded Jason's territory from the negative effects of the transformation zone at large, including from the sealing of his abilities.

The fourth territory was similar to the astral space it had been formed from, and filled with eerie, obscuring mist. It lacked the chasms spanned by crumbling bridges, but there were still crumbling gothic buildings. Most of it was made up of woodland, though, the mist drifting between trees with ethereal silver leaves. Every so often, Jason would find one with a pale white peach dangling from a branch, which he plucked and stowed away.

Item: [Ghost Fruit] (gold rank, common)

Fruit that contains an otherworldly power (consumable, food).

- Effect: For a moderate period after consumption, any magical damage inflicted by essence abilities or other innate powers adds disruptive-force damage in addition to the normal damage.

It would have been useful for confronting the ghost-like anomalies that appeared to attack Jason, but consuming gold-rank food would do him more harm than good. Fortunately, his powers were able to treat the incorporeal entities as if they were flesh and blood using the afflictions he had picked up at silver rank.

- [Mortality] (affliction, magic): Negates immunity to curses. This includes intrinsic immunities such as from not having a soul or not being alive. Cannot be cleansed while any curse affliction is in effect.
- [Blood From a Stone] (affliction, magic): Negates immunity to blood and poison effects. This includes intrinsic immunities, such as from not having a biology or corporeal form. Entities without blood can bleed while under this effect. Cannot be cleansed while any blood or poison affliction is in effect.
- [Weakness of the Flesh] (affliction, magic): Negates immunities to disease and necrotic damage. This includes intrinsic immunities, such as from not having a biology or corporeal form. Cannot be cleansed while any disease affliction is in effect.

These afflictions led to the odd sight of ghosts dying like living creatures, leaving behind ectoplasm laced with blood and rot. With the sheer number of them, it left the misty forest dripping in foul goo.

When the final ghost fell, Jason waited for the zone boss to appear, fingers crossed.

“Please be the marshmallow man. Please be the marshmallow man.”

When he sensed another almost featureless ghost appear, only much larger, Jason was disappointed. He held his hands

out to his sides and cast a spell.

“As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest.”

Having made them vulnerable to blood effects, Jason could drain the energy from the remains of the ghost-like anomalies as if it were life force, drawing it in and absorbing it in a huge wave.

- You have gained instances of [Blood Frenzy] through the ability [Blood Harvest].
- You have reached the maximum number of instances of [Blood Frenzy]. Further instances will be converted to instances of [Blood of the Immortal].
- You have gained instances of [Blood of the Immortal] through the ability [Blood Harvest].

This was the secret to Jason fighting the gold-rank anomalies as they grew stronger. Blood frenzy was a buff that increased his speed and recovery, allowing him to partially keep up with a gold-ranker’s speed, even if he couldn’t quite match it. The heightened recovery attribute boosted the effectiveness of his many self-healing powers, including the potent healing of blood of the immortal. Triggered when Jason suffered damage, it was a potent but short-lived healing effect that would sustain Jason in the face of powerful attacks.

Jason looked at his familiars.

“Alright, gents. Back to work.”

“Normally, essence users caught in a transformation zone are rendered unconscious throughout the process but aren’t changed,” Barbou said. “The fact that we’re awake tells us that this is an abnormal transformation zone, similar to the one in Slovakia.”

He looked at Gerling.

“You’re the only one with any experience inside a zone like this.”

“Our abilities were sealed away in the last zone as well,” Gerling said. Given the circumstances, he wasn’t going to keep giving Barbou a hard time. The Frenchman might only be bronze-rank, but he was a better ritualist than anyone Gerling had managed to recruit.

“What about ritual magic?” Barbou asked.

“We never tested it in the other transformation zone.”

“That should probably be our first step, then,” Barbou said. “I’ll try a loot ritual on one of these things that attacked us.”

“Asano called them anomalies,” Gerling said.

“He has a power that gives him information on the things he encounters, so he’d know,” Barbou said.

They were in a strange village that looked like a tourist attraction because it was scaled for knee-high people. The anomalies that attacked them were tiny villagers with farm implements, although there had been a carpet of them to eliminate. Without powers, they had been forced to physically crush them, which was surprisingly difficult.

While the power level of the anomalies was only around that of a low-end silver-rank monster, their true rank was gold and they proved rather resilient. Many of Gerling’s silver-rank minions had been injured, as well as rather disturbed after killing all the tiny people with their bare hands. Barbou had carefully avoided the fight, atop one of the diminutive buildings.

“What are these things?” one of Gerling’s men asked, holding up an orb swirling with black and red energy.

“PUT THAT DOWN,” Gerling roared. “You want to be a goddamn tentacle monster?”

“That’s where that thing came from?” Barbou said. “Interesting. Did you learn anything from Asano about them?”

“I think he had some way of using them to claim territory,” Gerling said.

“Which is presumably how he created his magic town,” Barbou surmised.

“I don’t think he used them in their current state, though,” Gerling said. “I think he changed them somehow, but he never told us how.”

“In fairness,” Barbou said, “I wouldn’t have told you either.”

Jason returned to the cloud castle at the centre of his new spirit domain before he expanded into the next territory. Under Jason’s control, the castle had morphed from its original design in the classic Western-European style to more of a palace. It was now made up of wings centred on the same pagoda to be found at the heart of Jason’s first domain.

Rather than head for the pagoda, Jason went to check on the people housed in one of the palace wings. Jason had found more people turned into celestines, much like the farming family from his first domain. This time, there were many more, the people who had been caged up in pens. Thus far, he had not encountered any of the ghouls that had been near them at the time.

Jason provided what food he could from his inventory and left them to their own devices.

After checking on the newly transformed celestines and fending off most of their questions, he made his way to the pagoda. He rode the elevating platform to the top floor and surveyed his new domain from the balcony. Immediately around the palace were deep pools of water, spanned by narrow strips of land. When he had been claiming that territory, anomalies had crawled up out of the water to attack.

The subsequent territories were quite disparate, from the fog forest to a city reminiscent of Prague, but not the real Prague. It was more like Prague from espionage movies, all shadowy corners and cobbled streets glistening from rain that always seemed to have just happened.

Jason withdrew one of the items he had taken from the ghost boss.

Item: [Dark Orb] (unranked, uncommon)

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

- Requirements: Sealed [Dark Essence] ability.
- Effect: Unseals a random [Dark Essence] ability.
- You have 0 sealed dark essence abilities.

Like all bosses, its loot included an orb to unseal one of Jason's abilities, but this time, he didn't need them. It was useless for its intended purpose, but Jason took out another item—a doom orb left over from the last transformation zone. Jason's completion of the transformation zone had changed it, however.

Item: [Eye of Doom (dormant)] (unranked, legendary)

Contains the potential to bestow spirit domains with the power of doom. Requires more energy before it can be used
(consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Spirit domain, [Doom] essence.
- Effect: Adds an additional passive effect to the wielder's spirit domains.
- Current power: 36%
- Consume essence orbs in order to increase power.

The eye of doom looked just like one of Gordon's eye orbs. Jason touched the two orbs together and the dark orb melted into the eye.

- Eye of Doom has accumulated power.
- Current power: 48%
- Consume additional essence orbs in order to further increase power.

Jason put the orb away and leaned on the railing, his mind troubled. He was unsure if the Earth's dimensional boundary could handle another shake-up. Jason would need to completely stabilise the transformation zone to prevent it from punching a hole in the universe. Even with his full powers, he was uncertain about his chances.

With the anomalies growing closer to the strength of an ordinary gold-rank monster with each new territory, Jason didn't know if he could claim it all. He had grave concerns about what awaited him in the final territories, which he had not risked claiming in the last transformation space.

Jason had two points of consolation that gave him hope for success. One was that his spirit domain already had its defences in place, helping fight against the anomalies in great number. It was growing harder with each expansion, though, as the anomalies became more resilient to the silver-rank effects. The second consolation was the most powerful weapon at Jason's disposal.

At first, Jason thought premature detonation of the nuke had triggered the transformation space, but while exploring the territories, he found it again. Not only had the detonation sequence been cancelled but, like most things in the transformation zone, it had been changed. Jason took it out from his inventory to examine it again. No longer a backpack nuke, it now took the form of an unwieldy rocket launcher.

Item: [Travis' Big Rocket] (silver rank, rare)

Definitely not compensating for anything (consumable, bazooka).

- Effect: Launches a rocket containing vast and destructive powers of solar and kinetic energy.

It was silver rank, as the original device had been, allowing Jason to make use of it. He just hoped that when the time came, it would be enough.

Gerling was looking at two orbs sitting on the ground in front of him. They were identical in size but differed in the colour of the energies swirling within. One was black and red, the unstable cores Gerling was familiar with. The other was filled with blue, silver and gold light.

“So, this is how he did it,” Gerling said.

“We can’t be certain,” Barbou said.

“No, this is it,” Gerling said with certainty.

Barbou’s loot ritual had produced the refined version of the orb.

“This is what Asano used to claim the transformation zone for himself,” Gerling said. “He has a loot power, so it was easy for him, but now it’s my turn. I’ve finally dug out one of Asano’s secrets.”

“Assuming you’re right,” Barbou said, “which is quite an assumption, by the way. There is limited power in this orb. You’re going to need a lot of them if you want to start affecting all this space around us.”

“So, you’ll loot more,” Gerling told him.

“I’ll need more spirit coins for that many looting rituals,” Barbou said.

Gerling grinned.

“We still have our racial powers,” he said. “And as it happens, Bennett, here, has a storage power as a racial gift, like Asano.”

“Sure do,” said Bennett, one of Gerling’s minions.

“Bennett,” Gerling said. “Adrien, here, is going to need some spirit coins. How many coins did we take from the base stockpile in Germany?”

“Roughly?” Bennett asked. “A metric ass-ton.”

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SWARM AGAINST SWARM

JASON DUCKED INTO ONE OF SHADE'S BODIES AND VANISHED, right before a huge gobbet of webbing splashed into the shadowy familiar. Despite Shade's incorporeal form, the potent magic on the webbing sent him flying backwards and pinned his body to the wall of the vast cavern. The energy in the web rapidly burned away Shade's body, destroying it.

Jason appeared from another of Shade bodies, right underneath the huge creature. He reached overhead to carve his knife through its hair and cut the skin, the long, steel-like bristles scraping his fingers. He shadow-jumped again as it moved to react. Jason's reflexes were already enhanced to the maximum, but the spider still caught him with one of the blade-like protrusions on its leg as he jumped.

This boss creature was not that much larger than the normal anomalies in the cave-system territory, but it was much more powerful. It had the full might of a gold-rank monster, complete with exotic abilities. These took the form of special webs, from fire webs that were harmful to Colin to dimensional webs that hurt Shade and Gordon.

Jason had been forced to recall his familiars other than Shade, whose multiplicity of bodies gave him some leeway. Those bodies were being taken down, one by one, though. The advantage of recalling his familiars was that Jason could use the effects he gained from them personally. The two orbs provided by Gordon were valuable shields, intercepting many of the web attacks, although they could only hold up for so long before breaking down and needing to reform.

The spider was also quick and agile for a creature the size of a transit van, but that was unsurprising from a gold-rank greater anomaly. The chitinous blades on its legs were swift and dangerous weapons, bleeding Jason again and again, although never scoring a decisive hit. Gordon's shields soaked the big hits Jason wasn't fast enough to avoid, while the smaller hits were rapidly healed.

The combination of the blood robes Colin gave him and Colin himself boosted Jason's formidable regeneration and drain attacks. Jason loaded the spider with afflictions, hit it with his big damage spell and then drained all the afflictions back out. This loaded Jason up with powerful recovery effects and the spider with transcendent damage as the curses, diseases, poison and unholy afflictions were drained away, leaving holy afflictions in their place.

True gold-rank power was no joke, however, and that was not enough to finish the job. Jason went through multiple cycles of applying and then draining the sinister afflictions, both to build up a powerful stack of recovery effects on himself and load up the spider with holy afflictions. Only then did Jason move on to the final stage of the fight, transforming his affliction dagger to its second form—from an unholy dagger to a holy sword.

Item: [Penitent, The Blade of Sacrifice] (silver rank, conjured)

Conjured holy sword for those willing to pay the price for victory in battles to the death (weapon, sword).

- Effect: Attacks refresh any wounding afflictions on the target. Those wounding effects require additional healing to remove.

- Effect: Attacks inflict an instance of [Price in Blood]. This affliction is applied equally to the person it is inflicted upon and the person who inflicts it. This affliction cannot be cleansed while a person who

shares it is alive and is immediately negated if the person who shares it dies. Dismissing [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice] does not remove this affliction.

- [Price in Blood] (affliction, holy, blood, stacking): Damage between people who share the affliction is increased, including damage sources in place prior to this affliction taking effect. Damage from holy sources is further increased by an additional amount. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

Doom Blade's second form was a risk versus reward weapon. The holy affliction it bestowed amplified all damage dealt and received, which was why Jason rarely used it. Only once he was confident in both the afflictions layered on the spider and his own ability to withstand the retaliation did he call it out.

Despite the risks, Jason did not shy from the fight, moving in to strike at the spider, boosting the damage it was suffering with every cut. Finally, Jason opened up with his finisher, Verdict.

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

Amplified by the holy afflictions racking the spider, the beam of transcendent light came down from the cavern roof like the judgement of a wrathful god, yet even that wasn't enough to eradicate the spider entirely. Its gold-rank resilience proved its might once more, leaving Jason with the very unusual situation of waiting on the cooldown for his finishing move.

Surviving was not the same as thriving, however, and the ruined spider was on the verge of collapse. Just as Jason thought he'd won, the spider exploded with a force that shook the cavern. Stalactites came crashing down and Jason was sent flying, slapping into the cavern wall like a wet newspaper. There was more to the boss anomaly's explosion than pure

force, however. Its ravaged body had transformed into a storm of spiders that scattered through the cavern.

Jason recovered his sensibilities quickly; this was far from the first time he had taken a mighty whack. He took stock, assessing his heavily injured body and discovering the spider swarm encroaching on him. Despite his injuries, he waved his hand, spraying leeches all around to send swarm against swarm. It meant giving up the extra regeneration when he was badly hurt, but the spiders had to be dealt with and Jason had another plan.

Jason's starlight cloak turned into wings and lifted him into the middle of the cavern. There was plenty of room for them to hold him aloft in the massive chamber as leeches moved to attack spiders.

The spiders, despite being tiny, were still gold rank and didn't fall quickly to Colin's afflictions. Indeed, since Jason was unreachable, they started savaging the leeches, which they outnumbered and outranked. Even so, the game little leeches were apocalypse beasts and did not go down easily.

"That'll do, Colin," Jason said. The leeches gathered into small piles that shot rags up to Jason, then turned into blood and swiftly flowed up the rags to be reabsorbed. Some of the spiders tried climbing up but Jason let the rags dissolve and they dropped to the floor.

Jason picked out a spider and cast a couple of spells on it. Inexorable Doom immediately multiplied all the afflictions, while Haemorrhage applied the same afflictions as Colin, plus a bonus—the sacrificial victim effect, which made the spiders more susceptible to drain abilities. Jason then called out Gordon and had him send an orb to trigger the butterflies, spreading the afflictions through the spider swarm.

The butterfly swarm spread, its exponential growth overtaking the spiders in number until every spider was loaded with a growing pile of afflictions. Jason was still heavily injured, but there was a solution for that. He cast a spell.

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

Ability: [Feast of Blood] (Blood)

- Spell (drain, blood).
 - Base Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: 30 seconds.
-
- Current rank: Silver 3 (14%).
-
- Effect (iron): Drain health and stamina. Only affects targets with bleeding wounds or who are suffering from the [Bleeding] affliction.
-
- Effect (bronze): Drains additional health and stamina for each instance of poison on the target.
-
- Effect (silver): Increasing the mana cost to very high and the cooldown to 2 minutes allows this spell to target all viable targets in a wide area.

Life force drained from the spiders and was soaked up by Jason. The gold-rank anomalies were small but had life force to spare and the afflictions on them allowed the spell to drain even more. It was more than enough to fully replenish Jason's health.

“Feed me your sins.”

Jason drained the afflictions from the little spiders the way he had again and again with their larger progenitor. The

spiders were left glowing with transcendent energy of blue, gold and silver, a match for Jason's eyes.

The gold-rank spiders were tough, but there was still a limit to the vitality in their tiny bodies. Colin's afflictions and Jason's drain had stolen much of it and the transcendent damage from the penance affliction burned away the rest. The spiders dissolved into rainbow smoke.

- You have defeated [Greater Anomaly].

- [Greater Anomaly] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.
- [Sin Orb] has been added to your inventory.
- 10 [Gold Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 100 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 1,000 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 10,000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.

- Defeating a higher-ranked monster has provided additional rewards.
- [Vessel of the Hegemon] has been added to your inventory.

- You have overtaken a genesis space territory and purged all anomalous elements.

- Return to core territory to initiate transfiguration of new territory.

While Jason was happy to have claimed another territory, his concerns about the future fights continued to grow. This anomaly boss had the strength of a full-flight gold-rank monster, if not an especially powerful one. Even the previous greater anomalies hadn't truly shown the power of their rank, but with each territory Jason claimed, the anomalies attacking it grew stronger. It was only a matter of time before even the ordinary anomalies reached that level.

As Jason returned on Shade's motorcycle form to his palace at the centre of his domain, a small group of newly transformed celestines approached. Shade returned to Jason's shadow as he started walking past the water fountain roundabout and towards the pagoda.

"Mr Asano," the celestine ringleader said, matching Jason's pace. "We have a lot of nervous and uncertain people, with little idea of what is going on."

"Then I have some bad news for you," Jason said, still walking. "You've got one more than you think."

"We don't know what to do," one of the other celestines pleaded.

"Go back inside and hope I figure out how to save the world. Again. Until then, there's not a lot of point making other plans."

The pagoda doors opened as Jason approached and closed behind him when he went inside.

"You were rather rude to those people who have undergone quite a lot of trauma," Shade observed as Jason called up a

cloud chair to sit in. They were on the balcony of the pagoda's top floor.

"I don't have the time or the energy to be nice," Jason said. "I should have never come here. The vampires are a secondary concern to what I need to do."

"If you weren't here, Mr Asano, who would stabilise this transformation zone?"

"Would it even have formed if I wasn't here?" Jason asked. "Something triggered it; you felt it, just like I did, and it wasn't the nuke."

"That does not mean it is somehow related to you," Shade said. "That is a conclusion built on far too little evidence."

"Yeah?" Jason asked. "You want to bet on whether this would have happened if I'd stayed out of it?"

"No, thank you," Shade said.

"Exactly."

Jason winced unhappily and closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Shade. You're right. I was rude to them and I was rude to you. I'll go and try to calm them down. In a bit. I'm just so bloody weary. I'm tired of this fight, I'm tired of this world and I'm tired of being responsible for it."

"We both know you won't put those responsibilities down, Mr Asano. Rest, as much as you can. You're going to need it."

"No kidding," Jason said with a bone-tired chuckle. "I don't see a path to win this, Shade. I've made so many mistakes. I should never have agreed to come here. I should have brought Farrah after I did."

"There is always a path, Mr Asano. You may not like where it takes you or what you must do to walk it, but the path is always there. Defeating the Builder is something most would consider impossible, yet you've done it twice. He tried to claim an astral space and he tried to claim your soul. Despite his personal involvement, he was rebuffed in both instances."

“Extenuating circumstances.”

“There always are, Mr Asano, or you would not have been in those situations at all. This world was going to rupture with the last abnormal transformation zone, yet you held it together. You’ve created your own spirit domain when your power is still so insignificant. That’s the most impossible thing of all and you don’t even understand what it means, yet.”

“But you do?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to tell me?”

“No. You’ve already placed a foot in a realm you aren’t ready for. I won’t let you shove your head in after it. I also suggest you refrain from speaking on it at all once we reach the other world.”

“Fine. You know that in every situation you just listed there were extreme mitigating factors that made what happened possible,” Jason said.

“Which you found and used every time.”

“Actually, that one time it was pretty much all Clive.”

“Do you think those mitigating factors aren’t here to be found now, or are you just too tired to seek them out?” Shade asked. “I hate to break it to you, Mr Asano, but doing the impossible is kind of your thing. To be unfortunately colloquial, it is now time to nut up.”

Jason’s eyes shot open and he stared at Shade.

Jason made his way down to the celestines. He plastered on what he hoped was a convincingly optimistic expression and tried to settle them as best he could. He was making some headway when he stopped mid-sentence, sensing a familiar presence enter his spirit domain.

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NECESSARY EVIL

MR NORTH STEPPED FROM UNCLAIMED TERRITORY INTO Jason's spirit domain. He was in the bottom of a rocky canyon, with sulphurous vents letting out steam from the volcanic activity below. He scaled the canyon wall with the same adroitness his true spider form would have had and then walked to the top of a nearby ridge. He looked out over the domain, spotting the pagoda at the centre of the palace complex.

"Oh, Mr Asano," he muttered as the aura of Jason's domain washed over him. "You are getting out of hand."

"I've got no interest in being in your hand," Jason said.

Mr North hid his surprise as he turned to face Jason, who wore his blood robe and starlight cloak. His dagger was in his hand, although held casually at his side for the moment. Under the dark hood was the unnerving, unreadable light of Jason's eyes.

"Not many can sneak up on me, Mr Asano. Not in this world."

"Those spider threads you have wafting around you are hard to spot," Jason said. "The trick is looking for the tiny bit of aura you put in them. A requirement to use them as sensory organs, I assume."

"And you can push your senses to the limit here without fear of being noticed because this place is already flooded with your aura," Mr North said.

"In this place, Mr North, it doesn't matter if I'm noticed."

“I suppose not. You must be wondering why I’m here?”

“No,” Jason said. “I’m wondering if you triggered this transformation zone.”

“You think I would put the whole world in jeopardy like this?”

“You’ve done it before. I haven’t forgotten who disabled the grid and plunged the world into calamity, Mr North. The day will come when you’re called to account for that.”

“It was a necessary evil, Mr Asano. I wanted to do things more gradually, but your return forced my hand. When you were fumbling around in ignorance, that was fine, but your friend Dawn accelerated the course of events, truncating my timeline. The magical development of your world needed to be accelerated in turn and humanity needed to be united by one common enemy so they’re ready when the next one arrives.”

“You were getting ready for the vampire war?”

“Nothing that mundane. The people of your world remained stubbornly fractious in the wake of the monster waves, so I developed a means to infuse blood with reality core energy and slipped it to the Cabal. Finally, people are pulling together to face the threat.”

Jason’s grip on his dagger grew tighter.

“You’re behind the ancient vampires?”

“I promise you, Mr Asano, the enemy you unleash will be far worse. This world needs to be ready. Of course, the vampires needed to be a plausible threat without truly threatening humanity, which is why this astral space needed to be dealt with.”

“What is this enemy I’m going to unleash?”

“That will be your necessary evil, Mr Asano. Or perhaps, necessary consequence would be a more appropriate descriptor. You’ll be unwitting, after all. We can’t have you killing the baby in an attempt to shield it from an abusive parent.”

“You don’t trust me to make the right choice.”

“You’ve already made the right choice, Mr Asano. There’s no point complicating matters by letting you convince yourself there are alternatives.”

“Isn’t that my decision to make?”

“Yes, which is why we’re keeping it from you. You’ve had failures in judgement before.”

“You keep saying ‘we.’ Who else are you talking about?”

“Your friend, Dawn. We’ve never discussed it, or even met, but we both made the same choice for the same reasons. If you don’t trust me, trust her. She set you on the right path, even if you’re walking it faster than I’d like.”

“I don’t know exactly how strong you are, North, but in this place, the advantages are all mine. You think I can’t make you talk?”

“I think your instincts are telling you that I’m right. I think you don’t entirely trust yourself and I think you won’t like who you become if you start torturing me for information. You’d have to go hard, and you know that. Harder than you want. I also think you need me. Do you have the power to resolve what’s happening here alone?”

“What has happened here?” Jason asked. “This transformation zone didn’t form naturally. If you didn’t trigger it, who did? And why are you even here?”

“Perhaps we can discuss this somewhere more comfortable than a rocky outcropping?”

“Fine,” Jason said. “Shade? Emi special, please.”

Darkness emerged from Jason’s shadow and took the form of a rugged dirt bike, inevitably black, along with a sidecar.

“You’re kidding,” Mr North said, looking at the sidecar. “Can’t you just open a portal?”

“None of my archway abilities work here,” Jason said. “My spirit vault, the node space door. I can shadow jump, but no portals.”

He slung his leg over the bike and waited.

“You could always jog.”

The deep astral did not have geography in any way that made sense from the perspective of physical reality. Only when the physical and the astral merged did concepts like distance become anything more than metaphorical. The borders of physical reality were a place such interactions took place, although border was something of a misnomer. Astral spaces were such borderlands, where physical and the astral were blended together.

The dimensional vessels used by powerful individuals to navigate the astral were essentially mobile astral spaces, and usually much smaller than astral spaces that formed naturally. Jason had fought the Builder in an astral space that turned out to have once been an unconventionally vast dimension ship, until it was stolen and affixed to the world of Pallimustus, acting more like a normal astral space.

The dimensional vessel Shako used to travel was another that belonged to the Builder, although much more modest in proportion. Like Dawn, he had left it close to Earth's unstable patch of dimensional membrane and projected an avatar through. After losing his temper, his avatar had been destroyed by the formation of the transformation zone and he was constructing another.

Unlike Dawn, who had permission to be present and had made the strongest avatar she could, Shako made the weakest, to support his case for non-intervention. It was skirting on the wrong side of the line, but the World-Phoenix was notoriously averse to direct confrontation. Unless Shako was brazen about violating the agreement, she would not intervene. With Dawn gone and no one else to look over his shoulder, that was all the more true.

The door to Shako's chamber opened and his servant, Keffin, entered, glancing at the half-formed avatar, currently a person-shaped being of light.

“Lord Shako,” Keffin said. “Another vessel has approached and contacted us.”

Shako snorted.

“The World-Phoenix called Dawn back to wring some minor concessions out of me again?”

“No, sir. The vessel is the Last Ferry.”

“Velius?” Shako said, pleasantly surprised. “Great. Invite him aboard.”

“Are you certain that’s a good idea, sir?”

“I’ve known Velius longer than you’ve been alive, Keffin. He’s an old friend.”

“That,” Mr North said as he clambered out of the sidecar, “was very undignified. Also, it would have been faster to run, with my power level.”

“I gave you the option,” Jason said. “At least I didn’t make you wear a little helmet.”

Jason led Mr North into the pagoda and up to the mezzanine lounge.

“If you didn’t do this,” Jason asked as they sat, “then who did?”

Mr North looked at the hood still shrouding Jason’s face and the blade still held in his hand.

“Must you be so cloak and dagger, Mr Asano?”

“I might be more amenable to jokes, Mr North, if you weren’t one of history’s greatest monsters. How many deaths can we lay at your door? The monster waves. The necromancer who animated the Makassar victims. He got his start in your house, Mr North. A house that, sooner or later, I am going to burn down.”

“So scary. I’m afraid that my little organisation is quite beneath you. I never intended them to be ready for today’s fights. Plus, they never really understood the consequences of my directives.”

“They were just following orders?”

“I take your point,” Mr North conceded. “Even so, you have larger concerns.”

“Who triggered this transformation zone, North? And why are you in it?”

“I came for Gerling.”

“Gerling?”

“He’s in here with us, somewhere. He learned that you were coming here and wanted to catch you inside.”

“He did this?”

“No. He simply came for you.”

“How did he get through the seal?”

“He took Adrien Barbou to let him in. Blew up my office building to do it. I came to take Adrien back.”

“You really care about some lackey?”

“I’m very old, Mr Asano, but in that time, I’ve had very few friends. Would you do any less for yours?”

“Friends?”

“Is that so hard to believe? I like Adrien.”

“You know that Barbou’s a ship-jumper, right? He turned on the rest of the Network for the Lyon branch, on the Lyon branch for the EOA and has probably spilled every secret he had to Gerling.”

“I know, which is why I was careful about which secrets he had. I may have let one or two slip, but nothing critical. True friends, Mr Asano, are willing to accept their friends’ faults. Something you, of all people, should be rather grateful for.”

“Then who triggered this transformation zone?”

“Another acquaintance of yours. Chen.”

“The gold-ranker from China?”

“Yes, although he was merely a cat’s paw. He used a magical device he doesn’t understand, the designs of which were provided by a man from beyond our world. Does the name Shako mean anything to you?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “He killed me once.”

“Well, he just tried again. I was scouting out the astral space when I saw Shako and Chen place the device in the aperture. Once the transformation zone triggered, I went in before it was sealed off.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because I understand what is at stake if this abnormal transformation zone isn’t smoothly resolved. The last one almost shook open the dimensional barrier keeping this world intact. It can’t take another event like that, so this one must be resolved better than the last.”

“I know,” Jason said.

The dagger and his cloak vanished as he stood and walked over to lean on the mezzanine railing.

“It really was because I came here,” he said. “I should have stayed out of this.”

“Yes. But you have a hero complex, Mr Asano. It makes you easy to predict. Easy to manipulate. But look around. The world needs heroes.”

“Yet, you play the villain.”

“We each have our role.”

“What do you know about Shako?”

“I know he’s a servant of the Builder, little more. That much I got from his aura.”

“The Builder isn’t allowed to interfere with this world anymore,” Jason said. “There’s an agreement in place. The Builder isn’t allowed to send people here.”

“So I’ve heard,” Mr North said. “Technically, he wasn’t here. What I saw was an avatar. A projection, much like those your friend Dawn used.”

“Will that count as a violation of the agreement?”

“Without knowing the specifics, I couldn’t make an informed assessment. In my experience, it’s a matter of what you can get away with and whether you were successful.”

“Velius,” Shako said as he welcomed the dark-skinned celestine with curly silver hair onto his dimensional vessel. “It’s good to see you again.”

“I wish I could say the same, Shako,” Velius said, his expression sober.

“Oh, come on,” Shako said. “Is this about the agreement? I may have walked the line a little, but—”

“You’ve walked the line before, Shako. This time, you crossed it.”

“I didn’t act. I didn’t go in person. I didn’t even send an avatar with magic. Any fool with a sword could have killed it.”

“Speaking of technicalities is essentially a confession.”

“My agreement with the World-Phoenix’s representative was about the other world,” Shako said. “Why isn’t she here? You represent the Reaper.”

“Your master made an earlier agreement. One to which my master is also party.”

“What does the Reaper care about Asano? Its only interest was in stopping the World-Phoenix from constantly resurrecting her pawns.”

“The Reaper’s interest is that a bargain was struck, so the bargain must be kept. Your master, by his nature, is able to flaunt agreements in ways that other great astral beings are

not, but he would be wise to avoid doing so quite so frequently and flagrantly. He has never shown the proper respect for the pacts by which the great astral beings navigate one another's authority. You have inherited this tendency and it is time for both you and your master to pay. One price that will serve for you both."

"And what price is that?" Shako asked with a flinty expression.

"The price is you, Shako. It's time for you to come with me."

"You want me to go off with you? If you want me onto your vessel, Velius, you'll need to drag me there yourself."

"I won't force you, Shako. If you refuse, I will go back alone."

"That's what I thought."

"Carmen will be the one to come get you."

"You'll send Carmen?"

"No one sends Carmen, Shako. She just turns up, which she did in this case. She's aboard the Last Ferry."

Shako froze, his pale skin turning a whiter shade of pale.

"The Reaper is done indulging you and your master, Shako."

"The Builder won't stand for this."

"If he was going to intervene, he would have," Velius said. "He won't go against the Sundered Throne; not for you. He's serving you up as the price for his own transgressions. So, will you be coming with me, or will Carmen have to come and get you?"

Shako hung his head.

"I'll go."

“What are you proposing?” Jason asked, still leaning on the rail as Mr North lounged behind him on a cloud couch.

“Do you have the means to stabilise this transformation zone more fully than the last?” Mr North asked.

Jason closed his eyes.

- 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: 69.1%

- Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone Y/N?

“The means, yes,” Jason said. “The strength, no.”

“What I’m proposing is to add my strength to yours.”

“You’re offering to help?”

“Yes, but will even that be enough?”

“Probably not,” Jason admitted.

“Then I’m afraid our classic hero-villain team-up will need to be expanded. Gerling, the necromancer. The vampires, if they’re up and about. Needs must, Mr Asano.”

“Will they be active?” Jason asked. “Until you, all I’d found were transformed civilians. The would-be ghouls, waiting for conversion.”

“In a normal transformation zone, anyone with magic caught inside is rendered unconscious for the duration and left otherwise unchanged. That has not happened to you and me, so it stands to reason that others are similarly active.”

“My abilities are a large part of how this space operates,” Jason said. “The door was a key component of making it work, although not the only factor.”

“Then we likely have you to thank for retaining our faculties. I don’t have the answers, Mr Asano. Transformation zones were never a part of my plan. I didn’t even know they were possible.”

Jason turned around to face Mr North.

“I don’t want to work with you. Or Gerling, or vampires or your itinerant necromancer. Frankly, I want to kill the job lot of you.”

“Will you?” Mr North asked lightly.

“You know that I won’t. I don’t have a lot of options, do I?”

“At this stage, Mr Asano, I think we should be grateful to have even one.”

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BALLS

“THIS IS THE PART WHERE WE GO OUT AND SAVE THE WORLD,” Mr North said.

He and Jason were still in the mezzanine lounge.

“No,” Jason said. “This is the part where you stay here until I come back and get you.”

“You have something better to do?”

“Mr North, one of us saved the world from the convergence of an astral space and transformation zone threatening to open a wound in the side of the universe. The other one is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands. Probably millions at this point. Which one of us do you think should be in charge?”

“Really, Mr Asano? Do you think my way or the highway is going to get Gerling and the vampires on board? Don’t let your desire to kill us all prevent you from completing the task at hand.”

Jason seethed but reluctantly nodded.

“I do have things to do before we take the next step, though,” Jason said.

“How do you suggest going about finding the others?” Mr North asked.

“We keep expanding territory,” Jason said. “Eventually, they’ll be in it.”

“I would appreciate being walked through the process before I’m thrown into it.”

“I’ll do that when I get back. Just stay here until then.”

“You want me to just sit here and twiddle my thumbs?”

The floor morphed as a table made of cloud-stuff rose from it before solidifying into dark crystal embedded with shifting flecks of blue, silver and gold light. Jason took a notepad and pen from his inventory and dropped them on the table.

“What are these for?” Mr North asked. “A confession of my heinous deeds?”

“You were around in the other universe a long time ago, right?”

“I was.”

“How’s your memory?”

“I’m gold rank, Mr Asano. My memory is so good that I could solve crimes alongside a strait-laced detective who can solve any murder except that of her own father.”

“You think pop-culture references will win me over?”

“My research on you suggests it’s worth a try. How’s it working?”

“Better than I’d like,” Jason admitted. “You know about the Order of the Reaper?”

“Reaper cultists. Assassins. Lost their way and became politically ambitious. Some kind of internal schism.”

“Write down everything you remember. It might prove useful when I go back.”

“And why would I do that for you?”

“A gesture of goodwill. Or don’t do it; that’s up to you.”

Jason moved to the elevating platform, his face still filled with frustration as it lifted him into the other levels. Once he was out of Mr North’s sight, the expression vanished and a smile curled at his lips.

Jack Gerling slumped against a jungle tree, exhausted.

“You did good, Jack,” said Bennett, one of Gerling’s silver-rank companions. The others were off gathering up the dead anomalies for Barbou to use looting rituals on. Given the numbers, Barbou had been using the largest ritual circles he could make work to loot the anomalies in piles.

In the jungle territory they were currently in, it was hard to find an open space to perform the ritual. They had resorted to hauling them all back to the previous territory Gerling had claimed, which was a wooden town on stilts set in shallow water. There was a town hall there with enough open space to manage.

Gerling recovered quickly. With his gold-rank recovery attribute, the wounds he suffered at the hands of the boss anomaly closed quickly. It also rapidly purged the giant snake’s poison and replenished Gerling’s stamina. Approaching the giant anomaly, he threw his arms around it, just under the head, and started dragging it back to be looted as well.

The looting rituals took hours, during which Gerling and his people left Barbou to work. As the anomalies weren’t monsters, they didn’t dissolve on their own an hour or so after death, giving Barbou time to get through them all. Gerling left Bennett and another flunky to watch Barbou as he and the others returned to the heart of Gerling’s territory. Bennett would collect all the loot in his dimensional space when Barbou was done and follow.

Gerling’s central territory had originally been a village of undersized cottages, the anomalies taking the form of a horde of tiny people. Once he claimed it, it stayed small but transformed into an undersized, cyberpunk-style slum. Neon buildings and miniaturised strip joints spread out in a rat’s nest of streets and alleys, with the humans walking through them like giants.

The only normal-sized building was a tower of glass and steel at the centre—the core of Gerling’s domain. At the top of the tower was a luxurious penthouse where Gerling went to rest. The rest of his team not tasked with monitoring Barbou stayed in smaller, but no less opulent, apartments a floor below.

When Bennett brought back Barbou, he delivered the fresh pile of rainbow orbs looted from the anomalies. They were piled high on the floor, along with the orbs unused from before.

“Well, Jack,” Bennett said, slapping Gerling on the shoulder as they looked over the mound of spheres. “No one can deny you’ve got balls.”

Gerling snorted a laugh. He didn’t know what they were called, but Gerling knew they were the refined versions of the black and red orbs that had turned Tran into a vampire and Guo into a tentacle monster. After witnessing those events, it had been a risk to use the rainbow variant, but Gerling had been right. They were the key to seizing control of the transformation space.

He was certain that Asano was out there, somewhere in the transformation zone. He didn’t know what would happen when the territories met, but Gerling was confident. With each territory expansion, the anomalies attacking had grown stronger, but Gerling had managed to kill three of the boss monsters. From each, he had gained a magical orb that had allowed him to unlock his powers. He knew Asano would have to deal with the same challenges, alone and at silver rank.

Gerling had used two of the power-unlocking orbs and now Bennett had just delivered a third. The first power unlocked was from his vast essence and wouldn’t have been Gerling’s first choice. It was a leaping power that was useful for mobility and let him build up power for enhanced attacks with the leap. It made for a good opening move against larger and slower enemies like the anomaly bosses, but there were many more powers Gerling would have chosen over it. His goal was Asano, who was elusive enough that such a power was of little use.

The second power he unlocked was more useful. From the potent essence, it allowed allies within his aura to boost their base attributes by consuming mana. Since their powers were all locked, giving them something to spend their mana on was valuable. At gold rank, the additional features of the power allowed the affected allies to add weakening effects to their attacks. It made them burn their mana even faster, but a silver-ranker not using their essence abilities had mana to spare.

This had been a real boon claiming the territory they had just completed. Since Gerling's aura covered the entirety of his domain, this allowed his people to use the effect anywhere within it. They were able to spread out and confront the weaker anomalies in small groups or even alone. They were mostly combat elites trained by the excellent US training programs.

Gerling wanted as many unlocked powers as he could get when he faced Asano. He had underestimated the silver-ranker once and was determined not to do so again. He took the latest orb and absorbed it, feeling the fog sealing another of his abilities part like mist in the sunlight. He let out a sinister chuckle as he felt his Immortality power awaken once more.

His gaze turned back to the pile of rainbow orbs on the floor. It was time for the next expansion.

Jason sat on the top floor of the pagoda. He hadn't yet looked at his latest haul from the spider anomaly or triggered the transfiguration of his latest completed territory. The sin orb that would otherwise have unlocked his powers should be enough to finish charging his eye of doom item, so he took both out and let the eye absorb the other sphere.

- Eye of Doom has accumulated power.
- Current power: 100%
- [Eye of Doom] is fully empowered. It may be consumed.

Item: [Eye of Doom] (unranked, legendary)

Contains the potential to bestow spirit domains with the power of doom (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Spirit domain, [Doom] essence.
- Effect: Consuming the [Eye of Doom] will add additional effects to your spirit domain.

Jason looked at the description. He was sure that it previously said it would add a single passive effect, not multiple general effects. He couldn't help but wonder what changed. Was there something specific about the orbs he was feeding it or was something else at work?

Jason leaned back into the plush cloud chair and considered the item in his hands. The unexpected change made him wary, but it should be safe to use, nonetheless. His identification ability had been unable to show him the effects of powerful items before, but it had never hidden effects entirely. The Eye of Doom, despite the sinister name, should be safe. The only questions were about the specific effects it would grant. Was there some side effect of a power that was somehow prohibitive?

It was hardly the first time that a description had changed on him. His system was not an objective assessment of the world around him but a function of his own abilities; it was a power he possessed to sense the world around him that was coloured by his attitudes and unconscious perceptions. He often wondered how affected it was by his conditions and moods. It had always proven trustworthy, yet was, in some ways, an unreliable narrator.

Even with those concerns, Jason once more put his trust in the ability, absorbing the eye, confident that it wouldn't harm him. The orb melted into his hand and vanished. Jason's head was immediately filled with searing pain, as if someone had scooped out his eyes, tipped his head back and was pouring a stream of lava into each socket.

Jason came to his senses, sprawled in his chair and uncertain of how long he had been suffering. He minimised the message window for the moment, letting out a groan as he stayed slumped where he was. One of Shade's bodies stood in front of him.

"How are you feeling, Mr Asano?"

"Like Farrah's magma elemental tried to shag my eye sockets."

Jason opened his eyes.

"Have they changed again?" he asked.

"It does seem to be a regular occurrence, Mr Asano. I know that unconventional eyes are not especially rare in essence users, but the regularity with which yours change is reaching the point where I'm becoming concerned."

"Should I be concerned too?"

Jason's eyes still ached, although the mind-shattering pain was gone.

"Do recall that truly permanent change is not to the body but to the soul. Your soul has been reforged more than anyone else I've encountered. You've been carrying heavy burdens and you need time to stop and rest. Real time, not the lull between crises."

"I'm trying to save the world, here, Shade. There's another world waiting and I can rest when I get there."

"I know, Mr Asano. But please keep in mind that it's a soul, not a whittling stick."

Gordon manifested himself and leaned down, positioning his dark, empty hood in front of Jason's face.

"Gordon?"

"You may want to check your eyes, Mr Asano," Shade said.

"Yeah, alright. Excuse me, Gordon."

Gordon moved aside and a stream of cloud-stuff rose from the floor and took the form of a long mirror. Jason looked into his own eyes. They were now eye-shaped nebulas, identical to the one dominating the otherwise empty space inside Gordon's cloak.

"Oh, nice," Jason said turning his head side to side. "These look a lot more like eyes. Less uncanny valley. What do you think, Gordon? Thumbs up?"

One of Gordon's orbiting eye spheres lit up blue, which was his signal for yes.

"Okay," Jason said. "The cosmetic changes are a winner, if still a bit stingy. I thought the idea was for my spirit domain to get new stuff, though."

"Your spirit domains are an extension of yourself," Shade said.

"Fair enough."

Jason pulled the previously ignored message window back up.

- You have incorporated the [Eye of Doom] into your spirit vault. This has added additional effects to your spirit domains.
- Hostile individuals that enter, leave and re-enter your spirit domain immediately regain all previous negative effects inflicted by the spirit domain. Leaving the domain again will still remove all effects.
- You may remotely view any location within your spirit domain. This vision cannot be foiled or avoided by any effect. At your current rank, this ability cannot be used across dimensional barriers.
- You may exacerbate the effects of your spirit domain on any individual you can see within it, either in person or via remote viewing.

"That would have been nice to have before those gold-rank pricks went digging my other place up."

Jason closed his eyes and sent his vision skimming through his domain. He instinctively understood how and didn't find it disorienting at all. Reaching his latest territory, not yet fully claimed, reminded him of the task at hand. He returned his vision to his own body.

“One last goody and then we get back to work,” Jason said, pulling out the other item looted from the anomaly boss. It was another orb, this one composed of familiar dark crystal flecked with gold, silver and blue light.

Item: [Vessel of the Hegemon] (unranked, legendary)

Forge of the divine chariot (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Transcendent rank or growth-type vehicle or construct intrinsically connected to an entity with a spirit domain.
- Effect: Converts the interior of the vehicle or constructed into an extension of the connected entity's spirit domain.

“Huh,” Jason said, looking at the sphere in his hand. “Forge of the divine chariot? It's a ball. Ever seen an item like this, Shade?”

“I have not,” Shade said. “It is not unusual for a looting power to produce something specifically tailored to the looter, however.”

“It was a bonus item for taking down something higher-rank than me, so I guess that makes sense. Not sure how useful it is, though. Also, I'm not in love with the term ‘looter.’ It makes me sound like I smash-and-grabbed a television.”

Jason plucked the miniaturised cloud flask from his necklace and it expanded to normal size. It was a round-bottomed flask with a cylindrical neck, filled with swirling white and blue energy. Jason placed the vessel of the hegemon orb on it like an oversized stopper and the orb immediately dissolved, getting sucked into the flask. The energy inside the

flask transformed, taking on the nebula eye form it now shared with both Gordon and Jason.

“That was pretty straightforward. We’ll have to wait until we’re back out where I left the cloud boat before we can see how it went.”

Jason touched the flask to his neck chain and it shrank back down, reattaching itself. Then he closed his eyes, which were starting to feel better, and spread his senses out over his domain.

- Initiate transfiguration of new territory Y/N?

“Yes.”

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WHICH ONE OF US IS THE VILLAIN

JASON'S LATEST TERRITORY FINISHED TRANSMUTING.

- Your spirit domain has claimed a territory.
- Territory has been renamed [Geo-Thermal Metropolis].

- Anomalies attacking as a result of further spirit domain expansion will have increased power.

- You have claimed sufficient territory to stabilise the transformation zone and separate it from the convergent astral space.

- Separating the space with the current territory will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the surrounding reality. Claim additional territory to reduce the severity of this effect.

- Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone Y/N?

“No.”

Jason rode the elevating platform down from the top floor of the pagoda, stopping to pick up Mr North on the way.

“Your eyes have changed yet again,” Mr North said as they walked across the atrium to the front doors. “What are you doing to them?”

Jason turned his new eyes on Mr North.

“Would you like me to show you?”

“Do you always talk like someone from a nineties action movie right after you’ve gotten a new power, Mr Asano?”

Jason blinked, nonplussed.

“I think I do, yeah,” he realised. “Still a chuuni, I guess. Greg would be happy.”

“Greg?”

“My friend. He was killed by the guy you want me to put aside my differences with to work together.”

“You need to do it, Mr Asano. You don’t need to like it.”

They went outside, to the driveway that looped around a fountain. A group of the celestines were outside, staring up at the top of the pagoda. Jason and Mr North followed their gazes, spotting a giant nebulous eye floating in the air over the pagoda.

“Mr Asano,” Mr North said. “I thought we were clear on which one of us is the villain.”

“We are.”

“One of us has a giant eye at the top of their tower at the heart of their realm.”

“It’s not the Eye of Sauron,” Jason said.

“It looks like the Eye of Sauron.”

“Well, it’s not.”

“I am not familiar with the Eye of Sauron,” Shade’s voice said from Jason’s shadow.

“Didn’t I tell you to read *Lord of the Rings*?” Jason said.

“I got as far as Tom Bombadil and then read *Remains of the Day* again, instead.”

“That’s fair,” Mr North said.

“I like Tom Bombadil,” Jason said. “I think it’s nice how into his wife he is. Shade, what is it with you and butler fiction?”

“Why would I want to read about elves and wizards?” Shade asked. “Do you have any concept how many elves and wizards I’ve encountered over the millennia? Buttlings is a noble profession of duty, dignity, professionalism and composure, where elves and wizards can and do conduct themselves in whatever disgraceful manner they care to. I’ve seen you scratch places you shouldn’t in public, Mr Asano.”

“Are you ever going to let that go? It was one time and no one was watching.”

“It was at the symphony, Mr Asano. A place for culture and comportment.”

“It was my private box.”

“That is not an excuse to scratch it.”

“That’s not what... You know butlering isn’t a real genre, right?” Jason said.

“Given many of the ‘real’ genres,” Shade said, “that is hardly an indictment. I am not responsible for the literary failings of your planet, Mr Asano.”

“Are you two always like this?” Mr North asked.

“Let’s just go,” Jason said. “Shade, a pair of ultralight trikes, if you please.”

“Of course, Mr Asano. I will carry out this duty with dignity, professionalism and composure.”

“Sounding like a butler doesn’t make you a butler. They have special schools.”

“That is not an absolute requisite,” Shade said. “Also, I took an online course.”

“You took a butlering course online?”

“It wasn’t ideal,” Shade acknowledged. “In-person attendance wasn’t viable. Also the correct term is buttling.”

“He’s right,” Mr North said. “It is buttling.”

“Did you pay for that course with my money?” Jason asked.

“Managing expenses appropriately is a core duty of household staff, Mr Asano. When was the last time you even checked your bank account?”

Jason ran a hand over his face.

“Can we just go now, please?”

Darkness sprang from Jason’s shadow and took the form of two powered hang gliders with three-wheeled seats, ready to run down the long palace driveway and take off.

“Can’t we just use a helicopter?” Mr North asked.

“Just be happy there isn’t a sidecar,” Jason said.

Jason’s latest territory had been a network of underground caverns woven amongst deep canyons of red and yellow rock. After the transfiguration, it was a futuristic city primarily located underground but also settled on the surface, which remained primarily barren and rocky. The exception was the previously desolate canyons, which had become lush gorges, rich with plants fed by the rivers running through them.

The bottoms of the gorges were thick with the spray of rushing rivers and humid from the source of geothermal energy that powered the underground city. The walls of the

gorges had buildings emerging from them all down the sides: glass-fronted homes offering spectacular views.

Jason and Mr North descended into the city via elevator, finding the public spaces of the underground sections quite cavernous.

“Is this the kind of place that turned up in the other transformation zone?” Mr North asked.

“More or less,” Jason said.

“It’s remarkable. Rather eerie, though, being desolate of people.”

“It is, a bit, yeah.”

“This region alone has to be larger than the dome covering the area in the real world. Do you think it will all be collected into an astral space again?”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “The rules by which this transformation zone operates are a little different to the last.”

“Oh?”

“It could be because the zone is mixed with a permanent astral space, instead of a proto-space. It could be that last time I had to slowly develop the power to truly imprint myself on the territory. This time I walked in with it, which seems to have changed things from the start.”

“Do you think it has changed things for the others? Gerling, the vampires, the necromancer?”

“You know how you do something one time by accident and then you know everything about how it works?” Jason asked.

“Point taken, Mr Asano. What now?”

“I want to get a sense of this territory before I expand into the next one. With each new territory I claim, they grow stronger. If they’re too strong, we’ll want to fight a retreating battle, bleeding them as we go. Knowing where to retreat will be important.”

“It won’t be a problem if the anomalies come here?”

“It will gradually reduce the size of the newly claimed space, but grabbing less of it at a time is better than losing it all. The completed territories, like this one, won’t be under threat unless we let the anomalies attack the pagoda at the centre. If we reach that point, we’re probably done anyway.”

“Meaning the world will be done with us.”

“Yes,” Jason said.

“How exactly do we expand territory?”

“Telling you that doesn’t seem like the greatest idea in the world.”

“I was just curious, Mr Asano, not ambitious. I won’t push.”

Jason and Mr North stood at the edge of the city, above ground. It was also the outer limit of Jason’s current spirit domain. It was marked by a familiar gloom, masking what lay beyond but up close, they could make out at least some of it. It appeared to be another city, from the geometric shapes they saw looming in the dark.

“I like to scout out territories before I expand into them,” Jason said. “Get a sense of what I’m working with. It probably won’t help, but I do it anyway.”

“When cautiousness and recklessness are equally available options, caution is the wiser choice,” Mr North said.

“Was that meant to be profound?” Jason asked. “It sounds like it was meant to be profound when it’s the very obvious position.”

“You don’t have to be rude.”

“I mean, be cautious if it costs you nothing? I’ve got no problem with you saying it, but don’t make it sound like it’s some sage advice. Is this how you keep your organisation in line? Saying common sense stuff while doing a Morgan Freeman impression?”

“You realise that most people don’t like you, right?” Mr North asked.

“Yeah, but at least the ones that do are decent people. Anyone who’d put your poster up is probably on a watch list.”

“There aren’t any posters of me.”

“That’s hardly my fault. I’m not your publicist.”

“My organisation was yours, for a time.”

“Thanks for that, by the way. Gave me some credibility to use against your crappy superheroes.”

They made their way into the gloom and found that it was another city, but very different from the underground metropolis behind them. This one looked like the cover of a fantasy book, with floating buildings and winding, impossibly narrow spires reaching into the sky. Jason imagined that, without the gloom, it would be very beautiful.

“Is this an elf city or something?” Jason mused as they wandered down a street made of machine-smooth flagstones.

“Far worse,” Mr North said. “A messenger city.”

“Messenger?” Jason said. “Like angels?”

Henrietta Geller, the sister of Jason’s friend Humphrey, was a summoning specialist. One of her summons was an angelic being with potent healing powers. Jason’s system had identified it as a messenger.

“They have the look of angels,” Mr North said. “They’re a race with too much inherent magic to absorb essences. Far too much magic. They also have an unusual trait that you will recognise.”

“Oh?”

“They do not have binary bodies and souls. They are gestalt entities of the physical and spiritual, like you. The real ones, anyway. The anomalies here will likely be imperfect replicas, which we should both be thankful for. True messengers are some of the most powerful non-essence users in the cosmos, from what I understand.”

“Strong for their rank?”

“Yes, and even the weakest of their adults are silver rank. Hopefully, what we encounter here won’t be full strength. Or at least mindless attackers. Foes that are both intelligent and powerful would be trouble.”

“Anything else I need to know?”

“That they are like you in more ways than one. They are imperialistic and tyrannical.”

“How am I imperialistic?”

“Will you be handing off your claimed territory to the Slovakian government?”

“Fine. But I’m not a tyrant.”

“Mr Asano, tell me that you don’t have a habit of making declarations and then using your power and influence to enforce them.”

Jason frowned but didn’t respond.

“What kind of powers can we expect?” he asked instead.

“Flight, obviously. Damaging their wings can impede that ability, but not negate it entirely. It’s mostly a magical power, despite the appearance.”

“Angels never were especially aerodynamic.”

“Aside from that, expect light-based attacks and healing as standard. Different varieties have other powers, often related to their wings. Shooting razor-sharp feathers, using them as weapons or shields, that kind of thing. Some know a specialised ritual that uses their inherent powers as a basis. It adds versatility and power to their capabilities, but has the usual drawbacks of combat rituals.”

“I’m familiar,” Jason said.

“You know a combat ritualist?”

“I slept with his wife.”

“I’m familiar with your history, Mr Asano. That is definitely a lie.”

Jason was about to respond when the gloom around them started dissipating, revealing the vibrant colours of the city. Both men started looking around, wary and curious.

“Is this you?” Mr North asked.

“It is not.”

“Then what is it?”

“If I knew that I’d—”

- This territory has been claimed as part of a nascent spirit domain.
- Your spirit domain abuts this territory. You may contest this territory by expanding your own spirit domain into it prior to it being fully claimed.

“Well,” Jason said. “I guess we have an answer on whether the rules changed for the others.”

“The anomalies carry within them vessels containing transformation energy,” Jason explained as he and Mr North hurried down a flagstone street, back towards Jason’s territory. “That energy is unstable if you...”

He trailed off as they approached the boundary of Jason’s domain, currently a shimmering curtain of blue-black energy. An angelic being manifested from the curtain, floating in the air, its wings spread out behind it. Threads Jason could barely see erupted from the ground under it, kicking up dust as they penetrated the flagstones. They wrapped around the creature and slammed it into the ground.

The messenger anomaly started glowing with white light, but parts of the threads wrapped around it glowed in turn,

lighting up in runes of blue, red and yellow, drawn out by the threads. The white light dimmed and Jason held out a hand, the palm slick with blood. Leeches poured out to bury the messenger.

“As far as I can tell,” Mr North said, “it has the power of a normal, gold-rank messenger.”

“Which is how powerful, exactly? You don’t seem to have trouble suppressing it.”

It was thrashing around under the pile of leeches, although it didn’t scream or vocalise in any other way.

“It’s in the range of a low-end gold-rank monster,” Mr North said. “Their intelligence and ability to work in coordination are the biggest threats.”

Jason cast more spells to accelerate the death of the helpless creature, yet even his escalating afflictions took far longer than he’d like to finish the job. Only the exponential nature of the damage made it possible at all and he was once more reminded of his earliest adventuring days when killing a powerful creature felt like chopping down a tree with a spoon. After the messenger died, Jason drained and looted the creature and they passed through the dark veil into Jason’s domain.

“Claiming a territory,” Jason said, resuming his explanation, “requires a stabilised version of the energy vessels I was talking about.”

“The ones from the anomalies.”

“Yes. If you just dig them out, they’re unstable and do very bad things if you try to use them.”

“Turn you into a giant tentacle monster?”

“It’s a possible outcome, but not the only one.”

“Did you at least warn the man before letting him leave with those things in hand?”

“I did.”

“His own fault, then.”

“Please don’t agree with my decisions,” Jason said. “It makes me uncomfortable.”

Jason explained that cores needed to be looted to stabilise, positing that someone else had figured that out and started using them. It was why he changed his mind about explaining the process to Mr North at all.

“I didn’t think it was possible for anyone else,” Jason said. “It should only work with the conjunction of effects I have. The magic door and some of my other powers.”

“Do you have a hypothesis?” Mr North asked.

“Best guess? The ability I developed in the last transformation zone somehow affected this one. It’s how I’m able to use my full suite of powers when they were sealed away last time. The question is whether that’s true for whoever else is out there. I know you’re not an essence user, but have your powers been affected?”

Mr North hesitated before answering.

“Yes,” he reluctantly admitted. “My inherent powers as a rune spider remain intact, but the additional powers I’ve developed in the years since I was a familiar are unavailable to me.”

“Gerling probably won’t have his powers, then. I’m not sure what kind of powers the necromancer has.”

“He’s an essence user,” Mr North said. “We were able to recruit him by being more ethically flexible than the Network.”

“Same for him, then. The vampires probably have their full powers, although the ambient magic here is gold-rank. If this sun above us counts as genuine sunlight, they’ll be desperately avoiding the day, which works for us.”

“Do you know who claimed that territory?” Mr North asked.

“Someone with the power to loot.”

“Does ritual magic work if your powers are sealed?” Mr North asked.

“I don’t recall ever checking,” Jason said.

“If it does, it may be Gerling,” Mr North said. “He had Barbou and a handful of silver-rankers with him. Barbou can perform a looting ritual and, as you said, he has most likely thrown in with Gerling for the sake of survival.”

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Jason said.

“What course of action are we going to take?” Mr North asked.

“I can contest the territory while whoever it turns out to be is still trying to claim it,” Jason said. “I’ll let them do most of the work first.”

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THAT PASSION DIDN'T COME FROM NOWHERE

JASON AND MR NORTH WERE IN AN AIR-CONDITIONED building at the edge of Jason's territory, watching the border where it met the claimed territory of persons yet unknown. It was one of the surface buildings of Jason's city, chosen for the second-storey viewpoint through a large window. They were relaxing in comfortable chairs.

The boundary was represented by a dark blue curtain of energy until, after several hours, it started to retract. The space in between the territories started once more filling with gloom.

"What's happening?" Mr North said.

"Whoever claimed that territory can't hold it. They've retreated into their completed territory and the claimed land is shrinking."

"What should we do?" Mr North asked.

"How confident are you about taking on those messengers?"

"You and I make a good team, Mr Asano. My abilities are more about control than power, while you are an affliction specialist. Given enough time, you can kill even gold-rank enemies. I can reliably pin down three at a time, maybe four. You have no problems with those numbers, correct?"

"Yeah, that's not an issue."

"Then I would say we can probably face up to six at a time. Seven would be a fight and more than that is entering perilous territory."

“So, the danger is adds.”

“Adds?”

“Extra monsters wandering in while we’re already dealing with others.”

“Ah, then yes. I’m afraid that, despite your considerable potency, eliminating even helpless gold-rankers is not a swift proposition for you. It’s impressive enough that you can manage it at all but time will not be our friend.”

“Keeping the fights down to six or less should be manageable,” Jason said. “We stay mobile, pick off the isolated ones. Remember that they’re not genuine messengers; they’re anomalies and will act as such. Right now, they’ll be invading the established territory of whoever tried the claim theirs.”

“So, we play vulture,” Mr North said. “Picking the bones of what’s left behind.”

“Yes, although I don’t know how this will work,” Jason said. “I’ve never had to contest a territory before. I wish saving the world had fewer learn-by-doing scenarios.”

They left the building and moved over to the gloom.

- You are at the border of your spirit domain. Minimum cost to expand: 431 [Stable Genesis Cores].
- Adjacent territory has been expanded into by a nascent spirit domain. Also expanding into this territory will cause it to be contested.
- Claiming a contested territory requires the destruction of all normal anomalies, the greater anomaly that will manifest once all normal anomalies are destroyed and

the defeat of the other claimant. Defeat can take the form of surrender or death.

- Expand your domain Y/N?

“Yes.”

Strips of leather shot out from Jason’s blood robe, wrapping around the wings of a messenger from behind. He contracted the strips, squeezing the wings and yanking himself into the air. He landed both feet heavily into the angelic anomaly’s back, using the momentum to stab into it with his conjured sword, held in a backwards, two-handed grip. Despite the added force, it barely dug into the gold-rank anomaly’s flesh.

- Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding], [Leech Toxin], and [Tainted Meridians].
- Target is already suffering from [Bleeding]. [Bleeding] has been refreshed.

- Weapon [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice] has inflicted [Price in Blood].

- Weapon [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice] has refreshed all wounding effects of the target. All wounding effects on the target require additional healing to remove.

The messenger flexed its wings, easily snapping the leather straps that gave Jason the leverage to press his feet into its back. Immediately, its plunge towards the ground was arrested and its body flashed with blinding light. Everything went white.

- You have been afflicted with [Blinding Light].

Jason immediately used his cloak as a shadow to teleport through, emerging from one of Shade's bodies that were scattered around the battlefield, an open-air temple amphitheatre. Shade was playing decoy and serving as a shadow jump platform for Jason. The gold-rank light attacks of the messengers were highly effective against the shadow familiar, however. This had thinned out the numbers of Shade's available bodies.

Gordon transformed into a nebula cloud and dashed to Jason's side, transforming the orbs floating around him into shields and using them to shelter Jason. Jason reached out blindly to Gordon, the incorporeal familiar's touch tingling his fingers.

- You have bestowed all instances of [Guardian's Blessing] to [Avatar of Doom].

Beams of light came searing down on them; Jason was protected by Gordon's shields and Gordon by the barriers from Jason's amulet. Jason had passed them along as the light beams were dangerous to Gordon, who had used all his orb shields to protect Jason and left himself exposed. Gordon lacked the spare bodies that Shade possessed, so Jason passed along his amulet's protection.

Neither Gordon's layered shields nor the amulet's protective blessing lasted long, the light beams burrowing through them in short order. There was just enough delay for the blinding effect to pass and Jason reabsorbed Gordon before the familiar took more hits, Jason suffering a couple himself as he went on the move again.

“I’m sorry that one got loose,” Mr North said as he and Jason sprawled on the amphitheatre steps. “Constraining four at once is trickier than I had hoped.”

“There were eight of them,” Jason said. “It was always going to be a rough fight.”

“I have touched all the bodies, Mr Asano,” Shade said.

“Thanks, Shade.”

Shade was able to serve as a vessel through which Jason could use his non-combat abilities. Most often that meant sharing his cloak or shadow jumping without line of sight, but it also allowed Shade to tag fallen enemies for looting. Jason had another use for the dead anomalies first, however.

Most of Shade’s bodies had been taken out in the fight. It would take a considerable amount of mana to replace them all, but his Blood Harvest spell could reap mana from the dead. Even so, by the time he had drained the remnant life force from the bodies, Shade was still seven bodies short of his maximum.

“Time to go,” Jason said as he triggered his looting power and the anomalies dissolved into rainbow smoke.

Jason pulled out his phone and checked the time. Farrah had modified it so that it would still function inside his dimensional storage, preventing it from entering stasis.

“Nineteen hours,” he said.

“Nineteen hours?” Mr North asked. They were resting after yet another fight with messenger anomalies.

“Since we were scouting this territory out and the other side claimed it,” Jason said. “A little over nineteen hours.”

Mr North looked up at the sky.

“Bright sunshine, the whole time.”

“Days and nights don’t obey the normal rules here,” Jason said. “If territories aren’t linked, you step from one to the other and go from day to night. I think this territory might not have a night at all.”

“If the person trying to claim this territory wasn’t Gerling but a vampire,” Mr North reasoned, “that would explain why they failed to do much about the messengers. The light powers they possess would be bad for vampires even without perpetual gold-rank sunlight.”

“It would explain why they retreated into their own territory and left so many messengers for us to find. If a vampire is making territory, I bet there’s an awful lot of night going on there.”

“You can shape the territory you claim like that?”

“It’s subconscious, but when you transfigure a completely seized territory, I suspect it reflects on you in certain ways. I can’t imagine a vampire with a spirit domain that’s full of sunshine. Even a nascent spirit domain.”

“Nascent?”

“I think my impact on this space is allowing others to go through the process I went through of slowly developing the power to make a spirit domain. I’ve already completed that path, but I’m not sure they can.”

“Why not?” Mr North asked.

“Because I’ve already claimed too much territory. They would need to take it from me to claim enough for themselves to complete the ability, but I think my territory is serving as an anchor, making what they’re doing possible. I could be wrong, but I think without my domain defining the rules for this space, they would no longer be able to claim new territories. The whole transformation zone might even collapse.”

“And the Earth with it,” Mr North said, following the line of reasoning. “They think that they’re doing what you did, but

it's doomed to fail.”

“I could be wrong. I don't think so, though. There's a feel to this place, like being in node space.”

“Which requires the Builder's magic door to manipulate.”

“It's my door now, and it's a part of how I manipulate this space.”

“It makes sense,” Mr North said. “The transformation zones are flaws in the original Builder's work. The seams coming apart as the dimensional membrane of this world thins and cracks. That a tool he created is able to repair the damage seems like a reasonable assumption.”

Both men turned their heads as they sensed a new aura emerge from the edge of the contested space.

“The greater anomaly,” Jason said. “The other anomalies spawned here must have been killed in the fully claimed space.”

- All normal anomalies have been eradicated. If the other claimant to the contested space is not within the space when the greater anomaly is destroyed, it will count as surrendering the territory.

“Oh, nice,” Jason said. “The other guy has to come to us.”

“They don't have your ability to inform them of the situation,” Mr North said. “Will they even realise?”

“You know what magic's like. You let instinct guide you. They'll figure it out, sadly.”

The greater anomaly looked much like the other messengers: a winged, androgynous humanoid draped in loose linens. It was larger than their normal two-metre height; Jason estimated around two and a half. The starkest difference was an

additional set of gold-coloured wings, alongside the normal white ones.

Jason and Mr North remained hidden, suppressing their auras to the maximum. To assist in this, Mr North had drawn out a ritual circle in webbing that would contain not just tell-tale auras but also sounds, scents and magic. They had decided to wait out the other claimant on the territory, rather than try and down the boss before they arrived. If they were in the middle of a brutal fight when the other party arrived, they'd be fighting on two fronts, half-exhausted or worse.

“What do we do if the other person has the same idea?” Mr North asked. “If I were a vampire looking to swoop in and take advantage, I'd be hovering just outside the contested space, waiting to strike. Preferably, through a minion. Either that or give up because of the sunlight and move on to the next opportunity.”

“Perhaps, but I don't think so,” Jason said. “What you don't feel is the connection to a territory you've claimed. You establish a link to your soul; giving it up is like cutting off a finger.”

“Vampires might give up a finger to stay out of the sun when the magic is this strong. When there's a boss monster and unknown enemies hidden somewhere, certainly.”

“I guess we'll see,” Jason said.

The territory claimant turned out to be the necromancer, as identified by Mr North.

“Why would gold-rank vampires permit a silver-rank essence user to be the one to forge a spirit domain?” Jason said. “Territorialism is in the blood.”

“My guess would be the need for someone who could withstand the sun.”

The necromancer did not sneak into the contested zone, instead arriving amidst a ghoul horde. Hundreds, if not

thousands of ghouls emerged into the contested space. Neither Jason nor Mr North thought bronze-rank ghouls would let a silver-ranker beat a flying gold-rank entity, but they were swiftly proven wrong.

Rather than as a fighting force, the necromancer used the ghouls as a power source, drawing energy from them to fuel incredibly powerful magic attacks. With his first attack, as many as a dozen ghouls dropped, their magic completely drained as a sickly green energy emerged from them, gathered over the necromancer and was flung at the anomaly. Even as those ghouls dropped, more came pouring across the territorial border.

The messenger returned in kind, complex magical diagrams appearing in front of it to amplify its magical blasts. Amazingly, the silver-rank necromancer held his own, drawing on more and more of the ghouls to create powerful magic blasts or a green magic shield to protect himself.

Jason's face curled into a snarl as more and more ghouls appeared, the number heading towards two thousand as they formed a sea of undead.

"Calm yourself," Mr North counselled. "You can't do anything for those people now."

"How many?" Jason asked. "How many people died for this sick piece of...?"

"Mr Asano, in this moment, we need to be focused on his power. Obviously, the ghouls are a finite resource, but so long as he has them, he commands considerable combat strength."

"It's simple strength," Jason said.

"Or perhaps he's using it simply. Have you ever fought a necromancer, Mr Asano?"

"No."

"I suggest you avoid it if possible. They are amongst those essence users least concerned with confronting an affliction specialist. Along with powerful resistances, they often have powers allowing them to shunt all the afflictions they suffer onto their unliving minions. It's likely that even if you caught

him in a sneak attack, he'd pass your afflictions on to a ghoul."

"Assuming he has such a power unsealed."

"Assuming, yes. Whatever the conditions, though, never forget that a necromancer is as strong as his undead are plentiful. You would need to eliminate his ghouls before moving on to the necromancer."

"I've killed thousands of undead before."

"Not while the man who animated them is right there. The correct approach is negotiation."

"And if he tries to kill us?"

"Then we do what we must."

"That's not a comprehensive plan."

"Step one is helping him fight. As distasteful as it is, Mr Asano, we will need the power he taps into through the ghouls for the fights to come. We have to help him in this fight so that resource might be preserved."

"That 'resource' is people. People he herded up, killed and turned into twisted puppets."

"Yes. We're here to save the world, Mr Asano. You need to come to terms with the fact that there is no line we can't cross in the face of that."

The ghouls parted like the Red Sea and the necromancer walked towards Jason and Mr North, who were standing by the body of the greater anomaly.

"Mr North," the necromancer said. "It's been so very long."

"You'll have to forgive me if I've forgotten your name across the years," Mr North said.

“You don’t forget things, Mr North. You never knew my name. Never cared. You were always obsessed with your human augmentation projects, with no time for my art. All anyone calls me now is ‘The Necromancer,’ and you may do the same. There is a validating singularity to it.”

The necromancer turned to Jason.

“And the famous Jason Asano. That’s quite the intimidating aura you have there. You really do want to kill me, don’t you? Is it true that you’ve come back from the dead?”

“You won’t.”

“Hardly diplomatic, yet you are restraining the urge. You don’t think you can beat me with my little pets here.”

Jason’s face was hidden under his hood, but his aura practically trembled with fury.

“We’re here because we need your help,” Mr North said.

“My help?”

“This place must be consolidated into one domain,” Mr North said. “None of us are strong enough alone, which is what truly restrains Mr Asano. Caution isn’t really his thing.”

“So you are here to surrender your territory to me?” the necromancer asked.

“It doesn’t work like that,” Mr North said.

“What are you even doing here?” the necromancer asked. “Why are you running around with him?”

“I was caught up in this while on other business, although it has proven for the best. If we don’t all work together, not only do we all die, but the world goes with us. Whatever means you may have developed to preserve yourself through death is unlikely to survive that.”

“And I’m to take your word for it?”

“Either that or fight,” Mr North said.

“Even assuming you’re telling the truth, why can’t I be the one to claim this domain?”

“Because Asano’s domain is the only thing making that possible,” Mr North said. “His domain goes, so does yours. It feels like you’re gaining power for yourself, but it’s an echo of his.”

“What makes you so sure?” the necromancer asked.

“Because I’m the one who brought the power he’s using into this world.”

“He can just hand it over to me, then. So long as someone has it.”

“If only it were that easy. Asano didn’t just take the power but absorbed it. It was quite the surprise, believe me. It’s part of him now, and not coming out.”

The necromancer’s face took on a twisted grin.

“I’ve taken lots of parts from people that weren’t meant to come out.”

“Perhaps you could, with enough resources and a decade of astral magic theory,” Mr North said. “We don’t have time for that, however.”

“What do I get for my participation, then?” the necromancer asked.

“Amnesty,” Mr North said.

“THE HELL HE DOES!” Jason roared. “You expect me to just let this guy go, after what he’s done?”

“I’m hardly incentivised to go along then,” the necromancer said. “I’m better off assuming that you’re lying, North, and taking all the power for myself.”

“We can’t let you go,” Mr North said, glancing to Jason. “That’s a bridge too far for Mr Asano, I’m afraid. Your research has doubtless shone some light on medical magic, however. Perhaps even medical science. We’re offering you the Nazi scientist deal. You’ll be quietly left to conduct your research, even funded.”

“You expect me to go along with this?” Jason asked.

“Yes. I’m sorry, Mr Asano, but this is how it has to be. We need him, so we have to make compromises.”

Jason’s eyes glimmered in his dark hood, but he didn’t respond.

“Jason,” Mr North said. “We have to hear you say it.”

Jason turned to the necromancer, looking at him for a long time. He was wearing a long, outlandish purple coat that made him look more like he was cosplaying a necromancer instead of actually being one. He had the usual polished and youthful features of a silver-ranker, with no indication of any bizarre alterations he had made to his body using his dark arts.

“Fine,” Jason finally spat out.

“I said we have to hear you say it,” Mr North said.

There was a long silence.

“Mr Asano, at least you can pick which Network branch he ends up with. You want the Americans or the Chinese to have him?”

“I want the grave to have him.”

“Not an option. Remember the stakes.”

A low growl came from Jason’s hood.

“Amnesty,” he said bitterly. “The Nazi scientist deal. You have my word.”

Jason spat out the last words like they were poison and Mr North let out a sigh of relief. He then turned back to the necromancer.

“I know it’s not ideal,” he said. “But it’s the only chance you have at a future. We live long lives.”

When the necromancer finally agreed, he surrendered not just the contested space but his entire domain.

- Your spirit domain has absorbed a nascent domain.

- 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: 83.9%

- Return to core territory to initiate transfiguration of new territories.

At Mr North's suggestion, they rested back in Jason's underground city. North made sure that Jason and the necromancer were thoroughly separated before checking on Jason. He found him in a large building filled with industrial machinery operating with unknown purpose. Jason was watching the machinery, the anger he showed the necromancer nowhere to be seen.

"Too much?" Jason asked.

"A little hammy, but you do passion quite authentically. It will play well to a necromancer wearing an enormous purple coat."

Jason didn't smile.

"That passion didn't come from nowhere."

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THE UPSTART MAGICIAN

“THE NECROMANCER WAS SURPRISINGLY EASY TO GET ON board,” Jason said. “It’s likely that the powers we’ve seen are the extent of his unlocked abilities.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

jumped through.

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

“Time to go,” Jason said.

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

“I’m not sure a guy in a purple coat who calls himself ‘The Necromancer’ should be casting chuuni stones.”

“What’s a chuuni stone?”

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

- Todd ‘The Necromancer’ Halverson.
- Essence user (human, silver rank).
- Essence ability advancement impediment (monster core taint): 94%.

Darkness emerged from Jason’s shadow to take the form of a sinister black golf cart.

“Get on the golf cart, Todd.”

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

“What can we expect from the vampires?” Jason asked.

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

“We won’t be,” Jason said. “I will.”

They found Todd’s ghoulish army standing around where he left them. Compared to their normal, barely controllable ravenousness, they stood as if in a daze. They were located where they had fought the greater anomaly, next to the border between the messenger territory and that of Todd’s former domain. The cart pulled to a stop in front of them.

“If we end up fighting the vampires, I can’t contribute without the ghouls,” Todd said.

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

“I would advise against lying,” Todd said. “The vampires’ aura sensitivity is high and they’re very powerful. They’ll know if you aren’t telling them the truth.”

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

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

“I know, right?” Todd said. “So badass.”

Jason pinched the bridge of his nose.

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

“More or less.”

“Bugger.”

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

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

“No need,” Jason said. “They’re already watching us. And listening.”

“Oh? I don’t sense them.”

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

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

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

“You’ve turned coat, Necromancer.”

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

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

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

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

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

“My name is Jason Asano.”

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

“Great Moravia?” Jason asked.

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

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

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

“I’m Polish.”

“Isn’t that basically the same thing?”

“I’LL KILL YOU, YOU SON OF A DOG!”

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

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

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

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

“Easy to say with Elizabeth keeping the peace,” Wassily said. “She saved your centuries from ending today, you miserable—”

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

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

“I would advise against counting unearned spoils,” Elizabeth said and turned back to Jason. “Did you cause all this to happen to destroy our operations here?”

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

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

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

“Giant shapes in the dark,” Elizabeth said.

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

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

“Yes. The planet can’t endure being shaken like that again. If you want there to be a world left to conquer, you need to add your strength to ours. There is also a powerful essence-user somewhere in here. Even together we may not be enough to subdue him.”

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

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

“No,” Jason said.

The vampire sensed Jason's frustration at his need to make a deal edging past his best attempts to mask his emotions.

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

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TOO MUCH OVER PRIDE

THE LONE FEMALE VAMPIRE WAS SEEMINGLY THE ONE MOST feared by the other vampires. After she agreed to join Jason in his conquest of the transformation zone, the four males looked at her and went off by themselves to discuss. From their expressions, the discussion was forceful and unfriendly. In the end, two chose to throw in with Jason while the last two refused. One of the refusers was Wassily.

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

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

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

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

Jason shook his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the sun and Jason had timed their approach so that they returned to his core domain early in the night.

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

“You know that looks just like—”

“I know what it looks like,” Jason said.

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

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

“No.”

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

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

“Fine.”

Jason could sense everything inside his spirit domain, including Mr North standing on the elevating platform, which he mentally ordered to ascend. While he waited, he closed his eyes. His vision extended out and he surveyed one of his new territories, which was a land under a perpetual eclipse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So?” Jason asked.

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

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

Mr North smiled.

“Yes, they do.”

“I’m looking forward to being just some guy again,” Jason said.

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

“What did you come here for, Mr North?”

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

“Aura strength, I know.”

“No. Well, yes, but that’s not the point I’m making. The strength speaks to what you’ve endured, but not your

capability. I'm talking about the strength of your aura, and the remarkable deftness with which you use it."

"Aura manipulation."

"Yes. Your aura strength could be a blunt instrument, but you've forged it into a mighty sword. Who taught you?"

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

"The vampire?"

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

"Not with that attitude. Don't waste such a powerful tool."

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

"I came to remind you to be vigilant. Don't let the vampires know your true intentions."

Jason took a step forwards.

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

“Mr Asano, I don’t need to read anything from you. I knew how this would end from the moment I was trapped in this place.”

“Do I have to kill you, Mr North?”

“No, Mr Asano. You just want to.”

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

“Shade, take Mr North back downstairs.”

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

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

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

“They aren’t vampires anymore.”

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

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

“Can you win?” Shade asked.

“I think so.”

“Then we should go.”

“Yeah? Not the answer I was expecting.”

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

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

Jason opened a portal arch and stepped through.

There were eight of the giant blood ticks and they moved quickly. Their flesh was soft, but they had praying mantis-like arm blades of incredibly hard chitin. If not for the swarm of Shade bodies that spread out, their numbers and skittering speed would have overwhelmed Jason in short order. One of Shade's bodies was set off towards the other former vampire, racing along the ground in the form of a horse at speeds that would shame a motorcycle.

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

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

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

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

Every one of Jason's familiars offered formidable new powers at silver rank. Gordon had his butterflies and Shade's significantly more numerous collection of bodies offered

incredible flexibility. For Colin, the greatest leap hadn't been to the leech swarm itself but to the regeneration it offered Jason. The ability to rapidly expend body mass to initiate large-scale, near-instantaneous healing took Jason's already impressive survivability to new heights. With no more resurrections available, that was more important than ever.

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

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

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

- You have defeated [Reality-Dysphoric Anomaly].

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

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

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

- You have defeated [Reality-Dysphoric Anomaly].

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TRUST ALL THE WAY

JASON WAS PAINTED RED, BOTH FROM HIS OWN BLOOD AND that of his enemies. He ignored it for the moment as he pulled a clear crystal orb from his inventory.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The regeneration cores were better than nothing, but he was a little disappointed. The number of orbs he would need to fill was not worth the time it would take to hunt enough vampires. He could hunt down reality core stockpiles to accelerate the process, but the latest transformation zone had finally taught Jason the lesson he had failed to learn over and over. It was time to stop being distracted. He must dedicate himself only to repairing the link between worlds.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We have the numbers,” Klaus said.

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

She got to her feet.

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

“Smooth things out?” Klaus asked.

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

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

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

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

Jason Asano

Race: Outworlder.

Current rank: silver

Progression to gold rank: 30%

Attributes

[Power] (Blood): [Silver 3].

[Speed] (Dark): [Silver 3].

[Spirit] (Doom): [Silver 3].

[Recovery] (Sin): [Silver 3].

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

[Party Interface].

[Defiant].

[Spirit Domain].

[Tactical Map].

[Nirvanic Transfiguration].

[Dark Rider].

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (5/5)

[Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Silver 4] 02%.

[Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Silver 4] 01%.

[Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Silver 3] 87%.

[Hand of the Reaper] (special ability): [Silver 3] 39%.

[Shadow of the Reaper] (familiar): [Silver 3] 88%.

Blood [Power] (5/5)

[Blood Harvest] (spell): [Silver 3] 41%.

[Leech Bite] (special attack): [Silver 3] 67%.

[Feast of Blood] (spell): [Silver 3] 11%.

[Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Silver 3] 18%.

[Haemorrhage] (spell): [Silver 3] 13%.

Sin [Recovery] (5/5)

[Punish] (special attack): [Silver 3] 59%.

[Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Silver 3] 08%.

[Sin Eater] (special ability): [Silver 3] 03%.

[Hegemony] (aura): [Silver 4] 00%.

[Castigate] (spell): [Silver 3] 04%.

Doom [Spirit] (5/5)

[Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Silver 3] 89%.

[Punition] (spell): [Silver 3] 54%.

[Blade of Doom] (spell): [Silver 3] 79%.

[Verdict] (spell): [Silver 3] 12%.

[Avatar of Doom] (familiar): [Silver 3] 14%.

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

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

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

“I am going to kick that idiot square in the...”

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

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

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

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

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

“Go on.”

“I think you intend to kill us all.”

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

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

“You’re afraid of little old me?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m a practitioner of vampiric blood magic. It’s a variant of the ritual magic I know humans use, but taps into the unique aspects of vampiric power. There are enough similarities that I’ve been able to learn things since awakening. I have some sense of the forces at work and how small we are before them. I believe that they are sufficient to destroy this world. If you can control even the smallest measure of that power, that is not wise to stand against.”

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

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

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

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

“I can think of a few things.”

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

“So you want me to let you stash it somewhere?”

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

“Since my only recourse is to trust you,” she said, “I may as well trust all the way and do my best to reap the benefits. I

hope you don't think the other vampires joined you humans from a moral imperative."

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

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

"A mistake I will not repeat."

Jason took the crystal, still proffered in her hand.

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

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

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

"This is quite the trusting gesture," Jason said.

"I don't see as I have an alternative."

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

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

"Then I will leave it be."

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

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

"They are still out there, then?"

"No," Jason said as he leaked a little of Colin's aura from within him. "There are things hungrier than vampires,

Elizabeth.”

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

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

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

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

- A nascent spirit domain has expanded into your spirit domain. This has turned your border territory into a contested zone.

- Claiming a contested territory requires the defeat of the other domain holder. Defeat can take the form of surrender or death. Extended absence from the border territory will constitute a surrender.

“Asano?”

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

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

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TIME TO CHOOSE

“THIS IS DIFFERENT,” GERLING SAID. “I CAN FEEL IT.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, I’ve made worse mistakes than defaulting on real estate,” Jason said, his voice coming around a corner.

They hurried around to find Jason sitting at what looked to be an outdoor café with a large tree in the middle of the dining area. Its high branches and lush foliage offered shady refuge

from the bright, clear sky. Instead of his sinister robes, Jason wore a casual suit in light colours, as if enjoying a pleasant day on the Riviera.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“As I was saying,” Jason said, as if their auras weren’t locking horns like raging bulls. “You Americans are trained quite well. The one area you fall short is aura control. You’re not terrible, certainly, and in most cases, you’re at a sufficient competence level. But then someone like me comes along, and

suddenly, all your little friends become liabilities. Unless you're willing to give them up to my soul attacks, which you really shouldn't. You can trust me on that."

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

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

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

"We really are just here to talk," Mr North said, emerging from the café behind Jason.

Barbou's faced showed a mix of relief, confusion and fear.

"Hello, Adrien," Mr North said.

"You," Gerling said.

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

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

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

"Some of us aren't centuries old," Jason said.

"Really, Mr Asano? Age discrimination?"

"SHUT UP!" Gerling roared.

"Alright," Jason said, dropping his half-smirk and smug body language. "Gerling, it's time for you and me to come to

terms.”

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

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

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

Gerling nodded but said nothing, letting Jason continue.

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

“I do.”

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

“You’re talking about a god.”

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

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

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

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

“The point,” North continued, “is that the artefact in question allows Jason to edit reality, within very specific and limited parameters. He’s been using it to undo certain changes made to this world long ago. Changes that have caused the rise in magic that, if not stopped, will destroy the Earth.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I told you once before, Gerling, that I was asked to put aside thoughts of revenge by someone whose wishes I am compelled to give weight. Let’s end things here, you and me. We do this together, and then we each go our own way. You fight the vampire war and save the world from the bloodsucker apocalypse. I leave the Earth to finish what I started here and

save it from crumbling from under you. We bury our past and go our separate ways, as soon as we're out of here."

"And this little friendship circle starts with my handing over everything that me and my guys have fought for in this place? Everything we've earned."

"No, Gerling. Starting with me putting aside for good the fact that you killed my brother, my lover and my friend."

"I don't want your forgiveness."

Jason ran a frustrated hand over his face.

"Are you that obsessed with power?"

"Are you that insistent on being the only one that's special?" Gerling shot back.

Jason stood up and paced, scratching absently at his head. Gerling stood up as well.

"Then I guess it's winner takes all," Gerling said. "We could have settled this without you two jabbering on."

Something appeared in front of Gerling's face.

"What the hell?"

"Just accept it, Gerling," Jason said. "Let me show you something."

- [Jason Asano] has invited you to form a party. Accept Y/N?

"What is this?" Gerling asked.

"It's how I see the world," Jason said. "I can't hurt you with it. I know you sense that."

Gerling frowned, conflicted. He didn't trust Jason, but his instincts really did tell him it was safe. What decided it, though, was the chance to pry open some of Asano's secrets.

Jason set out several items on the table. A spirit coin, a healing potion and a pair of minor magical gloves he had

looted from an anomaly. He talked Gerling through looking at his own character screen and ability descriptions.

“This is how I know the things I know, Gerling. It’s not just instinct.”

Jason held out his hand for Gerling to shake.

- Jason Asano.
- Essence user (outworlder, silver rank).
- ??? (spirit domain hegemon).

“This is my fight, Gerling. You have no concept of the enemies I’ve made along the way.”

“You’ve survived so far,” Gerling said.

“No,” Jason said. “I haven’t.”

Still holding Gerling’s hand, Jason concentrated.

- Jason Asano.
- Essence user (outworlder, silver rank).
- ??? (spirit domain hegemon).
- Number of deaths: 4.

Jason let go.

- [Jason Asano] has disbanded the party.

- You no longer have access to [Party Interface].

Gerling felt an odd sense of loss as the power to see his abilities laid out in front of him was taken away.

“You have your own fight, Gerling. By the time the vampire war is over, you’re going to be a hero to the world. Frankly, I’m glad I won’t be here to see it.”

“Yet, you’re working with vampires now.”

“There has to be a world to fight over,” Jason said. “Even they understand that.”

“And what happens to our little club once we’re done and you have control?” Gerling asked.

“I’ve already made deals,” Jason said. “I’m not happy about them, but I can live with them.”

“You expect us to believe you’ll just let us walk away?”

“It varies,” Jason said. “The necromancer is getting thrown in a hole where he’ll be stuck doing *closely monitored* medical research for the Network. The closest thing the vampires have to a leader will be switching sides.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“After the loss of the astral space facilities, she’s a lot less confident in her side’s chances in the war. She won’t be the first to defect. The smart ones know that the faster they come across, the better off they’ll be once everything is said and done.”

Gerling took his own turn to pace as he mulled things over. His people were still lying around, feeling like they’d been through a wringer.

“If I throw in,” Gerling said. “If I give up my domain, I want something in return.”

“What?” Jason asked.

“Teach me how to use my aura like you. Negate suppression collars. Attack people. How is your aura so strong?”

“Ah,” Mr North said. “I don’t think that’s a path you want to go down, Mr Gerling. Mr Asano’s power in that regard is a result of trauma the likes of which I cannot explain. Literally, I cannot. I don’t understand what a person would have to go through to reach that point and it would be more likely to destroy you. I’ve seen that kind of damage leave powerful essence users as broken wrecks. I have no doubt that Mr Asano himself was taken to the brink and took no small amount of time to recover.”

“But he did recover,” Gerling said. “And now he has an incredible power.”

“I had a lot of help,” Jason said. “Specialist care, for months.”

“I can take it.”

“I don’t even know how to do that to a person,” Mr North said. “We’re talking about scouring your very soul.”

“I do,” Jason said. “If you want to know what it takes, Gerling, lower your aura defences and I’ll give you a taste.”

“You think I’ll just open myself up like that?”

“I told you, Mr Gerling,” Mr North said. “Trauma.”

“Which you could easily be making up.”

“Gerling, how many scars do you have?”

“None, obviously. Essence users can’t get...”

Gerling was looking straight at Jason face, trailing off as he realised that the small scars on it shouldn’t have been possible.

“How?” he asked.

“Some marks run deeper than others,” Jason said. “I’m going to lower my aura defences and you can see for yourself. Take a look at my soul, Gerling.”

Jason’s aura, which suffused the area as part of his domain, was suddenly diminished. None of it was emitted from Jason himself at all. Gerling, wary of a trap, slowly extended his own out to examine Jason.

Gerling was no stranger to examining the souls of others. As a bully with power, he had often forcefully looked over the souls of the people around him. None of them were anything like Asano’s.

Jason’s soul was scarred and pitted, like the wall of a fortress that had endured countless sieges and never broken. He could feel powerful forces within. Defiance, resolution. Power. A tyrannical force that would not be swayed by greater

powers. There was also something else that made Gerling uneasy. It was faint, just an echo, not belonging to Jason, but something that had touched him and left a profound mark. Something Gerling's instincts wanted to call divine, but he refused to let them.

Everything about Jason's soul hinted at a story Gerling could not see. Stories of endurance and suffering. Of enemies with impossible power, not just defied but overcome. Jason's soul told stories of victory, and the price paid for it, time and again.

Gerling pulled his senses back.

"That's my soul, Gerling," Jason said softly.

"You said trauma," Gerling said. "If a few cuts on your face is all it takes to break open suppression collars, I'll take that hit."

Jason frowned and shrugged off his light jacket. He unbuttoned his shirt and opened it up, showing the myriad cuts where fragments of star seed had been pushed out of his body. A wide, bright scar ran from his right hip to wind around the left side of his torso. That was from his first fight with a silver-rank monster, when he was only iron-rank. His desperate scramble to distract it as villagers evacuated had almost cost him his life.

"If you want scars, Gerling, I can give them to you. I can rake your soul, if that's what you want, but now isn't the time for that. Now it's time to choose. Are you going to stand with us or stand against us?"

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FOUR-SCORE MEN

“WELL,” JASON SAID. “THIS IS AWKWARD.”

Every person gathered in the mezzanine lounge of the pagoda had either tried to or succeeded in killing or kidnapping at least one other person present.

“Perhaps I should take the lead,” Mr North suggested. “While I have tried to arrange several deaths amongst the group, I never tried to kill anyone here personally.”

“Whatever works,” Jason said. “Just make sure no one tries it again while I’m transfiguring the new territories.”

Gerling’s face creased with suppressed anger. Although he had ultimately agreed to participate, he was still not entirely at peace with his decision. He held his tongue, however, as Jason got on the elevating platform and ascended through the building.

“Boss,” Bennett said. “Are we seriously going along with that guy after all the time you’ve been setting up to hunt him?”

“If we don’t bend to circumstance, Bennett, then we break,” Gerling said. “We are dealing with forces here larger than all of us. Don’t speak on that again.”

“Boss?”

“If Asano isn’t listening to us, his shadow familiars are,” Gerling said. “Watch your words in this place.”

Jason completed the transfiguration of the territories surrendered by Gerling.

- You have claimed sufficient territory to stabilise the transformation zone and separate it from the convergent astral space.
- Separating the space with the current territory will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the surrounding reality. Claim additional territory to reduce the severity of this effect. Current severity reduction: 97.4%
- Would you like to stabilise the transformation zone
Y/N?

“That was worth bugger all,” he complained after looking at the percentage. “Gerling, your domains were crap.”

“I’m afraid he’s unable to hear you from here, Mr Asano,” Shade said. “If it would save you time, I can explain to him myself that he’s a worthless aggregation of excrement whom the cosmos would be better for wiping off its shoe. Metaphorically speaking.”

“I appreciate the sentiment,” Jason said with a chuckle. “I’m afraid it wouldn’t be productive at this stage. It seems that the severity reduction does not perfectly correlate to how many domains are claimed. It’s like a video game that immediately loads to ninety percent and then spends most of the loading time on the last ten.”

“It seems likely that broad reductions in severity are relatively easy,” Shade said, “but seamlessly integrating this anomalous realm into physical reality takes considerably more effort.”

“Even so, we are close to the end.”

Jason returned down the elevating platform to the others.

“It’s done,” he told them. “Now, what remains is to claim the final territories. It’s almost complete, but completion grows harder the closer we get.”

“There is something I’ve been wondering about,” Todd the necromancer said.

“What?” Jason asked.

“Three of us built domains separately,” Todd said. “For each of us, our domains expanded in rings until they ran into one another. Yet, now you’ve taken over our territories, it’s all just one set of expanding rings, right?”

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“Wouldn’t that mean that the entire geography of this place is undergoing massive changes?” Todd asked. “Even the space it occupies in total would need to shift.”

“That’s exactly what’s happening,” Jason said. “I assume that, aside from Mr North, none of you has any grounding in astral magic theory. As far as I’m aware, most of that knowledge in your world was brought here by me, and I didn’t share much.”

“You mean *our* world,” Elizabeth said.

“Sure,” Jason said. “A very bare-bones explanation of the astral is that the cosmos is like a bowl of dumpling soup. Physical realities, meaning universes like ours, with matter and energy and *Knight Rider* DVD box sets are the dumplings. The astral, which is raw magic that has no physical state, is the soup.”

Jason gestured broadly around them.

“This place is what happens when too much soup gets into the dumpling. It breaks apart. To drop the analogy, the magic of the astral realm renders the physical realm unstable and it breaks down. The rules of physical reality, as we understand them, go right out the window. We’re doing nothing less here than trying to rebuild the laws of physics by punching

monsters and hoping for the best. That's about as likely to work as it sounds and I can't encapsulate how many things had to line up to give us a chance at this."

He glanced at Gerling.

"Adding more risk to the process is trying to fix Humpty Dumpty by pushing him off the wall again."

"Humpty Dumpty?" asked Elizabeth.

"Right," Jason said. "You've been asleep for centuries."

"It's an English children's rhyme," said Georges, the Frenchman amongst the vampires. "*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall; Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. Four-score men and four-score more, could not make him as he was before.* It means something is irrevocably broken."

"Exactly," Jason said. "Broadly speaking, what I've been doing over the last year is trying to prevent what is happening in this place from happening on a global scale. I don't think it would be exactly the same, but the entire planet becoming an abnormal transformation zone isn't all that far off from what would happen."

"How can you prevent that?" Elizabeth asked.

Jason turned to Mr North. "Would you care to explain?"

"Long ago," Mr North said, "probably in your time, Miss Elizabeth, someone was sent to our world from another to set the events of the past few years into motion. I came to this world as his companion."

"Companion?" Gerling asked.

"His familiar," Mr North said. "I am not human."

"Hardly any of us are, at this point," Jason said. "Do vampires count?"

"No," Elizabeth said firmly. "Humans are herd animals."

Gerling's eyes hadn't left Mr North.

"So, you're responsible for putting the world in danger," Gerling accused.

“I participated, yes,” Mr North admitted. “When I say set the current events in motion, I mean quite thoroughly. My formerly bonded essence user is known to the Network now as the founder—the man who established the Network itself. Your entire organisation was created as a pressure valve. A safety measure to regulate the speed at which magic was injected into this world.”

Mr North hung his head.

“As the centuries passed,” he continued, “I came to love this world. It can be ugly and cruel, and I have become both in my efforts to shield it, but it can also be wonderful. There is no magic dividing the weak from the strong. Humanity needs to advance as one to push itself forward.”

“That’s not really how it played out,” Jason said.

“No?” Mr North countered. “A diamond-ranker is a nuclear bomb that can walk around and do what it likes. No one individual in this world has the power they have in the other. Money and influence go far, but no one here is immortal. There are no thousand-year kings. Until I came here and interfered with that order, this world had no taint of magic.”

Mr North’s animated body language suddenly stopped dead.

“That is why I turned against my essence user,” he said softly. “Betrayed him to Mr Gerling’s Network antecedents. This is the seed from which the advantage of the United States Network branches originates. I handed him over, both to stop him and to give myself the resources to begin my work.”

“What work is that?” Gerling asked. “Making superheroes?”

“In part, yes. I know what it looks like when essences are the source of power. I sought to democratise magic. Create a pathway to magic that I could give to everyone who wanted it, not just those who hoard and dole out essences as they please. It would give humanity more magic than I wanted them to have, but that die had already been cast and I knew what was

coming. What became the human augmentation project was centuries in the making and is yet to be perfected. I've taken shortcuts that I wish, on balance, I had not."

"You used Builder cores to somehow stop their power from driving them insane," Jason said.

"Modified clockwork cores, yes. My people discovered what is called a clockwork king, largely destroyed. It was here long before I ever arrived, for reasons unknown to me, but I exploited it. And Mr Asano, in turn, has exploited that to kill them with ease."

"That's how you killed those people in Venezuela," Gerling said to Jason. "You know their weakness."

"And he can exploit it, because of an artefact my essence user brought from the other world. It was the tool he brought to set off the changes in the world's magic. It was also meant to be the most important tool to fix things if they went wrong. Which they did, but he was gone."

"You couldn't use it?"

"I could not, or I would have. The founder was originally from this world. He was drawn into the other and then sent back, just like Mr Asano. This bestowed the founder with certain traits and the artefact was protected such that only someone with those traits could use it. This was so that if anything happened to him, someone else could be sent to take up his work."

Mr North turned his gaze on Jason.

"Enter, Mr Asano. I have been preparing for his arrival since long before he was born, yet he surprised me. I was expecting a zealot when what arrived was a naïve fool with a hero complex. I had been anticipating an enemy, only to receive an ally."

Jason's lips pressed together unhappily, but he held his tongue.

"Mr Asano's disposition changed much for me," Mr North said. "Unfortunately, I did not understand who and what he

was until it was too late. I had already set events in motion that changed the world.”

“You took down the grid,” Jason said. “Initiated the monster waves and sent this world’s magic careening out of control.”

“The dangers this world faces now are only the beginning,” Mr North said. “Unfortunately, I have set in motion the very events I have sought to avoid. Mr Asano will repair the world, but the only way to do so is to bring about that which I have been trying to stop. My actions, in trying to set the timetable of events, could have perhaps been avoided. It is too late now, and all we can do is weather each storm after the next.”

“What are you describing?” Elizabeth asked. “You are being very vague on the nature of this threat.”

“Yes,” Mr North said. “As I will continue to be.”

“Those are the concerns of another day,” Jason said, “but I hope you now understand why I’m willing to strike bargains when I would rather see you all dead. Mr North has more to answer for than any of you, but the people in this room constitute some of the most powerful forces on Earth. We’re going to need you all—in the future, as well as right now.”

Jason walked over to the mezzanine railing and looked out over the atrium.

“I think there will be one or two more territories before we’re done,” he said. “Progress is slow, so it may be three; I can’t be certain. With the extra territories I’ve claimed, the strength of the anomalies will be greater than what we’ve seen in the past. Expect them to have all the strength of category four monsters. Only by working as a team will we be able to beat them.”

Jason turned to look at Adrien Barbou, standing at the back with Gerling’s henchmen.

“Barbou, there’s no point taking you. You’ll die, and die fast. As for your people, Gerling, I’ll leave that decision up to you.”

Gerling turned to his own group, eight silver-rankers.

“I can enhance your powers,” Gerling told them. “Give you the strength to contribute. Make no mistake, though: If you join, the chances of death are high. That’s true for all of us, let alone you. I won’t force anyone, and I won’t think any less of you for staying back. But you’ve heard the stakes. There are worse things to die for than saving the world.”

Gerling’s men looked at each other. One of them looked reluctant as he spoke up.

“I’m sorry, boss. I don’t... I don’t want to die.”

“It’s okay,” Gerling said. “When I asked you all to join me, this was never a part of the deal.”

In the end, half of Gerling’s eight participated. The other four stayed behind with Barbou in the pagoda, while Jason led the rest outside, where Shade had taken the form of a jet hovering over the driveway, with a platform descending on cables to allow people to board.

As the plane winged towards the new edge of Jason’s domain, Jason sat alone in the cockpit, although Shade was doing the piloting.

“Mr Asano, may I ask what all of the explanation was in aid of?” Shade asked. “It hardly seems worth the effort.”

“Which is exactly the point,” Jason said. “If my intention was to kill them all, why bother?”

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THE VERY OPPOSITE OF FANTASTICAL

THE SKY WAS BLEAK, GREY AND SUNLESS, REFLECTING THE architecture of the city. The territory was another city, but the very opposite of fantastical. Uniform concrete buildings were set out in plain, hard lines, like a distillation of Soviet Bloc design.

Just as the territory was a bland version of a human city, the anomalies were a bland version of human. Identical human men in identical black suits with sixties tailoring, they were a clone army of men in black. They fought with what looked like ordinary pistols, although they packed a gold-rank punch. In close, they used a martial arts style that was fast and efficient, but robotic and predictable.

Jason's Blood Harvest power allowed him to drain the remnant life force of slain enemies, accelerating both his speed and his rate of recovering health and mana.

Once he had killed and drained enough of the anomalies, Jason was confident enough to engage them directly. Although the anomalies had gold-rank speed and strength, it was on the lower end of the scale and they lacked any exotic abilities. Jason was almost able to match them in speed and had a full host of powers to pit against them.

His cloak intercepted bullets, and while many punched through its silver-rank protection, his blood robes soaked some more of the impact. His regeneration and drain rapidly healed what damage still made it through. Jason was long past the point where even moderate injuries were a distraction.

Once he was in melee range, Jason's cloak was once again key to his defence. It hid his unconventional movement, which was made all the more deceitful by feints. As his aura told one story, his body told another, while the truth was something else entirely. He was still only beginning to use his aura feints effectively, but the minds of the clone-like anomalies turned out to be as bland as their appearance. Despite the precision and efficiency of their hand-to-hand skill, their lack of improvisation and imagination made their attacks predictable and their defences vulnerable to Jason's unorthodox style.

Jason had been through thousands of enemies in hundreds of fights. His current strength was the product of battles with monsters, anomalies and the risen dead; vampires, superheroes and even other essence users. His fighting style, the Way of the Reaper, was too comprehensive to be mastered by ordinary humans.

The myriad techniques and variations of his style went beyond martial arts. Its practices dipped into gymnastics, acrobatics, parkour, stealth, climbing, even sleight of hand. There were too many techniques to remember without the enhanced memory of a magically enhanced spirit attribute. There weren't enough hours in the day for the practice required not just to master but maintain that level of skill.

Sophie and Jason both practised the Way of the Reaper, but in very different ways. Sophie came to it through training, taking a subset of the whole and building a style perfect for herself. As she moved through iron and bronze ranks, she had expanded her repertoire, continuing to make the style her own without attempting to grasp the whole. She took what she needed, discarded the rest and was the stronger for it.

Emir Bahadir had studied the style more than most outsiders to the Order of the Reaper. He had hypothesised that the style was originally intended to be learned through skill books. Only then, with the skills magically imprinted, could the full style be mastered. This was his conclusion after several years of searching for remnants of the style, with dozens of subcontracted adventuring teams investigating the ruins of the fallen order.

Only through using skill books was Jason able to enjoy the level of proficiency he had obtained. He had dedicated considerable time and work into making the style his own and not just a series of programmed responses, but he would never have Sophie's focused mastery. While it was an important cornerstone of his combat technique, it would never be the foundation that it was for her.

Jason simply couldn't dedicate the training time Sophie could to a selected subset of techniques. He adapted to his circumstances, environments, and enemies, using spells, direct combat, sneak attacks, and skirmish tactics as he needed. For him, the movement and stealth techniques were just as important, if not more so, than the martial arts. The broad-spectrum learning from skill books was a good fit for him.

Sophie was so good at what she did that she would pit her skills against any opponent, trusting herself and the abilities. Jason would assess an opponent and change himself, looking for the most appropriate of his available approaches. He would even switch it up against the same enemy as they adapted to him in turn.

Fighting the men in black anomalies, Jason began with skirmishing hit-and-run strikes while his enemies were faster than him. They roamed the city in groups of four and he took some hits along the way, but it was nothing he couldn't endure. He left each encounter with a slew of afflictions in his wake, letting them do their work as he moved on.

Jason's biggest setback in the fight was the inability to use the affliction-spreading butterflies. The anomalies gunned down the brightly glowing blue and orange butterflies with machine-like precision before they could do their job. The only benefit was that the butterflies exploded on being destroyed, causing an amount of disarray in the orderly anomalies that Jason could make the most of.

As anomalies started dropping from their accumulated afflictions, Jason drained them and grew faster. He fought more directly, matching his skills and powers against their clockwork techniques. He took a battering at first, sometimes being forced to escape, but slowly learned what did and didn't

work. The uniformity of the enemies meant that a trick that worked on one anomaly would be effective against them all; they never seemed to learn.

Ultimately, these anomalies proved to be a weak match-up against Jason. His butterfly failure aside, his specific abilities were filled with answers to the challenges they posed. Being numerous but relatively weak aside from their resilience, Jason's afflictions were able to chew through their physical fortitude. Once he caught up to them on speed, their intimidating fighting technique was something of a paper tiger while their firearms were a minimal threat.

The others all had their own approaches, staying relatively close together at first before spreading out. By separating, the anomalies were less likely to converge into larger groups and overwhelm them.

The vampires each fought using different powers, with the human-like anomalies serving as self-serving blood bags. Elizabeth was a master of luring groups into traps set out using blood rituals, fuelled by the blood of the anomalies already killed. Klaus fed on the anomalies' blood to grow stronger and faster, starting with a low gold-rank baseline and growing to dangerous levels as he fed again and again.

The final vampire, Georges, also fed on the anomalies, to a different effect. With each feeding, he became more and more like them, taking on their rigid mannerisms and clean, precise movements. He even started to look more like them, with their bland faces and rigid body language.

He started using their fighting style but, unlike them, was able to learn and innovate. He swiftly reached the point of roundly besting them at their own game, even conjuring one of their pistols.

Todd the necromancer had already ordered his ghoulish army to move overland towards the sight of the battle before Jason had even expanded the territory. He consumed their energy rapidly but replenished their numbers by animating the dead anomalies. The zombie versions were only silver rank and

lacked their skills, but as cannon fodder and magic fuel, they got the job done.

Gerling moved with his four offsideers, using his unsealed essence ability to make them more powerful. They were not a match for the anomalies, but Gerling was. He would act as the spearhead, charging in, ignoring bullets burying themselves in his flesh. A charging punch to the gut doubled-over an anomaly, followed by a thunderous uppercut that shot it into the air. Gerling grabbed its leg as it flew up and hammered it back down, slamming it over and over, as if shaking the dust from an old rug.

Gerling's men capitalised on his powerhouse charge attacks and used their slight numerical advantage to maximum effect. Jason even supplied them with pistols looted from the anomalies, as those picked up directly would not work for the humans.

Mr North offered roaming assistance. He used webs to set out magical rune traps to complement Elizabeth's. He bound anomalies in webs to help Gerling and his team when they struggled. He even took his true form of a car-sized spider from time to time, draining the anomalies of blood with the enthusiasm of the vampires.

So long as Jason didn't retreat into his inner territories, the anomalies entering from the exterior of the domain would make their way around the ring-shaped territory in pursuit of him. Going back to the first abnormal transformation zone, Jason had discovered that unless he retreated to his domain's inner territories, the anomalies would not invade there.

The latest territory was huge, as the outer ring of Jason's entire domain. The fighting seemed endless. The essence users consumed spirit coins to maintain their energy, while the gold-rank blood of the anomalies was a feast for the vampires, possibly due to their human form. Even so, after a dozen hours

with no end in sight, the group started to flag. Of them all, only Jason was used to the ceaseless fighting.

Jason had cleared out entire proto-spaces alone or with Farrah. During the monster waves, he had fought for days on end in Broken Hill and Makassar. Clearing vast territories, full of anomalies, was familiar to him now. He didn't need to rest for anything but mental exhaustion, able to replenish his stamina and mana at need by draining anomalies. He didn't need to stop and let his recovery attribute heal his injuries. The closest they had to a healer was the necromancer, but his sinister life exchange powers were sealed and useless.

The vampires had never faced armies of monsters, and Gerling had always been tactically deployed by the Network. Mr North was both literally and figuratively a spider in the centre of his web, rarely taking direct action.

Oddly, it was the weakest members of the group who held up the best. Todd was relatively safe behind a wall of ghouls and felt less of the strain. Gerling's henchmen had participated extensively in both proto-space and monster wave clearing. Two of them had even fought at Makassar. This gave them similar experiences with endurance battles to Jason.

Jason had Shade helicopter everyone but himself to the closest inner territory, while he remained behind. As he was the holder of the domain, the anomalies would not move inward so long as he didn't either.

It took days of constant fighting before the territory was fully claimed and the greater anomaly appeared. Jason had been hoping for a UFO or a mothman, but it turned out to be a single, normal-sized man in black. His face was identical to the others, but his suit was of a more contemporary cut, compared to the mid-century fashion of the others.

The subsequent fight turned out to be the greatest struggle the group had faced in all their time in the transformation zone. The anomaly wasn't especially powerful in and of itself.

It was stronger and faster than the normal anomalies, but only at a low-mid gold-rank level. The problems it posed Jason and his team were twofold.

The first was that it possessed a dazzling array of miniaturised high-tech devices. These ranged from a powerful energy pistol blasting heat and kinetic energy to a force field projector and even a short-range teleporter. These were the primary tools at the anomaly's disposal, although far from the only ones.

“Was that a shoe laser?” Jason asked. “Is it bad that I kind of want him to win?”

“Shut up, Asano!” Gerling roared.

There was also a discreet jump pack on its back, to which was attached several small, disposable devices with powerful effects. A tube containing a small rocket killed one of Gerling's henchmen and severely injured the others, taking them out of the fight.

The second problem posed by the greater anomaly was that it wasn't as mentally limited as its lesser cousins. It was able to innovate and adapt to Jason and the others over the course of the fight.

Disaster struck when the anomaly charged up its pistol, teleported next to Todd and fired directly into his head, killing him. This put the pistol into some kind of charging cycle, but the group couldn't take advantage as the now-uncontrolled ghouls went into a frenzy. They only escaped due to the vampires managing to control at least a portion of the ghouls, opening a path to fall back. Not all were able to take it, however, and they were forced to leave behind Gerling's companions, who were inundated by the ghouls.

Away from the greater anomaly, Jason handled the bulk of the ghouls with the doom butterflies that swiftly spread to annihilate the weak ghouls. By the time he was done, the greater anomaly had tracked them down and the butterflies swarmed it. It destroyed them with some kind of rocket, but the resulting explosion massively weakened its force field,

putting Jason and the others on the front foot as the battle resumed.

In the end, it was the advantage in numbers that allowed them to kill it. Gordon's disruptive-force beams helped further weaken the force field. Mr North and Elizabeth set down traps they lured it into. By the time it was dead, every one of the survivors had taken severe damage. Jason's familiar, Gordon, had his vessel destroyed by the anomaly attempting to preserve its force field. This was a blow to Jason, who lacked the considerably rare materials to resummon him.

They all healed rapidly, the anomaly containing more than enough energy for both the vampires to feed on and to fuel Jason's Blood Harvest spell. Gerling was the slowest to recover, relying only on his gold-rank recovery attribute, yet that was far from slow. His arm had been blackened and almost torn off after suffering multiple hits from the anomaly's energy pistol, yet was back to normal by the time they returned to the pagoda.

The survivors were in the mid-level suites in the pagoda, recovering from days of combat. Gerling had lost half of his people and Jason had lost a familiar, albeit temporarily. They had agreed to a full day of rest before taking the next step.

Jason wasn't going to risk transfiguring his new domain until they were ready for whatever came after. He couldn't be sure what would happen once he completed his domain. Strangely, the distant shapes in the gloom seemed no closer than before, despite Jason having expanded into almost every territory. He did not estimate there to be more than one or two left at most.

Would there be some terrible, astral guardian in the final territory? Were the shapes in the gloom echoes of astral beings that would never be seen and pose no threat? Jason was hoping for that one more than he was expecting it.

There were still the remnants of a ghoul army running loose, although they were weak, scattered and uncontrolled. Until Jason resolved the transformation zone and reintegrated his domain with Earth, he would be unable to trigger the defences and eliminate them.

After warning the others that they should take the time to mentally prepare to face unknown challenges, Jason spent the day in meditation, readying himself for whatever was to come.

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SMALL MERCIES

JASON HAD MADE A TRADITION OF TRIGGERING THE TERRITORY transfigurations alone on his balcony, but he changed his pattern this time because he was unsure of what would come next. Shade's VTOL plane form hovered just outside the pagoda entrance, blasting wind. Jason went outside to join the three vampires, Mr North and Gerling.

Standing with them, Jason closed his eyes and initiated the change. The others sensed nothing from Jason's newest and most distant territory, but Jason felt it immediately start transforming. To Gerling and the others, Jason was just standing still with his eyes closed. This continued as the remote territory took time going through the transfiguration process.

"Asano?" Gerling finally asked.

"Sorry, it's been done for a few minutes," Jason said. "I was just standing here like this to annoy you. I'm saving the world, Gerling, not ordering a coffee. Shut up and wait."

Eventually, the process reached its conclusion.

- Your domain now encapsulates the entirety of the transformation zone and convergent astral space. You have successfully integrated and stabilised the physical and astral components of the space.

- Your domain now abuts the dimensional membrane between the physical and the astral. Due to the damaged nature of the dimensional membrane, an astral rift has formed, allowing the intrusion of external forces.

- To fully incorporate your domain into the physical reality without further damage to the dimensional membrane, excise the external forces maintaining the rift in order to close it.

Jason could sense the dimensional rift at the boundary of his domain and the astral entities pouring through. Most astral beings were unable to exist in a physical space, even one infused with astral energy like the domain Jason had formed from the transformation zone blended with a collapsing astral space. One that could, however, was an astral being Jason was familiar with, although these were more powerful than the ones he had encountered in the past.

His eyes snapped open.

“Let’s go.”

One of Jason and Shade’s first interactions, before Shade had even become Jason’s familiar, was Shade’s warning Jason and his companions about vorger. Now Shade gave the same warning to Jason’s new companions, making him want his old ones back.

“The vorger cannot exist in a true physical realm,” Shade explained as the plane flew rapidly in the direction of the rift. “They are often drawn into astral spaces where they can encounter physical beings, who are warped by the nature of the vorger into abominations. Until it is fully integrated with Earth, this space still contains some properties of the astral

space we were all in when it formed. This is how they can exist here.”

“So why don’t we integrate the place, then?” Gerling asked. “Shoving this zone back into Earth proper was the point of all this, right? Why not do that and kick these creatures out while we’re at it?”

“Because something is maintaining the rift they’re using to enter from the astral,” Jason explained. “I can feel the rift. I can feel whatever’s out there, waiting as it holds the door open.”

“Whatever?” Gerling asked.

“It’s not a vorger,” Jason said. “It’s something else. It feels familiar, but I can’t quite sense it enough to recognise.”

“You said waiting,” Elizabeth said. “Waiting for what?”

“For whoever defends this realm,” Shade said. “It is common for astral beings that can enter semi-physical space to feed on physical beings. That energy anchors them and allows them to stay. When the vorger do this, they warp and deform flesh. If they do it enough, the person is turned into a flesh abomination, their soul forever trapped inside. They no longer control their own bodies, yet cannot pass into death unless someone kills them.”

“You want to avoid them doing that,” Jason said. “I’ve seen those abominations and you don’t want to be one.”

“You still haven’t explained why we don’t just shut it all down and end this,” Gerling said.

“Because we may have stabilised the transformation space, but now we have rogue elements running around inside it,” Jason said. “We have to purge them before we can finish the job and finally get out of here. After that, we can all go back to trying to kill one another.”

“The vorger are incorporeal,” Shade warned. “Without a power that allows you to affect them, or an affinity to the astral, they can touch you and you cannot harm them in turn. They are, however, subject to spiritual forces. You all have

strong auras. If you can wield them as weapons, they will be effective.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem for the essence users amongst us,” Mr North said, looking at Jason and Gerling. “The rest of us have auras that are less actively controlled and more inherent to our nature.”

“You will likely be unable to make use of your auras in the appropriate manner,” Shade acknowledged. “I recommend you leverage what abilities you have as best you can.”

“I think I can help,” Gerling said. “I have a power that lets me pass off some power to others. You saw me using it to enhance my men. One of the things I can do with it is to invest you with a special type of force that harms ethereal entities. It’ll shield you a little, but mostly add special damage to your physical attacks. Good for ghostly stuff and pretty good for breaking magic shields too.”

“It’s called disruptive-force damage,” Jason said and Gerling gave him an assessing look.

“Must be nice to have a power that gives you all the answers.”

“Sure, until you realise that’s it’s only freeing you up to tackle even worse questions.”

Disruptive-force damage was a bane to incorporeal creatures, but Jason’s best source for that was Gordon, who was still waiting to be resummoned. He was not concerned about the vorger personally, though, as he had many tools to fight them. His ability to make soul attacks alone was even more dangerous to the other-worldly creatures than Gordon. The only question remaining was if they were strong enough to endure it.

Unlike the anomalies, whose power was tied to the level of the transformation zone, these external invaders varied in rank. They were a mix of silver and gold rank; the golds gave Jason the most pause. The true threat was the entity just beyond his senses, however, as it had not yet entered his domain. He had a very bad feeling that the strain of power he sensed was

diamond rank, in which case all their efforts could easily be for naught. He did not voice this concern. There was nothing to be done about it anyway.

Unlike the anomalies that appeared all around a territory, the vorger poured in from a single rift in the sky over Jason's latest territory. They seemed to be no fewer in number, though, which meant that the ghost-like creatures formed a sea of translucent white, glowing faintly in the dark sky. They were eerily silent, even as they stormed out of the astral, giving them an uncanny air.

The Communist Bloc style city had transfigured into a grim Gotham, with dark, narrow alleys and moonlight glistening off rain-soaked streets. It was a good environment for the vampires.

Although the vorger seemed endless, they were being rapidly annihilated by Jason and his companions. Jason was the most prominent; any vorger coming remotely close was annihilated by soul attacks. Even the gold-rank ones put up little fight and the area around Jason became an empty bubble in a sea of ghosts as he moved around to sweep them up.

The most prominent difference between Jason's approach and the others was that when he assaulted the vorger with soul attacks, they made a noise. Normally silent, even as the others dispersed them by various means, Jason's attacks made the vorger let out a glass-shattering screech. Since Jason was wiping them out in job lots, the battle was punctuated by chorus bursts of ghostly death shrieks.

Gerling required more effort than Jason to disincorporate the vorger with his aura, but he quickly caught on to the means. Once he figured out how to make a powerful weapon of it, he was like a giant with a hammer smashing through them.

Mr North and Elizabeth teamed up to use their unique ritual magic variations to set up defensive rituals, reminding Jason of Clive's combat style. Mr North created a web-pattern

magic diagram set out in the middle of a street. He and Elizabeth stood in the middle of it and any vorger that came near found itself entangled in a web, despite its ethereal nature.

Elizabeth, in turn, set up five ritual circles around the central web diagram. From each, a nest of long red tentacles emerged to lash at the vorger. They were able to extend and snake off around corners and down alleys, as if infinite in length. They sought out the vorger, wrapped around them and squeezed, the ghostly entities popping like balloons. This proved a terror to the vorger; only Jason's aura was more avidly avoided.

The other vampires did not fare quite as well, at least at first. Gerling's power helped, but only so much in the face of the ghost tsunami. Georges, who could take on the powers and skills of things whose blood he drank, was troubled at first because the vorger had no blood to drink. Jason changed that for him by casting a spell. Georges learned of it when he heard the icy voice Jason reserved for enemies.

"Bleed for me."

One of the vorger in Georges' face turned from translucent white to a red mist, with the familiar, coppery scent of blood. To Georges, it smelled amazingly appetizing and he sucked it in like he was playing tricks with cigarette smoke. Georges himself became a little translucent, and suddenly, he could touch the vorger as if they were physical things. Their touch was now harmless to him. Georges unleashed his inner beast, his gold-rank speed and vampiric ferocity tearing a path through the vorger.

The last vampire, Klaus, suffered the worst. Jason also made some of the vorger in front of Klaus bleed, but consuming them was not as effective. Consumption made Klaus faster and stronger, neither of which was of great help against ghosts. Even if partially inured to their attacks by the energy infused into his body by Gerling's power, Klaus was slowly warped by the touch of one creature after another.

Jason was unable to cleanse the effect with his power. The vorger's touch left behind an affliction of the magic type, which fell outside his power to dispel. This was common amongst cleansing powers, which tended to affect curses, diseases and poisons. Mostly, the kind of things Jason did to people. Magic cleansing was the purview of magic specialists like Clive, along with dedicated healers.

When the vorger made a final surge, each combatant was isolated. It was a last-ditch effort by the ghostly creatures to overwhelm them. A massive wave attempted to inundate Jason's aura and overwhelm it, requiring him to dig deep and push back. He weathered the powerful and costly offensive in which countless vorger perished but was left mentally drained. He felt like he was low on mana, even though he was almost fully topped off.

The vorger finally gave up and retreated, leaving only scattered stragglers behind. Jason and the others regrouped and cleared the stragglers, aside from Klaus. They found what was left of him, transformed into a pile of formless, grotesque flesh. It was already dead.

"I believe," Shade said, emerging from Jason's shadow, "that his vampiric nature has given him the mercy of death. Vampires sustain a false life using the life force they have stolen through blood. Once he was taken too far from his vampiric state, he could no longer contain that life force and it escaped, leaving the flesh to die."

Jason crouched to take a closer look at Klaus' remains.

"I know we were ultimately enemies," he said, "but that's a rough way to go out. And rough ways to go are my bread and butter. At least his soul won't be trapped in a twisted prison of his own body."

"Small mercies," Elizabeth said.

Jason nodded his agreement. He had no love for the vampires, but there was no point wasting anger on the dead. A spear plunged into Jason's back, bursting out of his chest.

“You won’t even get small mercies,” Gerling said, twisting the spear shaft to heighten Jason’s pain. “It’s time for this idiotic game of charades to end.”

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SALUS MUNDI SUPREMA LEX ESTO

“DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW HARD IT WAS TO GET THE materials for a category four suppression device?” Gerling asked, jerking the spear again. “I’m impressed that it takes something this strong to shut your powers down.”

Jason collapsed to the ground, the spear still running through him. He could feel the suppressive force coming from it, crawling through him from the inside out. He groaned through gritted teeth. The surviving vampires and Mr North gathered around.

“Fortunately,” Gerling continued, “there’s been an upswing in category four proto-spaces. So, while you were running around killing superheroes and playing with your magic door, I’ve been getting ready. Even so, I never could get the materials for a suppression collar that powerful. The best I could do was something that had to be implanted.”

He twisted the spear again.

“To my delight, the implantation was allowed to be quite rough. As you’re experiencing.”

“You have no idea what you’re doing,” Jason said. “I’m the only one who can—”

Jason was cut off by Gerling’s boot to the back of his head, crushing his face into the wet asphalt.

“You think you’re so special, Asano. The chosen one, destined to save the world because no one else can.”

Gerling ground Jason’s face into the street with his foot.

“You’re not special,” Gerling said. “The stuff you have is. So I’m going to take it from you. I’m going to take it all.”

“You can’t.”

“Impossible just means you haven’t taken the time to figure it out,” Gerling said. “While you were running around, claiming to be the Messiah, I was preparing, as I said. This spear...”

Jason groaned with pain as Gerling yanked it sideways like a boat tiller.

“...was only the start.”

Gerling open a small leather pouch on his belt and took out a rainbow orb, the size of a large marble.

“This,” Gerling said, “is much more impressive than its size denotes. I’d even say it’s the most impressive thing on this planet, for the simple reason that it can claim possession of anything else.”

“Contingencies on contingencies,” Mr North said. “The orb was a failsafe, in case whoever ended up with the door proved unreliable or uncontrollable. I should congratulate you, Mr Asano, on being quite thoroughly both. Mr Gerling and I have come to an equitable arrangement where he will be my agent, and the face of saving the world going forwards.”

“You can’t,” Jason said. “The door is a part of me. It’s part of my soul now.”

“And this will draw it out,” Gerling said. “I really hope it hurts.”

“The Builder created this orb,” Mr North said. “Do you even realise what a great astral being is? Of course you don’t. You can’t. The power of a great astral being is literally beyond your ability to comprehend. Your mind is too limited to contextualise magnitude of such an entity. This orb will pluck the door right out of you.”

The pained expression on Jason’s face vanished as his eyes went wide.

“Oh,” he said. “I knew I sensed something I recognised. You slipped up, hag.”

The spear blurred and vanished, along with Jason’s injuries as he got to his feet.

“I may not be able to comprehend the full power of a great astral being, but I know even they can’t violate a soul. Maybe you could have sold me on it since I don’t know that much about great astral beings, except that I’ve lived through the proof. The Builder tried to take my soul with his star seed, and he huffed and he puffed, but my soul was built out of bricks.”

Jason pushed out with his aura at full strength. The diamond-rank power that had him in its grip was reliant on his accepting the scenario, but even so, the raw strength of it was hard to push away. It was like being trapped under an unconscious person who wasn’t actively trying to keep him down but was so heavy, they were hard to escape. Jason gave it everything he had, straining to push back. Only his abnormal strength and the unique traits of his aura enabled him to force away the oppressive power.

Title: Indomitable

- Your repeated defiance in the face of more powerful enemies and willingness to sacrifice everything for a cause has marked your soul. Your resistance to aura suppression is further enhanced and ignores rank disparity.
- Your aura signature has changed. Your unwavering resolve floods your aura and can be detected if your aura is examined by an aura sensing power or when projecting your aura. Allies within your aura have increased resistance to aura suppression.

The illusion Jason had been trapped in shimmered and vanished as Jason’s mind cleared away the magic that had

been lying to his senses and the true scene was revealed. Jason was lined up next to Gerling and the vampires. In front of them was a nightmare hag; a diamond-rank entity that had little direct power but could manifest people's fears. It looked a lot like Shade if he'd been put through a heavy wash cycle—a ragged, shadowy figure. It had one arm outstretched, connected to Gerling and the vampires with three beams of silver-blue light. The luminescence of the light that had just been severed between Jason and the creature was still fading away.

Mr North was also in the line of nightmare victims but had broken free of the trance state even quicker than Jason.

“You threw it off,” Jason said, bending over with a weary groan, hands on knees.

“I have accepted my fate, Mr Asano. I have nothing left to fear.”

“Sure,” Jason grunted. “How the hell are we supposed to kill a nightmare hag?”

“You recognise this thing?” Mr North asked.

“I've faced one before, but Shade knows more than me.”

One of Shade's bodies emerged from Jason's shadow.

“For diamond-rank creatures,” Shade said, “nightmare hags are breathtakingly weak, at least in direct confrontation. They are, however, almost impossible to eliminate. More typically, they are bound and used for various purposes, as happened with the Order of the Reaper.”

“I thought they manifested your fears as a weapon,” Jason said.

“That is their means of fighting, and what makes them so dangerous,” Shade said. “They can manifest diamond-rank spiritual constructs in the form of people's fears. Their method of feeding, however, is to place people in an illusory scenario where their fears consume them.”

“If you've encountered one of these in the past,” Mr North asked, “how did you handle it then?”

“Other people’s fears are like a box of chocolates,” Jason said. “You never know what you’re going to get. It created a diamond-rank version of me that was a lot more like you. One that no longer sees lines to cross. Apparently, these hags being hard to kill doesn’t apply to their own manifestations.”

“The manifestation killed the hag so that you would eventually turn into it?” Mr North asked.

“No,” Jason said. “It killed the hag because it refused to be controlled.”

“The manifestations are accurate, then,” Mr North said.

“I hope not,” Jason said. “Shade, any idea on how to handle this thing?”

“To anchor itself here, it will need to feed on at least one physical being,” Shade said. “You and Mr North have denied it, leaving the others.”

“We have to save them?” Mr North said. “Help them escape somehow?”

“Shade, if this thing gets denied, it goes back through the rift, right? Job done?”

“That would be my understanding,” Shade said. “I would like to be clear that this is not a scenario in which I am comfortable making definitive statements.”

“We stick to the plan, then,” Jason said, pulling an object from his inventory.

Item: [Travis’ Big Rocket] (silver rank, rare)

Definitely not compensating for anything (consumable, bazooka).

- Effect: Launches a rocket containing vast and destructive powers of solar and kinetic energy.

Jason slung the huge rocket over his shoulder.

“Curse my sudden, yet inevitable betrayal.”

“What is that?” Mr North asked.

“A sun nuke, by way of astral reconfiguration. I thought I’d have a Godzilla monster or something as an excuse to fire this thing off, but having Gerling and the vamps just stand there in a trance is fine too. Can’t dawdle, though. Got to get this done before any of them die or break free.”

Jason opened a portal, which Mr North stared at.

“So, you can use portals here after all,” he said.

“Yes,” Jason said.

“You shipped us all back and forth via vehicle to make us believe that you couldn’t?”

“Got to have an escape plan. Are you going to fight for your life, Mr North?”

“No,” Mr North said, his voice weary. “You won’t let me live, and the world can’t afford for you to die. The welfare of the world must be the supreme law. I knew from the instant I was trapped in this place that this moment would come.”

He looked around with a sigh, then gave Jason a sad smile.

“Perhaps it’s for the best. I do have a conscience, you know. I suppose it’s time to pay for my many mistakes. I do love my adopted world.”

“I believe you,” Jason said. “Sometimes the things we love are the things we hurt the most. Earth isn’t my home anymore. Your homeworld has become my true home, just as mine has become yours.”

A window appeared in front of Mr North.

- [Jason Asano] has invited you to form a party. Accept Y/N?

“Why?” Mr North asked.

“I’m about to leave a henchman to kill all my enemies while I go away, assuming everything went to plan. Classic villain move, so I want some assurances.”

“That I die.”

“Yes. I considered letting you live, you know. I do believe you want to help.”

“But you can’t trust the way I might choose to help in your absence, once you leave for the other world.”

“I like you, Mr North, in spite of everything. But I also fear turning into you. And I can’t leave that behind me when I’m gone.

- [Noreth] has joined your party.

“Noreth?”

“The name my essence user gave me. It was very precious to me, once.”

Jason nodded and handed the rocket to Shade.

“There is a vault,” Noreth said. “It’s hidden under one of the remote magic accumulators Miss Hurin set up to feed magic to your village in Australia.”

“How did you manage that?”

“With great difficulty. Even lacking the main village defences, Miss Hurin was not incautious about its protections.”

“How do I open this?”

“It will only open for two people: You and I.”

“Is it a trap?”

“It has traps. I advise you to have Miss Hurin assist you. Speaking of which...”

“Barbou,” Jason said.

“He really is a friend. Please ask her to make it quick and clean. Call it a final request.”

“You know what he did to her.”

“I do.”

“I’ll ask. If she says no, I won’t push. She’ll probably say no.”

“I know. Now leave, Mr Asano. You’ve tarried too long already.”

Jason nodded.

“Goodbye, Noreth.”

“Goodbye, Mr Asano. Do better for this world than I did.”

Jason moved to step through the portal when Noreth called out to him.

“Actually, Mr Asano, there is one more thing I’d like to do, if you’ll permit me.”

Jason stepped out of the portal into the mezzanine lounge of the pagoda. Barbou and Gerling’s men rushed up as Jason walked towards the elevating platform. Jason didn’t so much as glance in their direction, instead holding out a hand slick with blood. Leeches sprayed out over Gerling’s men but left Barbou untouched. He skittered away fearfully as the others collapsed, screaming and yanking leeches off themselves. Jason rode the elevating platform up as his portal sank into the floor when the other end of it was destroyed.

“Thank you, Shade.”

“You are welcome, Mr Asano,” Shade’s voice came from his shadow.

Jason reached the top floor master suite, went into the study, and took a red crystal from a drawer. It was the one that Elizabeth had given him, in order to survive whatever attack she assumed he had planned. It lit up as it activated, a beacon to draw in the soul after the vampire died. Jason took out a reclamation orb and touched it to the crystal. The crystal grew dim as the orb filled with rainbow light. It did not fill all the way before the crystal blackened and crumbled.

- You have defeated [Georges Albon].

“Georges?” Jason muttered. He extended his senses throughout his domain, which covered the entirety of the transformation zone. Neither Elizabeth nor her blood crystal appeared anywhere within.

“Shade,” Jason said. “I believe I’ve been played. Could a disembodied soul successfully leave the transformation zone, even while the zone is sealed like this?”

“The only way to trap a soul, Mr Asano, is in its own body, as with the flesh abominations. A god of death can guide a soul, but not bind one. Even the Reaper can open passages for a soul, but is likewise unable bind one.”

“Open passages?”

“I will not be drawn into speaking on the role of my progenitor, Mr Asano. You know this.”

“Fine. I think Elizabeth had her blood crystal outside the transformation zone this whole time. She somehow got Georges’ crystal, maybe even made it herself. She passed it off as hers so I’d think I had her at a disadvantage.”

“Then she has likely escaped.”

“Yeah. She completely outplayed me.”

The blast zone of the nuclear solar rockets was a crater. Ash and dust blocked out the sky and the former gothic cityscape had been levelled for kilometres. Noreth dug his way out of the ground from where he had buried himself deep, inside a cocoon of magical webbing. His preparation was just enough to survive as, while the force of the rocket was immense, it was still only a silver-rank power. Noreth was gold rank, as were the preparations he made to shield himself. He also wasn’t a vampire, against which the weapon was optimised.

Even with his preparations, his cocoon had been crushed, as had Noreth himself. Buried underground, he had to wait for

bones to snap back into place before digging his way out. Once he did, he started laying out a ritual circle with webs.

There was a rush of rainbow light in the crater, not unlike the manifestation of a monster, but this was something else. Gerling appeared from the light, bare naked. His immortality power had brought him back even from full bodily annihilation. He was still coming to his senses when webs whipped out from a series of nearby ritual circles, binding him like chains in a standing position.

“I was a little worried you’d come back before I was ready,” Noreth said. “I was lucky, in this regard. Also, in that you never unsealed the power that enhances your strength. You won’t be able to pull yourself free, not without more tricks than you have in your bag right now.”

“What do you want, North?” Gerling snarled.

“You know I only came to this place for you, right? You took my friend.”

“Someone like you doesn’t have friends.”

“I may be a monster, Mr Gerling, but not an unfeeling one. You took my friend and I came to get him back. Because of this, he and I will both soon be dead. I can’t save either of us, Mr Gerling. Or you. When you think about it, you have led all three of us to our doom in this place.”

“We can team up. Fight Asano. You know he’s going to kill your friend, right?”

“I’m not happy about that, I’ll admit. But in the circumstances, I’ll take what I can get. At least my friend will die for having chased his own ambitions, instead of for you chasing yours.”

“Asano won’t let you live either. Once he finds out you’re alive—”

“He knows. Mr Asano was kind enough to let me take a small measure of revenge on the man who led me here, to my own death and that of my friend. Small consolation, but at least I can go on my own terms. I will kill you, Mr Gerling, and then I will take my own life.”

“It doesn’t have to be like this,” Gerling said.

“It didn’t, Mr Gerling, but now it does. Because of you.”

Jason opened his eyes and his vision departed from the crater where Gerling died.

- Party member [Noreth] has died.

“So, that’s it then,” Jason said.

“Will you pursue Elizabeth after reintegrating the transformation zone?” Shade asked.

“No,” Jason said. “She’s Earth’s problem now. I’m done with vampires and magic factions. It’s time to finish the job and go home.”

“Home, Mr Asano?”

“Yeah. Earth isn’t it anymore.”

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SOMETHING OTHER THAN HUMAN

LIKE THE REGION IN SLOVAKIA, THE FORMER CITY OF SAINT-Étienne had been reshaped after emerging from the transformation zone as it became a spirit domain for Jason. This one was larger, encompassing most of the city aside from a few ruined remnants on the outskirts, just outside of the spirit domain's borders.

Jason's spirit domain became the heart of one of Earth's highest-magic zones, with much of France now having magic stronger than that of Greenstone. Even silver-rank monsters had manifested with semi-regularity in the six months since the spirit domain was established.

The vampires abandoned France and its high levels of magic and it was retaken by eager Network forces. The French government was reinstated, although the country remained under martial law as order was slowly re-established. With essences and monsters now manifesting in the wild, there were new dangers and the government was currently operating from the safety of Jason's spirit domain.

The legal status of the spirit domain was a point of contention. The new Saint-Étienne was more like a city as imagined by a man whose knowledge of France came from watching too many whimsical French films. The French interim president was diplomatic enough not to point that out as he walked along a street with Jason's grandmother, Yumi. Yumi and the interim French president walked along an empty street. The city of Saint-Étienne was, for the moment, still largely unpopulated.

“Dr Asano, I would like to thank you again for letting us set up the interim government here. Best estimates are over a year before Paris will be restored to the point of initiating full repopulation.”

“Thank you for helping push through the Transformed Relocation project with the UN, Mr President,” Yumi said. “The first of the transformed will be arriving this week.”

“It’s not entirely selfless, Dr Asano. We will be in Saint-Étienne for a time, but for the transformed, it will be a home. Many have been treated poorly after losing their humanity and I believe that things will be more harmonious if we earn some goodwill.”

“If I may ask,” the president said, “where is your grandson? He has never been big on public appearances, but it’s like he fell off the side of the world in the last few months. The Network has requested that I impress upon you that they would very much like to—”

“We are aware of what the Network would very much like,” Yumi said. “Jason has not fallen off the side of the world quite yet.”

“If I may ask, Dr Asano, what exactly is this nebulous threat your grandson is saving us from? He’s not exactly forthcoming on the details, which is why so many doubt him. I’m an administrator, chosen both for my ability to get the reclamation up and running and for lacking the charisma come election time. I know little of magic and am just one more person struggling in a world that has completely changed.”

“I think you might be a better politician than you claim, Mr President. I don’t understand all that much myself, but how long has it been since there was a transformation zone anywhere in the world?”

“Forty-two days.”

“That’s where my grandson has been, Mr President.”

“United Nations Liaison to the Asano Clan?” Jason asked as Anna moved away from the helicopter pad. They were on the roof of a building near the arrival pagoda as the heart of the new Saint-Étienne.

“Not everything is about the Network anymore,” Anna told him. “I finally realised that I was holding on to something that doesn’t exist anymore, and the UN has been scrambling to find people with any idea of how to navigate this new world.”

“And the UN thinks my family warrants their own liaison?”

“You’re the one who started taking over chunks of sovereign territory,” Anna told him.

“That was never my intention.”

“Then give them back.”

“Anyone who wants it can come and take it,” Jason said, his voice an iron fist in a silk glove. They dropped off the edge of the building, neither so weak as to require stairs as they landed on the street below. Jason led Anna inside the pagoda.

The atrium was full of people, very few of whom were human. They walked through the crowd towards what was now a bank of elevating platforms, part of various design changes Jason had made to accommodate the clan. The pagoda was ultimately a cloud construct, even if it rarely showed, and could be altered with alacrity and ease.

“I’m surprised no one is looking at you,” Anna said as they navigated the crowd. “You’re more or less the head of state, at this point.”

She was awkwardly stepping around delicate elves and huge leonids while they unconsciously parted for Jason, like the wind slipping around a gliding bird. Anna quickly learned to walk right behind him.

“They don’t see me,” Jason told her. “Or, more precisely, their minds actively ignore my presence. It’s an aura manipulation trick I picked up a while ago, with the help of Craig Vermilion. There is a lot to learn from how vampires use

their auras and I've been practising a lot over the last few months."

"There's a new leader who has managed to rise up amongst the vampires," Anna said. "They've separated from the Cabal, who pretty much rule Africa and Russia at this stage. She's concentrating power in parts of Europe and Central America, pulling back from aggressive action."

"I've met Elizabeth," Jason said lightly. They arrived at the elevating platform and got on, alongside several other people.

"So I've heard," Anna asked. "I'd love to hear more."

"She and I spent some time together. I tried to kill her, but she outplayed me."

"There has been some suggestion that she's holding back until you're gone. That she wants to avoid you trying to kill her again and is waiting for you to leave this world behind before initiating a vampire war."

"That's more likely obfuscation," Jason said. "She's probably just taking the time to consolidate her power."

"Our analysts agree. The ancient vampires seem to have realised that they need to work together, but that isn't natural for them. Many weren't happy about pulling back after the success of their attacks on Network holdings in Germany and want to take advantage of the civil war in the US."

"Elizabeth is not fool enough to poke the dragon while it's chasing its own tail. Not my concern, in any case. The vampire war is your apocalypse, Anna, not mine."

"And how is your apocalypse going?" she asked. "A lot of very powerful people made very sure that I'd ask."

"It's all finished but the paperwork," Jason said. "I have more to do in the other world, but for practical purposes, the job here is done. To the best of my understanding, the dimensional membrane stopping Earth from spilling out the side of the universe will slowly recover over the next couple of decades. At the very least, things here are no longer escalating. Barring some god-like dimensional entity showing up to make trouble, you can rest easy."

“Some kind of public announcement would be nice,” Anna said. “We can do it with the UN, make it nice and legitimate. There are a lot of worried people out there, and a lot of crazies stoking trouble. It would be nice if you could explain it all.”

“What do you want me to do, Anna? Go on TV and start talking about alien gods? You want the UN to endorse a message that goes directly against most of the world’s religious beliefs? Remind me what the revelations about magic and monsters did for global religious harmony?”

“We can couch the language to excise anything contentious.”

“People never much liked the truth, Anna, and are quick to eat up lies. Feeding them only half of the truth will do more harm than good. Let them think what they want. I don’t care anymore.”

Anna looked at Jason’s impassive face. She remembered the wild, animated man she had met just a couple of years ago. He seemed much older despite, if anything, looking younger. There was a tiredness to him, to the way his alien eyes watched the world around him.

“Coming back to this world has done more to you than going to the other one did, hasn’t it?” she asked.

“Any sign that Gerling or Mr North are still alive?” he asked, ignoring her question.

“I thought they were both dead. I heard you confirmed it yourself.”

“Yes, but I’ve been deceived before and death isn’t always the end. I understand that better than most.”

“There has been no sign of Gerling or Mr North. As best we can tell, they both are truly dead. I have no information on Adrien Barbou either, past Gerling raiding the EOA headquarters and taking him. I don’t suppose you know his ultimate fate.”

“He’s dead and that is as much as anyone needs to know. Is the EOA showing signs of recovery?”

“No. Somehow, someone got access to the vast majority of their funds and siphoned them away. They lost half their leadership. More, once you realise how much Mr North kept from the others, which we’re still only finding out about now. Recovery isn’t possible. Most of its people are being absorbed into different Network factions, or even the civilian infrastructure, like governments and the UN.”

Jason nodded absently but didn’t say anything.

“Jason, we traced where the EOA’s money went.”

“The clan is taking in non-humans from all over the world, Anna. Even with the infrastructure I’m bringing to the table through the spirit domains, it takes a lot of funding.”

“The UN has offered to help with that.”

“Talk to my uncle Hiro. He’s managing the relocation program on our end.”

The elevating platform took them to the pagoda’s portal chamber, now a warehouse-sized space occupying an entire floor. The walls had archways much larger than those Jason created himself, all of which were open portals. It was a hubbub of activity, with people, forklifts and even supply trucks coming in and out under the direction of a harried group of Asano clan members in visibility shirts.

Jason led them to one of the portals where Asano clan members were checking everyone going in and out.

“Patriarch!” one of them said, startled as Jason stopped masking his presence from her. She was nineteen years old and Jason’s second cousin. He had given up on trying to stop the clan members from calling him that.

The clan structure had been instigated by the former members of the Japanese Asano clan, mostly Asano Akari’s father. Nothing had been heard from the Japanese Asano clan, led by Akari’s grandmother, Noriko.

Jason had not been on board with formalising the clan at first but was railroaded by his grandmother. Yumi had told him that if he wanted a say in how the clan was organised, he was welcome to increase his participation in administering it. Jason

had signalled surrender, leaving it to her and Akari's father, Shiro.

"We're going through to Slovakia," Jason said.

"Of course," Jason's cousin said.

Jason and Anna went through the portal, arriving in an almost identical portal room. They took an elevating platform up to what was now known as the Patriarch's suite on the top floor and Jason led them out to the balcony. Compared to her last visit, when it was ruined and empty, now all was repaired and odd folk bustled about in the streets. Celestines and leonids, elves and even more exotic people. The once devastated landscape had been repaired under the attentions of Jason's father, Ken.

"It's looking better," Anna said.

"Yes," Jason said. "My father has found the reconstruction to be very fulfilling. There's a lot more damage to be fixed around the world and my father's powers and experience are well-suited to handling them. I would appreciate your new connections making use of him."

Anna turned to look at Jason.

"You wanted to take him with you," she intuited.

"He has found a new purpose. I won't try and deny him that."

"So, it will just be your sister and her family leaving with you?"

"No," Jason said. "They've elected to stay."

Neither his face nor his aura betrayed his feelings on that.

"My sister had taken the food logistics of the relocation project in hand," he said. "You'll be seeing a lot of her in your new role, I suspect. Her husband is working with the new medical infrastructure and research team."

"I heard you poached Gladys from the Network. Ketevan wasn't happy."

“We need a lot of people with a lot of expertise. Learning the ins and outs of many new species is quite the challenge, even before you start getting into essence users and any other magical quirks that may appear.”

“What about your niece?”

Jason bowed his head.

“I’m not the uncle she knew. Not even the one who came back, from before the monster waves. They love me, but they look at me and don’t recognise these eyes. Or the man behind them.”

“You scare them.”

“Yes.”

“I won’t lie, Jason: you scare us all. Some of the most powerful beings on the planet went into that transformation zone and only two of you came out. One came out queen of the vampires and the other came out with a kingdom.”

“I’m not a king, Anna. Mayor, maybe, although that’s my grandmother, really.”

“Jason, unless you want to let the French and Slovakian authorities reclaim the land, you’re a *de facto* head of state. You’re *letting* the French government operate out of this place. The world’s nations and the UN may be playing nice now, while they’re scared and happy that the vampires are staying away. The time will come, though, when they start looking to take that land back. And even if they don’t, what will you do with it? You know you have more territory than the Vatican, right? That’s not even counting those astral spaces of yours.”

“I’ve left Grandmother in charge of all of that,” Jason said. “She’ll be more amenable to cooperation than I am anymore.”

“She can’t do the things you can do.”

Anna’s aura senses weren’t sophisticated enough to understand what Jason did, but the space around her seemed to go still, as if time had suddenly stopped.

“Rather than try and get me to do the things I can do,” Jason said, “you should be very glad that I’ve elected not to do

them. I'm leaving the clan with as many resources as I can and I am going. I'm done with it all, Anna. This world is better off without me now, and I'm better off without it."

"This world could use you."

"This world did. Goodbye, Anna. Shade will take you to see Grandmother."

"This way, Mrs Tilden," Shade said, emerging from Anna's shadow.

"One more thing," Anna said. "Some rumours I've heard."

"You mean you've checked in with your spies within the clan."

She didn't deny it.

"Is your clan resuming the human augmentation research that the EOA was conducting? You've been scooping up certain former EOA people the Network had its eye on. The Network has more expertise in this area. They're willing to collaborate."

"I'll bet they are. I don't trust them to avoid the same shortcuts that Mr North took," Jason said. "I have given the clan only a few hard rules to follow in my absence, and the way that research is conducted is at the top of the list. I've already made sure it's impossible to replicate the existing process for creating silver-rank augmented humans."

"The clockwork cores," she said. "We've been debriefing ex-EOA as their organisation collapses in on itself. The source of the cores went missing, months before Mr North died. We believe he took it."

"He did."

"How much of North's assets did you get your hands on? Did you torture it out of him in the transformation zone?"

"I didn't torture him, Anna. He was a monster that wanted to be a hero and got it very wrong. He hoped that I wouldn't be the same as him."

"We all do, Jason. But you're not a monster."

“It feels like this world wants me to be. Do you remember what I used to be like? I got kidnapped, and a few hours later, we were trading some fun banter in your kitchen.”

“That wasn’t fun for me, Asano. I was afraid you were going to kill my wife.”

“Oh, that reminds me. Shade, give her the painting on the way out.”

“Painting?” Anna asked.

“Something Dawn left behind. A gift for your wife.”

Jason and Farrah had spent weeks drawing out the ritual circle by shaping and placing stones. They had set it up on a football field in an isolated outback town in Australia, never repopulated after the monster waves. The entirety of the circle’s design could only be made out from the air.

Using their wings of fire and wings of darkness to fly over and survey their work, Farrah and Jason reviewed and tweaked the largest and most powerful ritual either would likely ever be involved in. At the very least, they wouldn’t expect to top it before reaching diamond rank.

After hours of work every day for the better part of a week, they were finally done. They sat in the sun-weathered wooden stands of the old football field.

“I think we’re good,” Farrah said. “A few more tests to make sure. The final assessment has to be yours, though.”

Farrah was a better and more experienced ritualist than Jason, especially with a ritual of this scale. She was the one making sure that all the aspects worked together while Jason, as the specialist in astral magic, took the lead on the ritual’s purpose and core design.

“We’ve pretty much made a more elaborate Stonehenge,” Jason said. “In a footy field. That’s pretty awesome.”

“We’re opening a passage between realities, and you think being in a dusty field in a town that was all but dead even before the monsters is what makes it impressive?”

“I do crazy dimension stuff all the time,” Jason said. “Rebooting Stonehenge is a new experience for me.”

“So,” Farrah said. “We can go whenever now.”

Jason looked up at the sky, clear and blue.

“I wanted to come back home better than I left,” Jason said. “Now I think I’m leaving it worse than when I arrived. This world is not good for me.”

Sitting side by side, Farrah nudged him with her shoulder.

“Well, you’re good for it,” she told him. “We’ve talked before about Rufus telling you that there’d be hard choices. I don’t think he quite had all we’ve been through here in mind, but only the scale was off, not the sentiment. Sacrificing your sense of self-worth because that’s what it takes to do the right thing doesn’t make you bad, Jason. It just makes you feel bad.”

“When I faced a nightmare hag in your world, my fear was power corrupting me. When I faced one here, my fear was not being as special as I thought.”

“I hate to break it to you, Jason, but you needing a little humility is not news.”

“Did someone tell you that you’re good at cheering people up? They lied.”

“Jason, you’re the second most important person in the world right now. That would mess with anyone’s head. Add in the fact that you out-skill everyone here to an absurd degree now. But don’t worry; back in my world, I’ll take you to Vitesse. In any big adventuring city, you’ll just be some guy.”

“I am looking forward to just being some guy again,” Jason said.

“That won’t be a problem. You’re strong, I’m not playing that down, but over there, you’re far from unique. You and I are what they call guild level.”

“Rufus told me to stay away from adventuring guilds.”

“That’s because guilds in dinky little province towns are just pointlessly aping how they do it in the big cities. There, all the top adventurers are in guilds. Guild level means you have the skills to be recruited by a real guild. Once you see it for yourself, you’ll see why we were so dismissive of the Greenstone adventurers.”

“You’re in a guild?”

“Yeah. The Burning Violet guild. It’s an old guild, but after Rufus’ grandfather became guild leader, it became more and more associated with the Remore Academy. It’s Rufus’ family, plus allies like Gary and me. Gary’s around the bottom of guild level, to be honest, because he’s as much a craftsman as an adventurer. Splitting your training time comes at a price.”

“The guild must be strong if it’s full of Remore Academy graduates,” Jason said.

“It’s not bad. All the major guilds are strong, though, in a city like Vitesse. Plus, most of the big-family graduates don’t join. They have family connections that lead into the more prestigious guilds, but connections only open the door. The Remore Academy gives them the skills to walk through it. Mostly, it’s the graduates who don’t come from power or money that join the Burning Violet guild.”

“Remore Academy has graduates like that? I always imagined it being crazy expensive.”

“Rufus’ grandfather set up a scouting program, looking for people with potential. The academy does scholarships, puts them up in dormitories and trains them so hard, they’re trying to escape, free tuition be damned.”

“You didn’t attend the academy, did you?”

“No. I was already an adventurer when I met Rufus and Gary.”

“Undead taking over a town, right?”

“Yeah. You know, it’s funny; I used to think of that as this great horrible disaster. Compared to Makassar, though, it

wasn't even a big deal. The numbers were smaller and the Adventure Society sent a whole contingent of gold-rankers, so there was never any doubt about resolving it. That's why they let low-rankers like us participate."

"That would be nice," Jason said. "I'm looking forward to seeing people more powerful than me and being happy instead of afraid."

"Well," Farrah said. "It sounds like you're ready to go. Just take a good look as you're saying your goodbyes. You won't be back for a long time. While you're doing that, I'm going to Switzerland."

"Switzerland?"

"So I can essence-up the most important person in the world. I'm going to need some essences, by the way. And some awakening stones. The good stuff too; no cheapies. I could have done this a year ago if you'd told me she moved to Switzerland a quarter of a century ago. We didn't have to worry about the Americans at all."

"I didn't know."

"You need to stay on top of these things, Jason."

"You didn't know either."

"I'm from another universe!"

Jason shook his head.

"You know I can't portal you all the way to Switzerland, right?"

"The United Nations is loaning me a plane. I promised Anna I'd help with the protection magic on the new UN building in London."

"They're going ahead with that?"

"Well, with the US civil war still going on, it's not exactly a testament to peace. They wanted somewhere the vampires had abandoned because the magic spiked and they weren't going to ask you to host it."

Jason groaned.

“I don’t want to get caught up in more mess, Farrah. You know that.”

“I know, but Anna’s a friend. While you were running around stomping out monster waves, I was working with her to get the grid back up and running. She’s a good person, Jason.”

Jason got to his feet.

“I know,” he said. “But I’m just tired of all of it. I have to let it go.”

She stood up as well and gave him a warm but concerned smile.

“Are you sure you’re ready for that?” she asked. “The places, sure, but letting go of people isn’t so easy.”

“I know. But holding on too tight just led me to hurting them.”

Jason made his farewells in France, on a warm autumn day. Taika complained about his mother and her opinions on French food. Travis wanted to go with Jason but knew that his contribution would be critical to the coming war with the vampires. He did, however, jump at the chance to give up his previous affiliation and work with the Asano clan.

At the end, Jason drifted down the River Furan on a cloud construct pleasure yacht with his sister and niece. They didn’t speak of magic or monsters or leaving. They enjoyed each other’s company and played one of Greg’s board games out on the deck. Jason ignored the occasional glance Erika made at his strange eyes and what he read in her aura when she did.

After watching the sunset together, he opened a portal and sent them back to Saint-Étienne. He was about to close it when a small figure dashed back through and clamped him in a vice hug.

“Goodbye, Moppet,” he said, tousling her hair.

Jason's body no longer had the physiological mechanisms to produce tears. He had been something other than human for a long time, but never had he felt it more than in that moment.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

(i.e. what's going on with these epilogue chapters)

CHAPTER 47 ENDS THE STORY FOR HE WHO FIGHTS WITH MONSTERS' second sequence, comprised of books four, five and six. As many readers will be already aware, the initial version of this story is released online before being polished up and released in book form. That is, both as an ebook and as an audiobook, read by the delightful Heath Miller, who will also have to read this so I can make him say whatever I want. What should I go with? Should I make him sing "I'm a Little Teapot"?

I just checked and it's under copyright. You dodged a bullet there, Heath.

Anyway, when these chapters are originally released online, I've been writing interlude chapters that connect each sequence of three books. These chapters often revolve around Jason without involving him directly, giving me a chance to explore some corners of the story world that don't crop up in the normal narrative.

The epilogue chapters after book three were the original collection of these interludes, and the epilogue chapters here serve a similar purpose. These chapters explore events that occur in the other world during Jason's time back on Earth, and what the people he left behind have been up to. Many of the epilogue chapters take place over years, with events happening concurrently with one another. As they draw to an end, they lead directly into the events of book seven.

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EPILOGUE CHAPTER 1

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HOW GARY GOT HIS GROOVE BACK

IN THE CITY OF GREENSTONE, GARY XANDIER AND RUFUS Remore walked quietly along an empty street, the night lit up by magical lampposts. Gary was a huge lion man, yet looked sunken and small, with none of his signature boisterousness.

“It was a good service, I thought,” Rufus said.

“Good service?” Gary reacted angrily. “Good service? He died saving this city and what does he get? A bunch of sneering nobles, glad to see him go. They hated him. They always hated him. Tiny people who tell themselves they’re giants.”

“There were friends there too, Gary.”

“Farrah wasn’t. She’s dead, Rufus. Now Jason’s dead. How long until Hester shows up at my door to portal me to your memorial service?”

“You could stick around. Watch my back.”

“I was watching Farrah’s back. We both were, and what could we do? Watch her die, that’s what. Adventuring was meant to be fun, Rufus. Remember that? See the world; help the people who need it. It turns out the people who need help, Rufus, are us.”

Gary hung his head.

“What will you do now?” he asked, his voice weary and subdued. “For a team, I mean. There’ll be no shortage of takers back in Vitesse.”

“They can stay there,” Rufus said. “I’m going to stick around, work on the new training centre.”

“Good,” Gary said. “Be a teacher, Rufus. Maybe we’ll live long enough to be old friends.”

A flatland of long, yellow grass spanned to the horizon under a wide-open sky. Little more than a few sparse trees broke up the endless sea of gold, shifting gently in the breeze.

A remote village of low buildings was the sole population centre. The few other buildings spread across the massive territory were ranches or other operations with no more than a handful of people. A lion-like leonid woman marched up to a cottage several kilometres outside the solitary village.

Accompanying the woman was a human man, who followed her to the cottage door. The building was a small stone affair, with an attached smith’s forge. The woman stood outside the door and bellowed a name.

“GARETH!”

Inside, Gary winced. The door hit the wall as it was slammed open. Gary’s hangover made it feel like it had hit his head on the way.

“Mum,” he groaned. “Did you open the door by yelling at it? Also, you know everyone calls me Gary.”

“No, everyone calls you the perpetually drunken blacksmith who half-arses his work. Are you sleeping on a pile of your dirty laundry?”

“I don’t suppose you’re here to wash it?”

“Although it might surprise anyone who knew you, you’re a grown man, Gareth. You’re old enough to do your own laundry.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Because somebody is too good to visit his mother. Magda had to come get me, which does not reflect well on you as her employer.”

“That’s not what I pay her for.”

“No, you pay her to manage the business side of your smithy, which is hard to do when the smith spends all his time in a wine-soaked heap. You’re not an onion, Gareth, so stop trying to pickle yourself.”

Gary patted around until his hand fell on an empty bottle, and he held it up, even as he still lay in a pile of dirty clothes. He peered at the label.

“This is wine? I may have been ripped off.”

“You should listen to your mother, Gary,” came a familiar voice.

Gary propped himself onto his elbows to see Rufus standing in the doorway, behind his mother.

“I’m going to let you two boys talk,” Gary’s mother said. “Afterwards, Gareth, you and I are going to have some words about keeping a clean house.”

Gary eventually managed to navigate himself to actual furniture and sit at his dusty kitchen table. He leaned forward, resting his head on it.

“Gary, you aren’t exactly looking your best,” Rufus said.

“You are,” Gary said. “Are you polishing your head again?”

“I don’t polish my head.”

“Sure you don’t. You hit silver?”

“The monster surge precursor signs have been going on for well over a year now, even if it increasingly seems like the surge will never come. There’s been a noticeable increase in

silver-rank monsters in Greenstone, which got me over the threshold.”

“I thought you were going to run your new school instead of going back to adventuring.”

“It’s only a training annex, and I am. But you know what standards are like in Greenstone. All the good adventurers leave, so someone has to step up.”

“Didn’t a bunch come back for the monster surge?”

“We’ve been waiting for the surge for years at this point, Gary. It should have been weeks, months at the outside. People won’t wait forever, especially in a place like Greenstone where all but the lowest ranks stagnate.”

“So, you’re leaving?”

“No. I’m still getting the training annex ready. It won’t go into full operation until after the surge. The academy won’t send people before then. Danielle Geller left. Managed to hit gold rank, or so I’ve heard.”

“Good for her.”

“You know, Gary, you were bronze rank before I even had essences.”

“It’s not my fault you’re immature,” Gary said.

“I’m sorry,” Rufus said. “Was I just called immature by the man who once forgot to wear pants to a fight?”

“I’m covered in fur, Rufus. It’s easy to miss.”

“Oh, I remember what you were covered in. It matted in your hair and we had to buy crystal wash to get it out, remember?”

“Right, yeah. Farrah wanted to just cut it out of my hair with scissors. She would have left me looking like a sick stray cat.”

“Gary, you are a sick stray cat. Your mother asked me to come here from another continent. She’s worried about you.”

“She’s my mum. That’s her job.”

“I’m worried about you.”

“Don’t, Rufus. Just don’t.”

“I’m not going to push. I do have something for you, though.”

“The way this conversation is heading, I’m not sure that I want it.”

Rufus took a small object from his pocket and placed it on the table.

“What is that?” Gary asked.

“You know what it is,” Rufus said.

Gary picked up the monster core and held it between the thumb and forefinger of his huge hand. He turned it over, examining it before setting it back on the table.

“What do you want me to do with this?”

“If you want to push your smithing to the next level, you need to rank up. You’ve been bronze rank for my entire adventuring career and you’re on the very brink of silver.”

Rufus tapped the monster core with his finger.

“If you’re really done with adventuring, then this is how you rank up now.”

Gary looked at Rufus silently for a long time.

“So, that’s what you’re doing. Trying to wake me up by making me choose.”

“Gary—”

“I don’t want to hear it, Rufus.”

Gary stood up, picked up the monster core and walked to the door of his modest cottage. He opened the door to reveal the huge span of yellow grass outside. He threw the monster core out into it with all his considerable strength.

“Rufus, you’re my best friend in the world and I love you. But get out of my house.”

“I don’t know where he is,” Magda said. The leonid woman had been approached in the village by an unusual man, asking after her employer.

“He hasn’t been staying in his cottage,” Magda continued. “He comes in every couple of weeks and works for a few days, then goes again. I’ve just been going up to collect whatever he’s made to sell twice a month.”

Magda was nervous. The customer had the immaculate perfection of a very high ranker, so if he grew angry at Gary’s less than excellent work ethic, there was little anyone could do about it.

“It’s fine,” the man said, smoothly producing a gold-rank spirit coin. “Go home for a while and... Mr Xandier, was it?”

“Yes, Gareth Xandier. But everyone calls him Gary, except his mum.”

“When Mr Xandier is ready for your services again, he will find you. It may be some time, so this should carry you in the interim.”

He held out the coin for her to take, but she hesitated.

“Young lady,” he said, despite looking half of her forty years, “I assure you that I will take more offence at the rejection of my offer than the loss of the coin.”

Magda’s eyes went wide and she plucked the valuable spirit coin from his fingers, hurriedly, then was shocked at her own rudeness. He laughed lightly, holding up a hand to forestall her apology.

“It’s fine. I’ll have to go find him myself.”

“You aren’t going to hurt him, are you?”

“Oh, I probably am,” he said. “But there’s nothing you can do about that anyway, so you’d best run along.”

Gary was unconscious in a hammock strung between two trees. A sword buried itself in one of the trees, cutting the strap holding up the hammock and dumping Gary on the ground.

Gary yelled angrily as he woke up, wrapped in the hammock, and tore it apart with his considerable strength. He scrambled awkwardly to his feet and looked around, seeing and sensing nothing. He was in a copse of thin, widely spaced trees and there shouldn't have been space to hide.

He looked to the sword sticking out of the tree and yanked it out. He immediately realised it was his own work.

"This is one of mine," he muttered.

"I'm surprised you're willing to admit that out loud," a voice said from behind him.

Gary turned to find a slender, handsome man standing before him. His clothes were as immaculate as his face, both out of place in the wild savannah. Gary couldn't sense an aura, which could have meant silver rank, but his instincts told him otherwise. This was a dangerous man.

"What do you want?" Gary asked.

"I don't just go around buying terrible swords, Mr Xandier," the man said. "But I found that one to be especially infuriating."

Gary looked at the sword in his hands. It had gone into and out of the tree without so much as a blemish to the blade. He hadn't exactly put his heart and soul into making it, but it was an entirely serviceable product.

"It's a perfectly adequate sword," he said in defence of his work.

Gary didn't see the blow coming or even feel it land. One moment he was standing there with a sword in his hands, and the next he was tumbling across the ground. Only when he rolled to a stop did the sting of the strike hit him.

“Adequate,” the man said as if spitting out a slice of rotten fruit. “The next time I hear that word come out of your mouth, Mr Xandier, it won’t be a gentle tap like this one you get.”

He was already looming over Gary by the time Gary rolled over and painfully sat up.

“If you want your money back,” Gary told the man, “go ask the guy you bought it off. Also, kiss my pert, hairy behind.”

The man gave Gary an assessing look.

“You don’t care what I do to you, do you? You have some sense of my power and it just doesn’t matter to you.”

“Yep,” Gary agreed. “So, kill me or sod off; I’ve already got a smug friend. He died, but I’m not looking to refill the position.”

The man continued to stare at Gary.

“I see,” he said. “You tried your hand at adventuring and it didn’t go so well. Lost people. I hate to break it to you, Mr Xandier, but that is hardly a fresh story. It’s been told forever and will be told again forevermore.”

Gary let himself fall back in the grass.

“Oh no, I’m not special. Now you’ve tracked me down for this great revelation, can we get back to the part where you leave me alone?”

The man plucked a wooden chair out of the air and sat down next to Gary, still lying in the grass.

“Mr Xandier, my name is Virid Martine.”

“The name’s Gary. Stop calling me mister.”

“Very well, Gary. Like you, I am a practitioner of the smithing arts.”

“Then make your own sword and leave me alone.”

“Gary, you will find that as you move into the upper realms of any craft, the principles you’ve formed start to inform your work. Over time, this becomes the basis for the

nuances that make your signature style unlike that of any other.”

“If I told you my core principle was solitude, would you go away?”

“No. We’re here to talk about my core principle. It’s a simple one—the idea that all skill, from sword mastery to dance to cooking to smithing, has foundational skills from which everything else stems. No matter how sophisticated or advanced the technique, it is, in some way, an extension of the foundational techniques.”

“I hate to break it to you,” Gary said, “but that principle is as much yours as it is everyone’s who has ever done anything.”

“Yes,” Virid agreed. “One might consider it the core principle of all skill. Yet, despite knowing this simple truth, so many disregard it. They rush towards complexity, always seeking to push the boundaries without fully exploring the depths that the fundamentals have to offer. In doing so, they fail to grasp that foundations are where the greatest depths lie. The very things they seek are fragments of a greater whole.”

“That’s a great story, really. I’m not sure why you’re telling me, but you’ve given me a lot to think about. So, if you could just leave me to that—”

The sword Gary dropped when Virid hit him came flying through the air to slap into Virid’s waiting hand.

“Everything we make tells a story,” Virid said. “About us, about who we are and how we look at the world.”

He turned the sword over in his hands.

“This sword tells the story of a man who is patient. Who doesn’t rush to the end but fully explores the place he’s already at, knowing there is more to learn. A man who spent years honing the fundamentals of his craft rather than move on to the new, flashy thing. It also tells the story of a man who no longer cares. His skills are ready to move on, to advance his mastery, yet he lacks the will. He’s become lazy and careless,

with only the dedication of the past allowing him to get by on a series of shamefully adequate works.”

Virid threw the sword and it shattered into pieces in the air, shards of metal tumbling into the grass.

“Because of my particular focus, I like to peruse the work of those still on the early stages of the smithing path. When I saw this sword, I was infuriated. That someone whose steps on the path were so solid had lost their way.”

Virid stood up, grabbed his chair, and shoved it into the air, where it vanished. He then closed his eyes and stood in place silently. Eventually, Gary sat up to look at him.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for something,” Virid said. “My aura senses are expansive enough that it can take a little time to home in on something specific.”

“Maybe you should be practising that, then, rather than harassing people who were perfectly happy in their hammock before you showed up.”

Virid’s eyes snapped open.

“Happy? Are you genuinely going to sit there and claim to have been happy?”

“Comfortable, then.”

“Comfortable is an animal unaware it’s waiting to be slaughtered.”

With a gesture from Virid, a line of fire appeared in the grass but didn’t burn it. An archway of blackened metal arose from the flames, which then rose to fill it.

“On your feet, Mr... Gary. It’s time to go.”

“I know how portals work,” Gary said. “You can make me do a lot of things, powerful as you are, but you can’t make me go through that thing.”

“True,” Virid acknowledged. “What I can do is other things, until you agree to go through on your own. Do you want me to do other things, Gary?”

Gary's only response was a groan.

"That's what I thought. Now, get up."

In the chaos of a monster attack, no one noticed a fiery portal open in the middle of a village. Virid and Gary stepped out and Gary immediately whipped his head around. The village had mustered a defence, judging from the shattered palisades and pikes lying beside the dead, but that defence had been broken. Now the screams of villagers and the shrieks of monsters mingled in air thick with the coppery taste of blood.

"Do something!" Gary yelled. "You're powerful enough! Fix this!"

"My help comes at a price, Gary."

"Just do something!"

"You don't care what the price is?"

"NO!"

Virid made a casual gesture, and moments later, silence passed over the village. Looking around, Gary spotted metal spikes sticking out of the ground, impaling every monster in sight.

"There you go," Virid said lightly.

Gary flashed him an angry look and rushed off to start checking on people.

Virid and Gary walked on the battlements of a fortress town, designed to accommodate the local populations during monster surges. After the destruction of the village, Virid and Gary had accompanied the survivors there.

"The world is growing dangerous," Virid said. "This extended period of pre-surge monster activity is becoming

worse than a monster surge due to its protracted length. It doesn't present the full threat of a surge, but the world cannot hunker down and wait out years of heightened danger. People, especially those with the least resources and greatest isolation, are becoming victims."

"You didn't seem to much care in that village," Gary said. "Putting terms on helping people as they died around us."

"You don't get to judge me, Gareth Xandier. You don't know the things I've done, but I know what you've done. You've sat around, slowly drinking yourself to death while people out there are suffering. You think you're excused because you don't have a portal power? Just being far away doesn't absolve you of failing to help any more than it does me."

"Is this what your price is about?"

"Yes. I'm glad that you didn't ask what it was, Gary. It speaks well of you."

"So, what have I put myself in for?"

"You aren't going to back out? I forced an agreement out of you under some duress."

"We made a deal and you kept up your end," Gary said. "I'm not going to just go back on my word."

"Very well," Virid said. "As we've both borne unfortunate witness to, there are many people in many places in need of help. We can't fight for them all but, as smiths, we can give them the tools to fight for themselves. Weapons, armour, reinforced gates and palisades. Not big, flashy works. Basic things. Foundational."

"Why?" Gary asked. "Why me?"

"It's not just you, Gary. Those of us that exist at the upper reaches of power like to step in during the monster surges, but this time, the challenges are greater. There are few of us and so many in need. We've taken it upon ourselves to recruit people we feel have the ability to make a difference."

"You could have just asked."

“Could I? I found you through your sword, Gary, and that sword told a story. It was not the story of a man ready to help. You had to see, to remember who you are.”

“And who is that?”

“Someone who cares enough that losing people can break him.”

Five swords were floating in the air, glowing yellow with heat. Like a symphony conductor, Gary waved his arms and they descended into the water troughs waiting below them.

“There are advantages to silver rank,” he muttered to himself. He had held an instinctive aversion to using monster cores, but he had resolved never to return to adventuring. More than a year of travelling between remote villages and fortress towns, shoring up their defences had confirmed it. He could do far more swinging a hammer in a smithy than he could swinging one at a monster.

That was not to say that he hadn't taken up his war hammer. Monsters had no interest in waiting for his work to be done before striking at towns, villages and homesteads.

Gary finished the last of his work, nodding with satisfaction. This last batch of swords marked the end of another village worth of work, and it would be time to move on. He placed the swords in a crate that he easily shouldered before heading out of the smithy.

“Fuzzy man!”

The little elf girl clamped on to Gary's leg like a limpet. He plucked her off by the back of her tunic and held her out, arms and legs wheeling.

“Hmm,” he said sternly. “I seem to have developed an unseemly growth on my leg.”

The elf girl's mother came along and took her little girl.

“Sorry, Gary.”

“It’s fine,” Gary said with a chuckle. They walked towards the main street, Gary holding the swords on one shoulder and the woman holding her toddler, still straining to reach Gary.

“She’s never seen a leonid before, and she won’t like it when you’re gone.”

“My being gone means you’re more ready to face danger than when I arrived,” Gary said. “I can’t feel bad about that.”

“So, you still intend to leave in the morning?”

“Yes,” Gary said. “Providing my transport shows up on time for once.”

“That’s a little rude,” Virid said as the crate on Gary’s shoulder opened and a sword floated out. It moved over to Virid, whose annoying enthusiasm for appearing from nowhere was undiminished.

“Not bad,” Virid said as he examined the blade.

“It meets your standards, then?” Gary asked.

“I didn’t say that, necessarily. My standards are very high.”

“Then you can offer me some guidance,” Gary said. “Which is good, because I have questions.”

“I walked right into that one,” Virid complained. “I’m starting to regret you reaching silver rank. Of all the people I’ve recruited, you’re the one who bothers me the most.”

“The others don’t want you to help their craft along?”

“Yes, but their questions are shallow and lack insight. Most of them don’t think that grinding out swords and pikes is helping them advance their skills. They always want to rush forwards instead of understanding where they already are. Their questions lack nuance and have simple answers.”

“It’s fine,” Gary said. “If you don’t want to help me, you don’t have to.”

“I didn’t say that,” Virid said hastily.

The latest town to receive Gary's attention was the largest he'd visited. Although the region was remote, the town was the trade and travel hub for all the little villages around it. Gary had helped convert it into a semi-fortress town, and more than once had stepped out to face monsters that threatened it.

The town was having a feast to celebrate the completion of the new walls, with tables and spit roasts set out in the central square. Gary gesticulated with a full roast leg, spattering fat and sauce as he told a story to the people sharing his table. He stopped as his silver-rank hearing picked out familiar voices arguing.

"Your shields are magic," Belinda complained to Neil. "All they cost you is some mana. Every time one of my shields gets broken, I need them fixed or replaced."

"You're an adventurer," Neil said. "You can afford it."

"We're not exactly scooping up coin running around after the herb witch here," Belinda said. "Not all of us come from money, Neil."

"Herb witch?" Jory asked.

"Sorry, sweetie," Belinda said. "I'm sure what you do is very important."

"It is," Jory complained.

"Look, Neil," Belinda continued. "My point is that I use a lot of equipment sets, and since we hit silver, I've been running around with cheap garbage. I need to find someone who can supply quality work at a decent price."

"Lindy, that's why we're here," Jory said. "I've heard there's a travelling smith who makes simple but high-quality stuff."

“You also said this was a defenceless town,” Neil said. “We just spent a quarter of an hour waiting to pass the checkpoint in their giant metal wall. We could have told them we’re silver-rank adventurers.”

“You can’t just go flaunting it,” Jory said. “We’re not here to make a fuss. And don’t the new walls suggest that they do have a good metalworker here?”

“I will point out,” Belinda said, “that none of my equipment sets, varied as they are, include walls.”

“You have a big shield,” Jory said. “That’s kind of like a wall.”

“Jory?” a booming voice called out.

Jory looked ahead to where sounds of revelry came from the town square. Lamps lit up the early evening, highlighting a huge, hairy figure rushing down the street, brandishing a leg of meat like a weapon.

“Gary?”

EPILOGUE CHAPTER 2

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I'M THE BAIT IN QUESTION

AT THE ADVENTURE SOCIETY DOCK IN THE CITY OF Greenstone, Emir Bahadir's cloud palace had been replaced with a cloud ship that would dwarf an ocean liner. Emir had been preparing to leave since Jason's memorial. Humphrey, Sophie and Neil boarded via a cloud dock that led directly into the side of the ship, where one of Emir's staff directed them inside. They were taken to the owner's stateroom, which was less a room and more like three storeys of typical Emir excess.

In an office larger than most homes, Emir was sitting behind a desk under a transparent ceiling that showed off the blue desert sky. The elevating platform deposited the trio as Emir completed a meeting with the Deputy Director of the Adventure Society, Genevieve Picot. She was an elf whose appearance was uncharacteristically aged for a silver-rank essence user.

Emir stood to shake her hand and she walked away, passing Humphrey, Sophie and Neil as they departed the elevating platform and she stepped onto it. Neil and Humphrey wore diplomatic expressions, while Sophie openly glared. Genevieve had been party to the political machinations that had made Sophie into a pawn, endangered with death and worse.

"Steady," Humphrey murmured.

"Don't worry," Sophie told him. "If I go after her, it'll be a better plan than jumping her during some random encounter."

"Sophie," Humphrey admonished.

“Most people only think it through to the actual killing,” Sophie said casually as they walked across the office that was more like an ostentatious town square. “It’s planning what comes after that matters. That’s where you get caught.”

Humphrey shook his head as Neil snorted a laugh. Behind them, the staff member that escorted them up was descending with the deputy director. Emir moved forwards to greet the three. The formal office furniture dissolved into cloud-stuff before reforming into a comfortable lounge suite.

“Sit, please,” Emir invited. Despite the appearance of ordinary armchairs and couches, the engulfing plushness of their true nature was luxuriously felt as the group sat.

“The time has come to leave,” Emir said, getting straight to the point. “Jason’s memorial is behind us and the Adventure and Magic Societies are finally done pulling you in for questions about the Reaper’s astral space.”

“It’s our duty to do everything we can,” Humphrey said.

“Incredibly tedious duty,” Sophie said. “They kept asking the same things, over and over. I know an interrogation when I’m in one.”

“They weren’t interrogations,” Humphrey said.

“Just because they were too weak-willed to pull out the pliers doesn’t mean it wasn’t an interrogation,” Sophie shot back.

“Pliers?” Humphrey asked. “What kind of life choices did you make?”

“They weren’t choices, rich boy.”

“That brings us to the main topic of discussion,” Emir interceded.

“Humphrey being rich?” Neil asked.

“No,” Emir said. “Miss Wexler’s life. How much do you remember about the time before you came to Greenstone?”

“Not much more than flashes,” Sophie said. “I was barely more than a toddler when we came across. I remember the

shipwreck and being found by adventurers. Anything before that is just fragments.”

“Do you even know the name of the city you were born in?” Emir asked.

“No.”

“It was Kurdansk,” Emir told her. “In the People’s Holy Federation of Dreisil.”

Humphrey shook his head.

“People’s Holy Federation,” he muttered. “The more they try to make a nation sound free and righteous, the more tyrannical and corrupt it is.”

“You’ve been?” Neil asked.

“I travelled a lot with my mother, before I received my essences. Our airship docked there to resupply and the port master extorted the captain for so-called docking fees. I wanted to speak up, but Mother stopped me. Said that’s just the way it was, there. Bribes and graft, baked right into the civil structure of the city.”

“Have you not been to Old City?” Neil asked, Sophie nodding.

“At least the criminals in Greenstone have the decency to not pretend they’re anything else.”

“Did you not hear the Duke just made the surviving member of the Big Three crime bosses the mayor of Old City?” Neil asked.

“Adris Dorgan’s goal is legitimacy,” Humphrey said. “He needs to go straight in order to fulfil his ambitions. I don’t like it, but it will take someone like him going legitimate to get Old City into line after years of criminal rule.”

“That’s an oddly reasonable position,” Neil said. “Your mother tell you that, did she?”

“No,” Humphrey said, his gaze flickering downward. “Jason did. Well, then Mother said the same thing.”

“Jason and your mother always did think alike,” Neil said. “She was classy, while Jason was... well, Jason, but behind the curtain, I think his mind worked a lot like hers.”

“I noticed that too,” Sophie said.

“You know, Humphrey,” Neil said, “your father might be lucky Jason’s not around anymore. I think we all saw where that thing with your mum was going.”

“What?”

Humphrey puffed up with rage, his eyes going wide. Sophie reached over to place a gentle, restraining hand on his arm.

“Neil, don’t be an arse,” she said, turning to face him so Humphrey wouldn’t see her trying not to laugh. She turned to Emir, who watched leisurely. Humphrey sat glaring at Neil, who sat with a chastised expression but laughing eyes. Sophie forcibly put the conversation back on track.

“Emir,” Sophie said. “How do you know what city I’m from when even I didn’t?”

“Do you recall last week when I told you that I would like to dig into your background?”

“You’d already been doing it for six months, at that point?” Sophie guessed.

“I had, yes,” Emir admitted. “If we’re going to catch the Order of the Reaper by the tail, we can’t just keep following the trail they’re marking for us. We need to find something they didn’t put in our path and you’re the only thing we’re confident about fitting that description.”

“So, what?” Sophie asked. “You want to send me to this city and parade me around until someone tries to kill or recruit me?”

“Our plans are a little more nuanced,” Emir said. “But, essentially, yes. We intend to go fishing, Sophie, with you as the bait.”

Humphrey leaned forwards, his hostility switching from Neil to Emir. “What makes you think we’ll let you use our

team member like that?”

“Yeah,” Neil agreed. “We’ve had our fill of sketchy plans with no margin for error. They’ve cost us enough already.”

“I realise that,” Emir said, “but—”

“I’m not sure you do, Mr Bahadir,” Humphrey said. “You never lost a team member. Your adventuring stories are hilarious anecdotes about fighting monsters with ducks or accidentally kidnapping princes while robbing royal treasuries.”

“Exactly,” Neil agreed, suddenly in lockstep with Humphrey. “Our stories are about paying in blood and death so that our homes and families aren’t annihilated by some god monster’s version of a land grab.”

“Down, boys,” Sophie said. They both turned to look at her, half out of their seats. She raised her eyebrows at them and they sat back down.

“I’m the bait in question,” she told them, “so the final say is mine. Let’s at least hear the man out.”

“Oh, yeah,” Neil yelled with angry sarcasm as he sprinted down the alley. “Let’s all be human bait. That’s a great plan.”

He was sprinting alongside Humphrey through a maze of narrow alleys, dodging piles of rubbish and old crates as their feet moved rapidly across the rain-slicked cobbles.

“The choice was Sophie’s to make,” Humphrey yelled back.

“How about we get less arguing and more speed?” Sophie suggested. She was in front of them, lightly jogging backwards as she went slow to keep pace with the others. “I know you don’t have a lot of experience being chased but yelling loudly is not going to help. I suppose it’s the fault of your upbringing.”

They emerged from an alley onto a busy street, in the middle of a raucous parade. They slowed down and merged into the boisterous crowd, letting the flow take them away.

“What do you mean, upbringing?” Neil asked loudly to be heard over the parade.

“You two were brought up wealthy,” Sophie explained. “You were raised being told that you’d get everything you want by yelling loudly.”

“I believe,” Humphrey said, “that your prejudice against the well-to-do is showing, Sophie. I cannot speak for Neil, but I was raised in no such manner.”

“Well, I *can* speak for me and I wasn’t,” Neil said.

“Then why is it that rich people always end up yelling loudly about the things they want when they aren’t just given them immediately?”

“We do not!” Neil yelled, then slumped as Sophie gave him a pointed look.

“Perhaps some discretion?” Humphrey suggested. “We have not escaped yet.”

“It’s fine,” Neil said. “It’s a parade; everyone’s yelling. They’re not going to find us.”

“They found us,” Sophie said and started pushing her way back out of the crowd. Humphrey and Neil didn’t bother to look as they moved to follow.

“Was that strictly necessary?” Neil asked as he and Humphrey poured bottles of crystal wash over themselves. The yellow oil was rapidly flushed off their bodies, which were stripped down to simple pants and no shoes. It left their muscular bodies glistening wet, rather than looking like marinated slabs of meat.

“Yes,” Sophie said, her clothes still pristine. “Completely necessary.”

They were standing in a ramshackle wooden shed in the entertainment quarter of Kurdansk. Originally a warehouse district close to the Kurdan River docks, the large plots of relatively inexpensive real estate made it the most viable place for building large theatre halls. It was a heady mix of pleasure, criminality and money that made it a dangerous but alluring place where wealth and poverty collided.

Sophie blended in easily, especially given that her dark-skinned, silver-haired celestine ethnicity was common in the city. She was the one who found a way to disguise her companions, who stood out much more, by flaunting rather than hiding them.

“You did impressively well,” Humphrey told Neil. “For an elf, you have a surprisingly low centre of gravity.”

The muscular elf shot Humphrey back a venomous glare.

“What?” Humphrey asked innocently. “You want me to pretend I don’t have the might essence?”

“Yes,” Neil said. “Yes, I do. We were putting on a show.”

“And you did very well. You’re startlingly strong for a healer. And for an elf. Some manner of gift evolution?”

“Yeah.”

Humphrey turned to look at Sophie.

“Did it have to be oil wrestling?” he asked her. “I’m still not sure that being half-naked and covered in yellow grease was the best choice of disguise.”

“It worked, didn’t it?” Sophie asked. “You both looked completely different to normal. I’ll show you the recording crystal later.”

“You recorded it?” Neil asked.

“No,” Sophie said quickly. “What I did do was receive several lascivious invitations for you two.”

“Really?” Neil asked. “What kind of women?”

“It was mostly men,” Sophie said. “Women prefer more of a sleek, lean body, instead of...”

She waved her hands at the two men whose torsos resembled inverted triangles made of abs and pecs.

“...all this. I mean, it’s not bad, but you’ll find a lot of women will pick lithe over bulky. You look like a kilo of walnuts in a pair of quarter-kilo bags.”

Neil looked down at his body.

“Walnuts?” he asked, then over at Humphrey. “Humphrey, do you wax your chest?”

“No,” Humphrey said hastily, shifting his gaze. “The oil probably made the hair fall out. Do you wax yours?”

“I’m an elf,” Neil said. “We don’t have chest hair.”

“Excellent work,” Emir said. “You flushed them out.”

“What is our next move?” Humphrey asked.

Sophie, Humphrey and Neil were finally safe in Emir’s cloud ship, floating above the city. Out of the low-magic region of Greenstone, the full functionality of his cloud ship was restored. It was docked to a taller example of the many towers in Kurdansk’s busy skyport.

“Your next move is to get out of the city,” Emir said. “They made an open move and we have their tail now. Your part in this is over.”

“Good,” Neil said. “My church has sent word. Asked me to join up with Jory while they have him running around isolated towns, teaching them to make cheap potions.”

“I thought he was operating more like a lecturer,” Humphrey said. “Why do they have him out in the field?”

“It was his idea to take a direct approach,” Neil said. “The monster surge precursors are hitting these outlying communities hard and they need to be as self-reliant as they can with resources stretched thin everywhere. He’s an

important asset to the church. The Healer expects Jory's work to help a lot of people."

"Your church needs you specifically to protect him?" Humphrey asked.

"I'll bet Jory wants protection he can trust," Sophie said. "Guards are fine, but they won't fight for you the way a friend will."

Humphrey nodded.

"We'll be parting soon, then," he said. "At least for a while. Which brings us back to the question of what is next for Sophie and me."

Sophie turned to Emir. "Did you find anything out about my family here?"

"No," Emir said. His aura didn't betray the lie, but that wasn't how Sophie had learned to spot them, and his body language gave it away.

"You owe me, Bahadir," she said. "I talked my team into going along with this on the condition that you helped me track down any family I have left."

"You need to be patient, Miss Wexler," Emir said. "This is not an affair for bronze-rankers to dabble in."

"Yet, you had no compunction about staking her to a tree and waiting for predators to sniff her out," Neil said.

"Tell her what she wants to know, Mr Bahadir," Humphrey said. "Unless you want my mother to come and ask."

"I heard she reached gold rank," Emir said. "Please pass on my congratulations."

"I will," Humphrey said. "Last time I spoke with her over water link, she expressed an interest in coming to see how I was doing here. You know she never approved of this endeavour."

"Are you seriously threatening me with a single, freshly ranked-up gold-ranker?"

Humphrey didn't say anything, simply giving Emir a wicked grin that startled Sophie. She had last seen it on the face of Jason Asano, and it looked alien on the normally straightforward Humphrey. Even in her surprise, she didn't miss the subtle clenching of Emir's jaw.

"Fine," Emir said. "Just don't do anything stupid."

"What do you mean, gone?" Emir asked his acting chief of staff, Wilmont. Wilmont was an elf known for his unflagging composure.

"I did tell them that you would not like them disembarking," Wilmont said. "I sent word to you immediately, of course, but Miss Wexler was not to be deterred, despite Young Master Geller's best efforts."

"But he followed her anyway, of course," Emir said, not asking.

"Indeed, sir. Young Master Neil remains aboard, preparing for departure. He will be transferring to the church of the healer's skyship quite soon."

"At least tell me my granddaughter didn't try to follow them."

"She did," Wilmont said. "After the fact. As she is a member of the household, however, the staff felt more comfortable in forcibly restraining Miss Ketis and she remains onboard."

Ketis was Emir's granddaughter, whom Sophie was training to use her martial arts, derived from a skill book, the way Rufus had once helped Jason. Emir hoped Sophie would be a more-or-less positive role model, but that wasn't working entirely as intended.

"At least there's that," Emir said. "You should have stopped the others too, Wilmont."

“As Miss Wexler quite vociferously pointed out, Mr Bahadir, they are your guests, not your prisoners.”

“I meant stall them, not lock them up,” Emir said. “Constance would have done it.”

“Miss Constance is not here, Mr Bahadir. If I were as capable as her, then I would have already had her job instead of just filling in during her absence.”

Emir rubbed his hands over his face in frustration.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That was rude of me, Wilmont; I apologise. I just feel out of sorts without her by my side.”

“Of course, Mr Bahadir. I am certain that Mr Morse will take pains with her wellbeing.”

“Then you don’t know Cal,” Emir said. “He’s a firm believer in strength through adversity. It’s why she asked him to help her.”

Emir’s chief of staff and the object of his affections, Constance, had taken a leave of absence from Emir’s staff. She had left with Emir’s old teammate, Callum Morse, with the intent of not returning until she reached gold rank.

After the trail of the energy vampire that possessed Thadwick Mercer went cold, Rufus Remore’s parents continued the investigation while Callum returned to his usual activities. An avid monster-hunter, he was one of the few gold-rankers that obsessively worked to raise his strength with the unflinching enthusiasm of a low-ranker. He agreed to assist Constance, who had renewed her ambitions for gold rank as the world grew more dangerous. It was also a chance to introduce her to the secrets that made progressing through gold rank a different proposition to the ranks that came before.

“He best bring her back to me safe and sound,” Emir said, “or he and I will have words.”

“You and he, sir?”

“Well,” Emir amended. “Me, him and a bunch of other gold-rankers I hire. I’m not stupid enough to fight Callum alone.”

“Would you like me to dispatch people in pursuit of Young Master Humphrey and Miss Wexler?”

“No,” Emir said wearily. “I already had people waiting to follow them. They were obviously going to leave.”

“Then, if I may ask, Mr Bahadir, why not have them stopped yourself?”

“I can’t responsibly ask Sophie to let me put her in any more danger,” Emir said. “If she insists on doing it herself, though, who am I to stop her?”

“Then why the exasperation, sir?”

“Wilmont, it would just be really nice, from time to time, to be surprised by someone making a sensible decision.”

“If I may be so bold, Mr Bahadir; if what you are looking for is sensible, you may have chosen the wrong profession.”

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EPILOGUE CHAPTER 3

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THE PAST CAN WAIT

TO ALL APPEARANCES, MARTA FRIES WAS AN UNREMARKABLE resident of the city of Kurdansk. Like many of Kurdansk's celestines, she had dark skin and silver hair. Her small row house was no different to the others wedged together on the narrow street where she lived.

The plain but powerful aura-suppression bracelet on her arm hid her silver-rank aura but also impeded her aura senses, so she didn't sense the approaching bronze-rankers until they were close to her door. There was something unsettling about the celestine; a hint of familiarity put Marta ill at ease. She didn't dwell on it or hesitate, but immediately moved to her bedroom and pulled up the rug to reveal a trap door from which she took her emergency bag.

Marta pushed aside the wardrobe to reveal the removable wall panel that she herself had installed. It had gone unused for the two decades since her friend Melody had used it in the course of faking her death. Marta now used it herself, swiftly disappearing into the night. She never sensed the gold-ranker who quietly watched her emerge into the alley.

Sophie knocked again, this time hammering on the door with her fist.

"I don't think breaking this woman's door is the first impression you want to make," Humphrey told her. "I don't

think anyone is home.”

“If she knows something about my mother, I have to find out for myself.”

“I understand that,” Humphrey said, “but you can’t conjure her into being by wanting it enough. You need patience.”

She turned a glare on him and he met her gaze, unflinching.

“You’ve always been a realist, Sophie,” he told her. “A city full of hidden enemies is not the place to lose that.”

She grimaced but gave a reluctant nod.

“We’ll try again later,” Humphrey reassured her.

“You needn’t bother,” a male voice said as the door opened in front of them. The man behind it had an unexpectedly familiar face.

“Mr Morse?” Humphrey asked. “What are you doing here?”

“The resident is gone,” Callum Morse said. “She’s not coming back.”

“How do you know that?” Sophie asked.

“Because I watched her leave for good,” Cal said.

“Are you tracking her?” Sophie asked.

“I am.”

“Tell me where she is,” Sophie demanded.

“No.”

“Why not?” Humphrey asked.

“Because you lack the strength to walk that road. I will not set you on the path to getting yourselves killed.”

“You’re going to keep that from me?” Sophie asked.

“Yes, he is,” a female voice came from behind. Another familiar face was walking up the narrow street behind them. It was Constance, Emir’s hitherto-absent chief of staff. “You

only got this far because Emir asked something of you that he had no right.”

“We agreed to it,” Humphrey said. “It was our choice.”

Constance shook her head.

“Miss Wexler’s motivation is clear and understandable,” she said. “You should know better, Mr Geller. You were raised better. Why would you go along with this?”

“Because she needs it,” Humphrey said, with a glance at Sophie.

Constance waited for further explanation, but all she got from him was a flat stare. She let out a weary groan.

Emir was in the middle of a massage when his very relaxed body went very tense.

“Sir?” the masseur asked.

Emir whipped himself off the table, snatched up a robe and threw it around himself as he almost skipped out of the massage room. The moment he had been waiting for had arrived as he sensed Constance return to the cloud ship. She had reached gold rank and come home.

Emir didn’t even bother with an elevating platform. Remoulding the ship to open a hole under his feet and through the decks below, he dropped multiple levels. His robe was one of the things flapping around in his rapid descent to the docking chamber of the cloud ship.

“This is what you’ve been up to?” Constance scolded as Emir landed in a crouch. “What was the rule about wearing pants in front of the staff?”

Emir looked up with a grin, which turned to a frown. Constance’s normally shoulder-length brown hair was cropped short and her pale skin contrasted unflatteringly with the light green and brown armour she wore. What perturbed him was not her appearance but the fact that she and Callum were frog-

marching Sophie and Humphrey in through the docking port, along with the embarrassed-looking people Emir had sent to trail them.

“What exactly is happening?” Emir asked.

“Do you seriously think that you should be the one asking that?” Constance asked. Emir had been longing to hear her voice, although not in that particular tone. “Using bronze-rankers as bait?”

“We made our own choices,” Humphrey said.

“You’re bronze rank,” Constance said without breaking her gaze from Emir. “You don’t get to choose danger like that.”

Sophie deftly twisted out of the grip Constance had on her arm, turning to poke Constance in the chest.

“We chose to put our lives on the line and one of us died saving a city full of people,” Sophie said. “You want to shove us around, you’re gold rank and you can. But if you denigrate what we’ve done and what it cost us, then I will find a way to kick the crap out of you, gold-ranker or not. How’s your poison resistance?”

Callum snorted a rare laugh at Constance’s nonplussed expression while Humphrey grinned proudly. Emir did his best to mask his expression, with mixed results. Callum put a calming hand on Constance’s arm.

“They’ve faced their own trials and made real sacrifices, Connie,” he said softly. “They might be in dire need of guidance, but we still have to respect that.”

“Wait,” Emir said. “Connie?”

“That being said,” Callum continued, ignoring Emir, “respecting their experiences is not the same as letting them run off and get killed.”

“What were you thinking, Emir?” Constance asked, turning to Emir once more.

“How do you even know what’s going on?” Emir asked her. “You’ve been gone for a year.”

“You think you’re the only one tracking the Order of the Reaper?” Callum asked.

“I did, yes,” Emir said. “Everyone is looking at the Cult of the Builder now. Adventure Society, governments, everyone. Are you saying you’re running your own game? Why on your own? Why not throw in with me?”

“Because you aren’t my only loyalty, Emir,” Callum said. “I’m part of the Cult of the Reaper.”

“Since when?” Emir asked.

“Since always.”

“You never told us that.”

“I told Gabriel and Arabelle.”

“Everyone on our team but me?”

“You have a big mouth, Emir. Especially when you aren’t wearing pants.”

Callum glanced over Sophie and Humphrey.

“Your judgement isn’t always sound,” he continued, “and you need someone to keep you in check.”

“Like Connie, here?” Emir asked.

“Yes,” Callum said.

“Do you even want me back?” Constance asked Emir.

“How can you even ask that?” Emir said, his expression hurt. “I just jumped down five decks with no pants to see you.”

“We all saw,” Humphrey said. “Perhaps some clothes and a little time will give us a chance to discuss things more calmly.”

“You haven’t lost all sense, then,” Constance told Humphrey. “You realise I’m going to tell your mother about this.”

At that moment, Neil appeared via elevating platform, his possessions packed into the dimensional bag slung over his shoulder. He looked around at Emir in his robe, Sophie and

Humphrey, Constance and Callum, plus a handful of Emir's silver-rank operatives trying to avoid anyone's attention.

"Did I miss something? I missed something, didn't I? Nobody tells me anything."

"There are trails to follow, but they're dangerous for you, as you are now," Callum told Sophie. "You're too weak and your team is scattered to the wind. Reach silver rank, gather them together and I will give you what you need to take the next step in seeking out your family."

"You don't have the right to keep that knowledge from me," Sophie said.

"But I have the power," Callum said, "and there is nothing you can do about it but wait. Concentrate on growing stronger."

"Surprise," Emir said. "The guy obsessed with getting stronger suggests you go get stronger."

Sophie, Humphrey, Neil, Emir, Constance and Callum were sitting in one of the cloud ship's secondary bar lounges, Emir now wearing clothes.

"If it were your family, how would you take someone keeping it from you?" Sophie asked Callum. Emir winced, breaking his gaze from where it had been locked on Constance.

"Not the approach to take," Emir told Sophie. "You and Callum have much in common when it comes to family."

"I understand your frustration," Callum told her, seemingly unfazed. "But I also know the price of letting your emotions drive you places they should not. So I'm stopping you until you are ready. Hate me if you like."

"That woman knew my mother," Sophie said. "And you let her go."

“She needs to go,” Callum said. “You have brought attention onto her that will get her killed. She needs to disappear from more than you if she’s going to live long enough for you to get your answers.”

“I could have had them today,” Sophie said.

“No,” Callum said. “If not for Constance and myself, you and she would most likely be dead, along with Emir’s people trailing you. The gold-rankers you didn’t sense backed off because of our presence.”

“Then what do you expect us to do now?” Sophie asked. “Because I’m done playing fish on a hook and I don’t care about the stabby pricks of the Reaper.”

“I’m a little curious about them,” Humphrey said. “If you’re part of the Order of the Reaper, why are you letting us run in circles hunting for them?”

“I’m not a part of the Order of the Reaper,” Callum said. “The Cult of the Reaper venerates the principles of the Reaper. The sanctity of death.”

“Sounds like the Church of Death,” Neil said.

“We have long worked alongside the Church of Death. Our values and objectives are often aligned. The Order of the Reaper is an offshoot of the cult. They started as a faction that wanted to become more active in the world. Specifically, to accrue political power.”

“That doesn’t seem to fit what I know of the Reaper,” Humphrey said. “Admittedly, that isn’t a lot, but that shows how obvious it is.”

“Yes,” Callum agreed. “The order split from the cult, mouthing affinity to the Reaper while abandoning the principles that come with it. They became self-serving assassins until they overreached and were forced to falsify their demise. The so-called last bastion of the order, that you explored beneath Sky-Scar Lake, was part of a faction that sought to retain ties with the cult. They counselled reconciliation and were sacrificed for it.”

“How do we not know this?” Emir asked. “Jason Asano’s familiar should have had this information.”

“The shadow of the Reaper that administered the trials was a familiar from a time before the cult and the Order segregated. It was set in place when the astral space was a trial grounds for our youngest recruits, from whom our larger secrets were kept. I suspect the Order was careful in what they allowed the familiar to learn, given that he was a part of the re-emergence plan taking place even now.”

“I don’t care about any of this,” Sophie said, standing up.

“Do not go out into the city looking for answers,” Callum warned. “The only ones to be found left with the woman who disappeared. All that waits for you now is death.”

Humphrey stood up as well. “I don’t like it either.”

“But you think I should let it go?” Sophie asked him.

“I think neither Mr Morse nor this city will give you the answers you want. But there are sources of knowledge greater than either of them.”

Constance put a hand over her face and groaned.

“Must you, Mr Geller?”

“This is my team, not yours,” Humphrey told her. “You can disapprove all you like, but we get to make our own mistakes.”

Vitesse, in the nation of Estercost, was known as the city of flowers. Located in what Jason Asano would know as the French Riviera, its iconic skyline was marked by huge towers with flowering vines spilling down the exterior. Known as the garden towers, most had every third or fourth floor dedicated to gardens using water, light and plant magic to create lush refuges of peace towering over the city below. They were residences for the city’s wealthy elite—aristocrats and

adventurers—as well as headquarters for the city’s key organisations.

The Adventure Society and Magic Society both maintained entire buildings to themselves. The continental council for the Adventure Society sat in Vitesse, rather than the capital city, Cyrion. The royal family maintained a tower as a palace, with most of the family residing there.

The Remore family had no aristocratic title; the Gellers had only a title from the small provincial city of their origin, refusing all others. Neither family was begrudged their residences in some of the city’s premier towers, however. On a courtyard balcony thick with floral aromas, Danielle Geller was giving her son a disapproving look.

“I always intended for you to learn from Jason Asano,” she told him. “You may have learned some lessons I did not intend, however. I’m not sure I approve of this rebellious streak.”

“Yes, you do,” Humphrey said.

Danielle laughed, not denying it.

“Where is Miss Wexler now?” she asked.

“The temple of Knowledge,” Humphrey said.

“Good,” Danielle said, nodding her approval.

“You aren’t afraid she’ll get information that will send us into danger?”

“Knowledge does not give you the answers you want,” Danielle said. “She gives you the answers you need.”

“Now is not the time to pursue this goal,” Knowledge told Sophie. In the Vitesse temple of Knowledge’s answer room, Sophie faced the manifestation of the goddess with the same boldness Jason once had. The goddess showed Sophie a different face to what she had shown Jason, now bearing the dark skin of the Vitesse locals.

“That’s not the answer I came for,” Sophie said.

“Yet, it is the answer you have received,” Knowledge said. “The time will come when your companions are made whole. That will be the right time to seek out your past.”

“My companions can’t be made whole,” Sophie said. “You know that.”

“You would presume to tell me what I know? You are as insolent as Jason Asano, but not as adorable.”

“There’s nothing adorable about being dead.”

“It is time for you to go, Sophie Wexler. I will not set you on the path you want, but I do have one I think you will accept. The time has come for you to reunite with Clive Standish. He has found that the promises of those around him to be worth little and could use allies he can trust.”

“Clive is in trouble?”

“He is making trouble. Whose influence is responsible for that I think we both know. Seek him out, Sophie Wexler, for the past can wait better than he.”

The city of Greenstone was in the far south of the continent that, in Jason’s world, was called Africa. Compared to the low magic, largely empty south regions, the north was much more populous. The city of Rakesh, on the north coast, was the home of the Adventure Society’s continental council. It was just one part of a sprawling campus combining the largest Magic Society and Adventure Society strongholds on the continent.

Prani Ajus was a Magic Society official who had come to visit the astral magic research wing. One of the research wing’s officials, Lorelei Grantham, spotted her and moved to intercept.

“Grantham,” Prani said. “You’re an administrator, not a researcher. I have no need of you at this time. I am going to

see Mr Standish.”

“He’s caught up in his latest round of research,” Lorelei said. “You know what he’s like. This might not be the best time.”

“Grantham, are you covering for him?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Lady Ajus.”

“If you are going to lie, Grantham, do me the courtesy of making it vaguely plausible. Mr Standish hasn’t placed one of his insistent requests for fieldwork in more than a month.”

“Perhaps he has come to accept that they will be rejected,” Lorelei suggested.

“That’s what worries me,” Prani said. “I will not permit him to go off on some aimless, ill-conceived mission of vengeance over some unimportant dead man.”

“We promised him he would have the chance to take the fight to the Builder.”

“Which he will,” Prani said. “Vicariously. That man has an extraordinary mind and I will not allow some cultist to put a hammer through it. Now, enough delays. Take me to Standish.”

Lorelei reluctantly led Prani through the building to where Clive was supposed to be working. Opening the door to his workshop, she was surprised to find that he was. Behind a glass wall was a ritual room where Clive was standing in the middle of an elaborate ritual circle. With him in the centre of the circle was a metal arch, engraved with runes.

The glass wall was designed to restrict any magic that might interfere with the rituals inside while allowing sound to pass through easily.

“Mr Standish,” Prani said. “I would like a report on your current activity.”

Clive turned from where he was examining the arch to look back through the glass.

“Oh, Lady Ajus. Hello, Lorelei.”

“Mr Standish,” Prani repeated. “What are you doing?”

“What I was told to do,” Clive said. “I’m unlocking the secrets of the astral magic the Builder cult uses. This portal arch, for example, is part of a transportation network the cultists and their Church of Purity allies use to move about without drawing attention from the many people hunting them down.”

“Alleged allies,” Prani corrected.

“Of course,” Clive said with an insincere smile.

“And how are you progressing?” Prani asked.

“Well,” Clive said, “why don’t we find out?”

He pointed a hand at the arch and it lit up with rainbow energy. Prani yelled as Clive stepped through immediately. She slapped her hand against the glass, which shattered. She dashed forwards with silver-rank speed as the portal went dormant again in her face. She wheeled on Lorelei.

“Open it back up!” Prani demanded.

“I don’t know how,” Lorelei said. “I’m an administrator, not a researcher.”

“We’re in the astral magic research department,” Prani said. “Find someone who is.”

EPILOGUE CHAPTER 4

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DRAGON LADY

BELINDA FOLLOWED THE SIGNAL OF HER MAGICAL DEVICE INTO a dusty desert gulch, a few dozen kilometres south of Rakesh. She roamed around, looking for the source of the signal. She and Clive had only been able to get an approximate location from the Magic Society campus, and it was taking days to narrow it down.

“Where is the stupid thing?” she muttered, part of an ongoing stream of disgruntled commentary. “Roaming the whole damn desert. Sand in places that sand is not supposed to be.”

The heat was not harmful to her bronze-rank body, but harmless was not the same as pleasant. After much searching, she found an old mine tunnel, filled with rocks and overgrown with scrubby bushes to disguise it. She used one of her powers, counterfeit combatant, which enhanced her strength and allowed her to toss out the large rocks.

She tossed out a light stone that floated over her head and followed the tunnel into the yellow rock face. It led to a chamber that she doubted was ever part of the mine. It was too large and the floor was worked smoother than any non-magical tool could manage. In the middle of the room, a portal arch was set into the floor.

Taking out some chalk, she started drawing a ritual circle.

The Magic Society campus in Rakesh had magic in place to prevent portals from operating outside of certain designated zones. It was when Clive discovered that he was barred from those zones that he discovered exactly how 'insistent' the Magic Society was about his remaining on campus and focused on the tasks they fed him.

It seemed mild at first, as if they simply wanted him to be working as hard as possible. His repeated requests to conduct fieldwork were denied and his escalating attempts to leave the campus revealed that he was a prisoner in all but name. It felt like a stark betrayal from an organisation to which he had given half of his life, even if he was no longer an association official.

Clive had always assumed that the Magic Society in Greenstone was an outlier in its corruption, courtesy of the man at the top. Now it seemed that the stain appeared in many places and many flavours. In Rakesh, where society was divided into castes, they apparently saw little problem with holding someone they felt lowly enough against his will.

Since he was barred from any area his portal power would work, Clive was forced to make other arrangements. No one suspected that the portal network that the Builder cult used operated on such different principles to an essence user's portal that it could slip through the campus defences. The defence magic impeded the cult portal network, but with the right boosting rituals at both ends of a portal, a passage could be opened. Clive recorded this in his personal notes but left it out of the ones he made for the Magic Society.

Clive's assistant, Belinda, was not subject to the same restrictions as Clive. On the contrary, she was responsible for taking care of anything Clive needed done off-campus. She was not watched as carefully as Clive; the caste system that justified holding Clive dismissed her as unimportant. They did try to check any materials she brought in or took out, but she had a personal storage space. Even the Magic Society couldn't peek into that without killing her first.

It took the better part of two months for Clive and Belinda to devise and execute their plan, from making certain he

understood the portal functionality, to building a device that could track down another portal to use as a destination. The biggest risk factor was the time between when Belinda set out to find the destination portal arch and when they activated it. If anyone looked into why she hadn't returned to the campus for however long it took, the whole plan could have come crumbling down. In the end, Clive had been forced to make a move he did not want to make.

Lorelei Grantham was the Vice-Dean of the astral magic research department, as well as the person who had recruited Clive out of Greenstone. Clive was fairly certain that the misrepresentation of what he would be walking into was perpetrated on her as well as him. Believing the lies herself made her pitch more authentic. Seemingly remorseful, she had paid close attention to Clive in the subsequent months, frequently shielding him from the attentions of Lady Ajus and other officials interested in the research they pushed on him.

Clive took a large risk by trusting Lorelei to cover for Belinda, especially since he told her very little of what he was up to. Belinda had repeatedly warned him against trusting anyone, suggesting that Lorelei had been expertly playing him from the start. He wasn't entirely sure that trusting her was the right move right up until he escaped through the portal, right in the face of Lady Ajus.

Immediately after he stepped out of the portal, Clive and Belinda eliminated the ritual circle around it to prevent anyone from following him through.

“We should leave immediately,” Clive said as they worked to destroy the ritual circle, chiselling damage into the floor carvings. “There's a chance that someone there could devise a means to reopen the portal from the other end.”

“Then why did you send me out to a hole in the side of a desiccated nowhere?” Belinda complained. “I have sand and dust in places where neither are welcome.”

“We had to make sure the arch was both abandoned and intact, for one,” Clive said. “Appearing in the middle of a Builder cult stronghold would not be much of an escape. All I could tell from the other end was that this portal hadn’t been activated in years. It could have been damaged or obstructed.”

“Which it was,” Belinda admitted. “You think they can follow us without the ritual circle on this end?”

“I postulated a couple of ways it could be done before settling on this way,” Clive said. “I didn’t include them in my public notes, but I’m far from the only good astral magic researcher they have. I rejected those methods because there’s a solid chance they would extend the transmission time of the portal.”

“Meaning that after you went in, it would take longer before spitting you back out?”

“Possibly,” Clive said. “Another possibility is that I would have emerged from the destination arch over the course of several minutes.”

“Does that mean what I think it means?”

“If you think it means my body slowly oozing out of the portal like slime being pushed through a cheese grater, then yes.”

“I think avoiding that was a good choice,” she concluded.

“Agreed,” Clive said.

They finished up and Belinda led him out through the mining tunnel. Belinda tossed out a floating glow stone while the tall Clive was forced to periodically duck his head under wooden support beams.

“I hope Lorel— Miss Grantham doesn’t get in too much trouble,” Clive said.

“She’s probably in charge of trying to catch you,” Belinda said. “You and Humphrey are way too trusting of authority figures. You don’t have to be as suspicious as Sophie, but maybe take after Jason a little.”

“Actually, Miss Grantham helped me cover for your absence,” Clive said.

Belinda stopped moving down the tunnel.

“What?” Clive asked, also stopping.

“What did I tell you right before I left?” Belinda asked him.

“To make sure I go to the right portal and don’t land in a cultist camp.”

Belinda gave him a flat look.

“Not to trust Miss Grantham,” Clive sullenly admitted.

“And what did you do?” Belinda continued the interrogation.

“You were gone for nine days. That wasn’t going to go unnoticed.”

“You sent me to a portal hidden in an abandoned mine, lost in the middle of nowhere.”

“We needed one the cult and the Church of Purity wasn’t using,” Clive said. “Every other portal arch in range was in active use. The point is that Lorelei covered for us. She even stalled Lady Ajus while I was activating the portal, all without ever asking what I was up to.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Belinda rubbed her chin thoughtfully as she stared at Clive.

“I guess she wasn’t faking it,” she mused.

“Faking what?”

“The way she...”

Belinda looked at Clive, seeing genuine confusion in his face.

“You didn’t notice?”

“Notice what?” Clive asked.

“The way she looked at you.”

“What about the way she looked at me?”

Belinda gave him an incredulous look.

“Oh, that poor girl.”

The Pallimustus equivalent of the Mediterranean Sea was called the Gramid Passage. Due to the absence of an Arabian Peninsula, Israel and Palestine, it directly connected what Jason knew as the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. Danielle teleported Humphrey and Sophie across the Gramid Passage from Vitesse to Rakesh.

“We shouldn’t keep Carlivexistrix waiting,” Danielle said. “She’s showing us a great courtesy, coming to meet us like this.”

“Clive would go mad seeing her,” Sophie said.

“She’s not a festival attraction,” Danielle admonished. “Clive will have to live with the disappointment.”

Humphrey produced floating platforms for the trio. They were flat metal disks, only just large enough to stand on. It was a common sight to see essence users riding them about, as Rakesh had a sufficient level of magic to support their operation. In low-magic Greenstone, only people like Clive and Belinda, who possessed the appropriate essence ability, could use such devices.

Humphrey had been using them since he was a child, having travelled widely with his mother. Sophie had learned to use them during their holiday in the city of Pranay, after their first excursion in the astral space that would later claim Jason’s life. Seeing her stare at the platform in her hands, Humphrey realised her thoughts and placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She reached up to cover it with her own in a gesture of thanks, gifting him one of her rare smiles.

She shook off the malaise and they got moving. The buildings of Rakesh were desert stone, plastered and painted in colourful murals. It reminded her of the Cavendish district in Greenstone that was similarly styled, especially what the neighbourhood people called the Rainbow Road. Unlike the mishmash of colours in Cavendish, the murals of Rakesh were both far more expansive and far more coordinated. Travelling through the streets was a soothing passage as each district's dominant colours graduated into the next.

Activity on the streets was busy but quiet, the local culture valuing calm decorum. It was a stark contrast to the raucousness of Greenstone's Old City where Sophie grew up. Most people were on foot or using animal-drawn carriages, their normal auras marking them as the teeming citizenry of the populous city. Essence users used floating platforms, either standing ones like the trio rode on or more elaborate models. Some were simple seats on a slightly larger platform, while others were ostentatious floating palanquins.

"Sophie, be sure to manage your behaviour in this city," Danielle warned as they glided along the streets on their float platforms. "Civic order is given much more precedence here than in most places. The culture is based around strict social hierarchies and respect for authority. Divergence from that is strictly punished, both socially and legally. There are allowances made for visitors, but visitors find themselves swiftly positioned in the hierarchy by their background and behaviour."

"We're only bronze-rank adventurers," Humphrey warned her. "That means a lot less here than in Greenstone. Mother is gold rank and has already accrued some prestige here, so defer to her."

"The Geller name is also of value here," Danielle said. "It will help us, but we must also be careful not to tarnish it."

Danielle led them to a large area surrounded by a park of pleasant gardens and long, winding pools. Many people walked along or floated over the pathways, the park serving as a major junction for city travel. Dominating the park at the centre was a vast building with multiple wings. It was not

painted but made of a rich white stone, topped by golden domes.

Sophie and Humphrey followed Danielle as she made for one of the wings, approaching a pair of huge double doors, already wide open. Inside was a large atrium filled with plants that sat in pots, grew from wall alcoves and even hung from the high ceiling, either growing out directly or sitting in hanging pots. Doors led off in multiple directions and a pair of sweeping staircases curved up to the left and right.

“What is this place?” Sophie asked, looking around. There were no people at all inside.

“I told you that this city is fixated on hierarchy,” Danielle said. “This building is for those to whom placement in a hierarchy would be an insult. Diamond-rankers, mostly, but not exclusively.”

A door opened and a woman came out, with a toddler waddling alongside, holding her hand. She had the ageless beauty of the magically preserved, with milk chocolate skin typical for the local human population. The toddler let out a yelp, pulled his hand free and started running across the floor, wrapping his arms around Humphrey’s leg in a hug.

“Biscuit!” the toddler yelled.

“I haven’t seen you in months and that’s all you have to say?”

“Biscuit, please!”

Humphrey shook his head.

“Did you enjoy spending time with your mother?” Humphrey asked.

The toddler transformed into a small bird and flapped up onto Humphrey’s head, where he started chirping.

“You can’t say this about your mother!” Humphrey scolded, throwing an apologetic look at Stash’s mother, who was now standing next to Danielle and looking on in amusement. There was more chirping from Stash.

“My mother doesn’t make biscuits either,” Humphrey said, “but you don’t see me calling her that.”

“Can you understand his chirping?” Sophie asked.

“Unfortunately,” Humphrey said. “The advantages of his being a bonded familiar instead of summoned.”

Stash started chirping loudly.

“I don’t have any biscuits,” Humphrey said.

After some more angry chirping, the bird flew off Humphrey’s head, transformed into a little grey puppy in mid-air and landed in Sophie’s arms. She took a biscuit from her jacket pocket and slipped it to him, which he happily munched on.

“You’re going to spoil him,” Humphrey told her.

“Sophie is the best!” the puppy said, and Humphrey narrowed his eyes at it.

“Since when can you use people talk in animal form?” Humphrey asked.

“I can’t!” Stash insisted, spilling crumbs. “Er... woof?”

Humphrey ran a hand over his face and turned to Stash’s mother.

“Carlivexistrix, I apologise,” he said. “I’m not doing the best job of helping your little boy grow up.”

“Oh, that’s just how children are at that age,” Stash’s mother said. “You should have seen your mother, here, the first time your grandmother showed her off to me. An absolute terror, she was. Also, please call me Carli.”

EPILOGUE CHAPTER 5

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WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG

“WELL?” LADY PRANI AJUS DEMANDED AS SHE STORMED INTO the large research room in the astral magic research department. Lorelei Grantham was there, along with a half dozen researchers, poring over the notes left behind by Clive.

“We found something that Cli... that Standish left behind,” Lorelei said. “He obviously wanted it to be found. It’s a means to track portal network activity. It only gives vague locations, but we can use it to at least partially monitor Builder cult travel. This could be a critical asset against the Builder cult.”

“Does it cover the theory behind the operation of the portal network?” Prani asked.

“No,” Lorelei said. “It’s a practical guide to using it to track others using it, though. He left us a valuable asset for—”

“Irrelevant,” Prani said. “There are people all over the world looking for ways to fight the Builder cult. What matters is unravelling the secrets behind the advanced magic they use for our own use. While the other branches waste time fighting a war that will be won sooner or later, we’ll be pushing ourselves ahead for once the war is done.”

Lorelei looked at Prani with disdain.

“Do you have a problem, Vice-Dean Grantham?” Prani asked.

Lorelei choked back the bile-filled response struggling to escape.

“No, ma’am.”

“Carli was much more approachable than I expected,” Sophie said. “That’s not what I expected from a dragon at all.”

“Everybody needs friends they can be relaxed with,” Danielle said. “My family have been companions to Carlivexistrix since we first came to Greenstone. Her last child is still running around with my diamond-rank ancestor somewhere, as far as I know.”

They were standing in the precisely cultivated gardens of the Magic Society campus, waiting for Clive and Belinda. Thus far, they had the distinct impression of being given the run-around. Instead of Sophie and Humphrey’s team members, what they got was a stern-looking Magic Society official. Humphrey and Sophie moved to meet her, while Danielle remained where she was, casually examining a water feature.

“You’re Standish’s team members?” the official asked. “I am Lady Prani Ajus.”

She spoke to Sophie and Humphrey, but her gaze lingered uneasily on Danielle.

“Also Belinda’s team members,” Sophie added.

“Why is it that no one will so much as tell us where they are, let alone lead us to them?” Humphrey asked.

“The situation is complicated,” Prani said, earning a derisive snort from Sophie.

“The situation is shady as shi—”

“Sophie!” Humphrey barked, cutting her off. “I apologise, Lady Ajus, but I hope you can take it as an expression of our frustration.”

“I’m afraid that Mr Standish is currently engaged in a delicate matter,” Prani said. “He won’t be available for contact for some time.”

“Porky pies!” puppy Stash yelled out. “Stick it up your bum, lady.”

“Stash!” Humphrey scolded. “Who taught you to talk like that?”

“Telling people to bugger off is kind of my thing,” Stash said proudly. Humphrey and Sophie went stiff at the reminder of their lost companion.

“Lady Ajus, I apologise,” Humphrey said after an awkward moment. “We will take our leave.”

Prani’s expression showed exactly what she thought of the group’s lack of decorum, but again her gaze glanced over Danielle and she said nothing, turning and walking away without another word.

“What do you two think you’re doing?” Humphrey hissed at Sophie and Stash as they walked back towards Danielle. “What did my mother tell you about decorum?”

“That woman just lied to our faces.”

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “And how effective do you think your approach was in helping us find Clive? We’ll probably need to leverage Mother’s influence, which will not be made easier when the people she contacts hear about our behaviour.”

“You mean my behaviour,” Sophie said.

“No, I mean our behaviour,” Humphrey told her. “We’re a team, Sophie. We stand and fall together.”

They reached Danielle, who gave them a casual look.

“You will need to learn to control your impulses better,” she told Sophie.

“No, I don’t,” Sophie said. “I need to get powerful enough that when some woman tries to hide my friends from me, I can hold her upside down and shake her until she talks without people getting all whiny about it.”

Humphrey very carefully didn’t smile. His blank expression didn’t fool his mother, who gave him a weary, disapproving head shake.

“Power,” Danielle said to Sophie, “is certainly an intrinsic part of being an adventurer. As you rise through the ranks,

however, you will find that so is diplomacy. This is why you're still only a one-star adventurer."

"What do we do now?" Humphrey asked. "Head for the local Geller family and have them apply some pressure?"

"I think we should hear out the priest first," Danielle said.

"Priest?" Humphrey asked.

"Behind us," Sophie said.

Humphrey turned and spotted a cleric in Church of Knowledge regalia walking towards them.

"Good day, sir priest," Humphrey greeted. "I am—"

"He knows who we are, Humphrey," Sophie cut him off. "Church of Knowledge, remember?"

"Miss Wexler is correct," the priest said, taking a small tube from within his robe and holding it out for Humphrey to take. "My goddess simply asked that I deliver this."

"What is it?" Humphrey asked.

"The current location of Clive Standish and Belinda Callahan."

The priest bowed and retreated without saying any more.

"What was that about?" Sophie asked as they watched the man turn and hurry away.

"If Knowledge seeks you out," Danielle said, "it's because she knows where you need to be."

Humphrey opened the tube and pulled out a map.

"Somewhere south of here," he said, looking it over.

"Well, good luck," Danielle said. "I'm going to teleport back to Vitesse."

"You're not helping?" Humphrey asked.

"There's only so much time I'm willing to spend coddling my son. You can teleport yourself around just fine, so I'm going home. I have my own affairs to take care of."

Humphrey looked down at the map in his hands.

“This is the middle of nowhere. I can’t teleport there.”

“Neither can I,” Danielle said. “You think I’ve been to every random patch of wilderness and can just teleport wherever?”

“Kind of, yeah,” Sophie said as Humphrey nodded his agreement.

Danielle shook her head in exasperation.

“Ask Carlivexistrix to take you,” Danielle told them. “Her territory is to the south and she’ll be leaving today.”

Humphrey’s eyes went wide.

“Riding a dragon?”

Humphrey threw out his arms and let out a whooping noise.

“You’re going to fall off,” Sophie yelled so he could hear her over the rushing wind as the dragon underneath them rocketed through the air.

Carli’s true form was that of a vast and majestic dragon, whose scales were not just rainbow colours but shimmered and changed in a magnificent display of beauty. Humphrey and Sophie sat side by side on her broad back without any harness, just an oddly grippy blanket Carli had provided them.

“Are you really going to act like this isn’t amazing?” Humphrey yelled.

“It’s just flying, Humphrey.”

He looked at her with a disbelieving expression.

“No one is that jaded,” he told her. “You won’t break if you admit to having some fun, you know.”

He gestured around them at the vast desert panorama expanding in every direction below, with white sand, yellow stone and the winding line of blue and green that marked the river and the narrow strip of fertility it brought.

“It’s alright to admit to enjoying something,” he told her. “It won’t stop people from thinking you’re very tough.”

Underneath them, Carli’s body jerked, leaving Sophie pressed up against a mortified Humphrey.

“Sorry,” Carli’s rumbling dragon voice cut through the wind. “Air pocket.”

“I don’t see how you aren’t angrier,” Belinda said. “They were holding you prisoner.”

She and Clive were riding a skiff through a desert river canyon that towered over their heads. It was magically propelled but not especially fast. Clive had chosen it at the small village they bought it from because the low magic profile made it harder to track if they were being followed.

“From their cultural perspective,” Clive said, “they were acting within appropriate boundaries.”

“So, you think it’s fine?”

“They lied to me, lured us into their territory and kidnapped me,” Clive said. “Of course that’s not acceptable, which is why I escaped. I won’t say I’m not disappointed in the Magic Society, but we can’t blame the whole organisation for the actions of a few.”

“That’s crap,” Belinda said. “The fact that you even think like that is how it keeps happening. After Greenstone and Rakesh, have you ever been to a Magic Society branch that wasn’t shady as shi... what is that?”

Belinda pointed at two figures moving through the air above the canyon. They were both mostly human-shaped, although one had huge wings. She and Clive extended their senses and then both broke out in grins.

“What are they doing here?” Clive asked. “How did they even find us?”

Sophie and Humphrey glided down through the canyon, Humphrey with his wings and Sophie riding the air. She alighted onto the skiff with no more impact than a falling leaf while Humphrey's landing almost tipped Clive over the side.

"What was that?" Sophie demanded after Belinda had righted the boat and Clive had recovered.

"It wasn't my best landing," Humphrey sheepishly admitted. "I'm more used to dropping down to attack things."

"Like Clive," Sophie said.

"I was not attacking Clive."

"It looked like you were attacking Clive."

"I wasn't attacking Clive!"

Clive and Belinda shared a glance as they watched the pair. With the skiff stabilised, Belinda stood up and snatched Sophie into a warmly returned hug. The last few months was the longest time the pair had been separated since they were children.

"We'll lodge protests with the Adventure Society and Magic Society branches when we reach another city," Clive said. "I'm not going back to Rakesh any time soon."

"You should," Sophie said. "We could burn down that Ajus woman's house."

"I'm in," Belinda said. "It's probably made of stone, but there's magic. We'll figure it out."

"No one is burning down anyone's house," Humphrey said.

They were in the courtyard of a tavern at a riverside town, deciding on their next move.

"Maybe we could go find Jory," Sophie said. "Sounds like he could use some help. Neil's probably with him already."

“Jory?” Belinda asked, sitting up straight in her chair. “He told me he was going to be giving out lectures, not fighting. He should have let me know.”

“When was the last time you got a letter from him?” Clive asked. “It’s possible Lady Ajus was intercepting our mail.”

“I think we should revisit the burning her house down plan,” Belinda said. “We should take a vote.”

“We keep following the river to the border city of Oleyu,” Clive said. “Until we get there, we’re still in the Rakesh Magic Society branch’s area of influence.”

“There will be a temple of the Healer there,” Humphrey said. “We can find out more about Jory’s situation from them.”

The city of Oleyu was unremarkable. It wasn’t as big and important as Rakesh or Vitesse, or unusual like Greenstone. It was a pleasant, prosperous, and moderately sized city built on river trade, with a mid-range level of magic.

Clive, flanked by Sophie and Humphrey, was in the Magic Society building lodging a protest over his treatment by the Rakesh branch. He wasn’t optimistic about results; the Rakesh branch was one of the most powerful on the continent. Any official with authority stationed there had power and connections, so any consequences they faced would come from the Adventure Society, rather than other Magic Society branches.

The Adventure Society didn’t take kindly to its members being exploited, but for a bronze-ranker like Clive, in a big city like Rakesh, it would take time before his complaint was given attention. As the monster surge precursor signs grew worse and the Builder cult remained a threat, inter-organisational conflict was a low priority.

Belinda, meanwhile, was contacting Jory through a water link chamber. Communicating through watery clones was the most accessible form of long-distance communication and a

major use for the magical stone that Greenstone exported. The green stone of the chamber Belinda was led into was a reminder of home.

She stood on a small platform in front of a water pool and waited. It took a few minutes before the water flowed up into the shape of a person. The water took on colour until a somewhat wobbly replica of Jory stood before her, the blank expression turning into a grin as the connection was formed.

“Lindy!”

She smiled at him, about to answer, but he started babbling.

“I was so relieved when I heard you were alright. After you didn’t respond to my last letter, I tried contacting you, but the Magic Society said that you were on some job with Clive and couldn’t be contacted. I kept trying to get in touch, but they stopped listening to me altogether. I was about to try contacting Emir Bahadir to see if he could help, but—”

“You do realise this chamber lets both of us talk?” she interrupted.

Jory let out a sheepish laugh.

After regrouping in the private dining room of a high-end tavern, Belinda explained Jory’s situation to the others.

“Jory isn’t doing anything dangerous,” she said. “He’ll just be in some isolated rural areas where his guards will need to handle monsters they come across. The areas are all low magic, so he should be fine. Mostly bronze- and silver-rank monsters.”

“That might not be the case if these monster surge precursors keep getting worse,” Humphrey said. “Joining him might not be a bad idea.”

“I’m not against it,” Belinda said, “but I think it would be better off with only me joining Jory and Neil.”

“We just met up,” Sophie said. “You want to run off again straight away?”

“You’ll get bored senseless playing guard duty, Soph, and you know it’s good that you haven’t had many chances in life to get bored. You know what happens.”

“You’re blowing things out of proportion,” Sophie said.

“Am I? Remember Charles and the moss cat?”

“How was I meant to know it wouldn’t grow back?” Sophie asked.

“It was growing off of a cat, Soph. It very obviously wasn’t a real tomato.”

“It wasn’t a real cat!”

“I believe Belinda’s point,” Clive said, “is that she thinks you’ll do better working with me.”

“On what?” Humphrey asked.

“I’ve been working on something that might help us catch the Builder cult by the tail,” Clive said. “I’ve managed to tap into the portal network that the Builder cult has been using to move around.”

“That’s amazing,” Humphrey said. “That will be a huge weapon against the Builder.”

“If I can use the information the way I think I can,” Clive said. “Every request I made to do reconnaissance and field testing was denied. I eventually realised that the Rakesh Magic Society wasn’t interested in the fight against the Builder. All they want is access to the cult’s advanced astral magic, which is what they really recruited me for.”

“The Adventure Society will take a very different view,” Humphrey said.

“Yes,” Clive agreed, “but after Rakesh, I’m not willing to take that on faith. They might dismiss me as just some bronze-ranker from a provincial city. I want to walk into the Magic Society with everything on a plate, so they can’t push it aside.”

“Will we get to kick the crap out of some cultists?” Sophie asked.

“She means will we be forced to fight any cultists,” Humphrey corrected.

“If everything goes right, then no,” Clive said. “And what could possibly go wrong?”

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EPILOGUE CHAPTER 6

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KIND OF HIS THING

CLIVE DROVE THE FLYING, OPEN-TOP CARRIAGE THROUGH THE skies of Vitesse, docking halfway up one of the garden towers covered in flowers and greenery. He disembarked onto a balcony, along with Humphrey and Sophie, where they were met by an Adventure Society attendant.

“Young Master Geller, Mr Standish, Miss Wexler,” he greeted. “Welcome back to the city, and congratulations on reaching silver rank.”

“Thank you, Ernest,” Clive said, handing over the control crystal for the carriage. “Do you know where we’re meant to go?”

“I believe Mr Cotezee is waiting for you.”

“Thank you, Ernest.”

The trio made their way through the Adventure Society building to Miles Cotezee’s office. He was a senior administrator, his silver rank coming entirely from cores. His paper, knowledge, rune and scribe essence combination was more suited to battling bureaucracy than monsters. They found the man in his office behind a desk piled high with papers in a series of trays. He looked up as they entered, his sudden grin looking especially manic on his frazzled expression.

“Clive! And friends, obviously. How did we do?”

Miles stumbled out of his chair and hurried around the table as Clive gave him a wary look. The man looked like he was ready to snap if he got bad news.

“Success,” Clive said. “You can set up a presentation.”

“Already did,” Miles said. “It’s in...”

He fished a watch from his pocket to check the time.

“...a little over three hours. You should take some time to have some lunch and relax beforehand.”

“You might want to join us,” Sophie suggested. “You look like you could use a break.”

Miles let out a mad cackle.

“Break? That’s a precious dream. Just be back here in two and a half hours. Oh, and wear your guild pins. It’ll lend a little authority to what you have to say.”

“What do we need more authority for?” Sophie asked. “Clive cracked the cult’s portal network; how much more respect does he need to earn before people listen to him?”

“However you look at it, you’re freshly minted silver-rankers,” Miles said. “I love you kids, I really do, but you’re not in Greenstone anymore. If you want people to listen to you in this town, power is king. If you don’t get it from your rank, get it from your name, your guild or wherever you can. Preferably, all of them.”

Miles frowned, remembering something.

“Where’s your familiar?” he asked Humphrey.

Humphrey held open his jacket to reveal the head and paws of a mouse sticking out of the lining pocket.

“G’day, bloke,” the mouse said.

Humphrey shook his head and closed his jacket. The trio left Miles’ office and made their way to one of the tower’s many open balconies. Magical energy emerged from the rune tattoo on Clive’s chest, passed through the cloth of his robe and coalesced into a tortoise the size of a sport utility vehicle, floating in the air beside the balcony. The tortoise’s gently curved shell was covered in brightly glowing runes in a cornucopia of colours.

This was Clive's rune tortoise familiar, Onslow. The trio stepped off the balcony and onto his shell, at which point the familiar descended through the air. They alighted in a public park where they hopped down from Onslow's back. Clive fed him a lettuce leaf while scratching the back of his head.

Clive was about to return Onslow to the tattoo when he spotted some children pointing. The rune tortoise was a non-threatening figure, despite its size, and covered in colourful, glowing runes that made him popular with children. Humphrey and Sophie shared a knowing look.

"We'll get you something to eat and come back," Sophie told Clive, patting him on the shoulder.

When they returned with a basket of sandwiches and drinks, Sophie and Humphrey found a gaggle of children riding Onslow around as he slowly floated around the park, just above the ground. Their parents were all gathered around Clive. In these situations, Sophie and Humphrey used to play a game where they guessed which ones were single mothers based on their body language, but it had become far too easy to tell. Sophie pulled out a recording crystal and tossed it into the air, where it floated over her head.

"What are you doing?" Humphrey asked.

"I thought Lorelei might like to see this," Sophie said innocently.

"You are just trouble, head to toe," Humphrey told her.

Eventually, Clive noticed them and dismissed Onslow, the families going on their way. The trio sat on a blanket and enjoyed lunch, although they still had time to spare when they were done. They decided to walk a roundabout path back to the Adventure Society tower rather than fly. Teleporting into the tower wasn't possible.

On their way back, they saw a priest in full regalia sprinting down the street like monsters were chasing him. Sophie and Clive looked around and saw that no one seemed to be paying him any attention.

"Does that guy need help?" Clive asked.

“No,” Humphrey said. “He’s a priest of Lust. I bet there’s a...”

He trailed off as a priestess, also in elaborate robes, came running around a corner in pursuit of the priest.

“Come back!” she yelled after him. “I’ll help you with your ritual!”

“BEGONE, WOMAN!” the priest yelled back over his shoulder.

“Is that...?” Clive asked.

“A priestess of Fertility, yes,” Humphrey confirmed.

“This is a fun city,” Sophie said.

Riding one of the elevating platforms up through the tower, Sophie, Humphrey and Clive took out their guild pins, affixing them to their clothes. Each one depicted violet flames in the shape of a flower. The shimmer of the magical material from which they were made gave the impression of dancing purple fire.

The building seemed oddly busy, even for the Adventure Society. As they made their way to Miles’ office, they saw people rushing frenetically through the halls. In his office, Miles was somehow even more agitated than he had been just hours before. He was standing over his desk running his hands through his hair as he looked at the papers in front of him like they’d slept with his wife. As the trio came in, he looked up at them, wild-eyed.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“Is there a problem with the presentation?” Clive followed up.

“Presentation’s cancelled,” Miles said.

“Cancelled?” Humphrey asked. “We’ve been scouting out that dam for two months. Clive finally figured out what—”

“Doesn’t matter right now,” Miles said, moving around the table to close the door. “Something big is going on. I’m not sure what exactly, but rumour is that the monster surge is finally about to start.”

“And these rumours spread since we got here three hours ago?” Sophie asked.

“The high-ups are keeping their cards close right now, but yeah,” Miles said. “From what I’ve heard, there’s some undisclosed source of information that says the surge is going to begin within the next few months.”

“People have been saying that for years now,” Sophie said.

“Yet none of those people triggered what’s going on now,” Miles said. “The Adventure Society has had the Magic Society cancel every booking on the water link chambers and all but taken them over. Almost all activities are being cancelled or rescheduled. Orders are going out everywhere, including for you three.”

“The Adventure Society doesn’t give orders,” Sophie said. “It gives contracts.”

“The society is going into monster surge rules, Miss Wexler. Try turning down a directly issued contract today and see where that gets you.”

“What’s the contract?” Humphrey asked.

“All three of you need to travel to some small town on the far side of nowhere,” Miles told them, turning to search through the unruly papers covering his desk.

“And then what?” Sophie asked.

“No idea,” Miles said. “The contract just says to go there. All three of you. Specifically you. That’s the entire directive.”

He found what he was looking for, handing them a sheet of paper each with what little details there were.

“This is a nothing contract,” Sophie says. “It just says head off to some little village.”

“I don’t know any more than you do,” Miles said, “except for one thing. This contract didn’t come down through normal channels. It came down from on high, and I mean proper high. The kind of people your mother couldn’t get in to see, Mr Geller. People who shouldn’t even know who any of you are. So, I strongly recommend you take the contract and do exactly what it says without making a fuss.”

“Why is everyone looking at me?” Sophie asked.

“What about the dam project?” Clive asked. “If I gave someone else the details, maybe they could take over.”

“Take over?” Sophie said, wheeling on Clive. “After all the work we put in? This is your win, Clive.”

“As long as the work gets done,” Humphrey said, “it doesn’t matter who does it.”

“Yes, it does,” Miles said. “Miss Wexler is quite right to be concerned. Reputation is everything in this town. I know you’re very enthused about the civic responsibility of adventurers, Mr Geller, but there’s only so much good you can do if no one takes you seriously. If you want to fight the good fight, and I know you do, then you need to step out of your mother’s shadow and let people know you’re a man to reckon with in your own right.”

“Which is exactly what I meant,” Sophie said. “Political something something. Also, I’m not letting some random person take all the credit.”

“Tell us about this village they’re sending us to,” Clive said. “What makes it special?”

“No idea,” Miles said. “My very strong suggestion is to go there and find out. There has to be something going on. Oh, and someone will be going with you. He’s being portalled in as we speak.”

A small town on the far side of nowhere was having a celebration feast inside their new, reinforced walls. As evening

fell, a trio of visitors arrived in search of a blacksmith. Jory, Belinda and Neil were startled to discover that the blacksmith was someone they knew.

They hadn't seen Gary in two years, since Jason's memorial. The previously crestfallen leonid had regained his boisterousness, gathering all three of them into a bone-crushing hug before dragging them all off to the feast.

"What are you even doing here?" Gary mumbled through a mouthful of roasted meat. He had bitten it from a whole leg he was waving around that was the size of Belinda's arm.

"I'm out here trying to figure out how to make cheap potions with the local materials," Jory said. "What about you?"

"Similar thing, but for weapons, armour and fortifications," Gary said.

"A strange lady told me there was a blacksmith that could meet our needs here," Jory said. "Belinda needs a full refresh of her gear."

"Strange lady?" Gary asked. "Strange how?"

"She was too high rank to be out here," Jory said. "Even though I couldn't sense her aura, I could tell. Her clothes and the way she carried herself. A celestine, with hair like rubies."

"Are you sure it wasn't a man?" Gary asked. "I haven't seen a woman like you're describing, but there's a guy roaming about making trouble."

"Unless it was disguise magic, I'm quite certain," Jory said. "I figured she must have been sent out here because a gold-rank monster manifested."

"Makes sense," Gary said, then tore off another meat strip with his teeth. With his huge head and leonine features, it was somewhat terrifying to watch.

"I haven't heard about any gold-rank monster, though," Gary said, still spraying slivers of meat as he turned to Belinda. "So, you need a set of silver-rank gear? I was set to pack up and move on tomorrow, but I can take a day."

“I need a lot of gear,” Belinda said. “A lot. A day might not be enough.”

“Don’t underestimate your friend, here,” a smooth voice said. An immaculately groomed man in out-of-place city fashion sat down next to Gary. “His skills have advanced in leaps and bounds in the last year or so.”

“This would be the guy roaming around making trouble,” Gary introduced. “Virid, these are my friends. Belinda, Neil and Jory, this is Virid.”

“A pleasure,” Virid said. “I’m also curious about this unusual woman you mentioned. I didn’t feel anyone like what you’re describing and my senses are... quite prodigious.”

The three looked over Virid, just as alien to the remote town as the woman Jory described.

“What is going on out here?” Neil wondered aloud.

“Good question,” Rufus asked. “What are you all doing here?”

Everyone at the table turned to face the new arrival and Gary leapt up, clasp ing Rufus in a huge, hairy hug, the meat in Gary’s hand getting oil down Rufus’ back.

“I seem to recall you not being a hugger,” Rufus gasped.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Gary said with a laugh. “What are you doing here?”

“Adventure Society sent me,” Rufus said. “They came to the training annex, told me where to go with nothing about why and portalled me halfway around the world. The others are still caught up at the town entry checkpoint.”

“Others?” Gary asked, as arguing voices drifted in their direction, loud enough to be heard over the ongoing feat.

“You were lucky I was able to talk them down,” they heard Humphrey say as he walked along the street next to Sophie and Clive. “All you needed was a little patience.”

“How was I meant to know they wouldn’t take a bribe?” Sophie complained. “Since when do village guards have

integrity?”

“Small town people are good and decent folk,” Humphrey said. “They deserve our respect.”

“And city people don’t?” Sophie demanded.

“In fairness, Sophie,” Clive interjected, “would you trust you?”

“That’s not a terrible point,” Sophie admitted, then turned to look ahead. “Lindy?”

Belinda rushed to catch her friend in a hug.

“What is everyone doing here?” Clive asked.

Jason’s old team, plus Rufus, Gary and Gary’s mentor Virid were gathered at a picnic table left from the previous night’s feast. They were discussing how they all ended up in the same place at the same time, in the middle of nowhere.

“The only clue we have to what brought us all here is this mysterious woman?” Rufus asked. “Why us? Why here and why now?”

“Discounting Gary’s new friend,” Clive said, “there is something that connects us all. Greenstone.”

“And the person who brought us all together there,” Sophie added.

“The location here may have been chosen for discretion,” Virid suggested as the others fell into a sombre silence. “Large cities have eyes and ears that even I can’t escape, while the arrival of someone like me in a small one becomes fast news. Here, there is no one to tell.”

“Quite astute,” a female voice said.

The group turned to see a celestine with alabaster skin, her ruby eyes and hair that shone in the morning sun. They stood up, arraying themselves in front of her. Virid was wary, not

sensing her aura. He pushed out with his senses, turning whiter than she was at what he found.

“I’m, uh... I’m going to go,” he said.

“No,” Dawn told him. “You’re not. Sit back down.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Gary watched the terrified Virid with shock, as he was the only one who knew the man to be a diamond-ranker. What did that make this woman? She looked Virid up and down.

“You don’t look it,” she told him, “but you’re a smith?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good. Mr Xandier’s skills may not be quite where I need them, so collaborating with you may bridge that gap.”

“I don’t suppose you’d care to explain why you brought us all here?” Rufus asked, stepping to the fore.

“I need Mr Xandier to reforge a weapon for me,” she said.

“The rest of us aren’t smiths,” Rufus said. “You don’t need us all for that.”

“I also need to fulfil a promise,” she said. She took a weapon from the dimensional bag at her waist and held it out. Gary moved forward and took it, turning it over in his hands.

The sword was bent almost in half. The craftsmanship was familiar, yet alien.

“What did this?” Gary asked. “How did the blade not snap?”

“You tell me,” Dawn said.

Gary’s examination went deeper than simply looking. His forge essence abilities gave him insights into the nature of worked metals.

“It’s soul-bonded,” he said. “The sword bends but doesn’t break, because so does the owner.”

He looked up at Dawn.

“Which isn’t you.”

“No. I promised the owner I would have it ready and waiting when he arrived and only one man can reforge it.”

“This feels like my work,” Gary said, “but I don’t remember this sword.”

“It’s been modified,” Dawn said. “It wasn’t soul-bonded when you made it, and it was ranked-up, being a growth item. Look again.”

Gary looked back down at the sword in his hands, pushing his senses to the limit. Finally, he recognised it and his eyes went wide. His face came up filled with fury and he let out a roar that cracked the stone wall of the smithy next to him. Dawn’s hair and clothes whipped around her like she was standing in a hurricane, but she didn’t so much as lean back. The friends behind Gary covered their ears, deafened despite not being in the direct blast.

“WHY DO YOU HAVE THIS?” Gary roared, marching up into Dawn’s face and waving the sword in front of her. “How do you have it?”

“I told you,” she said calmly. “I promised the owner I would have it waiting for him.”

“I don’t know who soul-bonded this weapon,” Gary growled, “but the real owner is dead. So you’d best tell me who gave you this or you’re going to join him. I don’t care who or what you are. I’ll find a way.”

“Gary, no!” Virid warned, standing up.

“Sit,” Dawn barked and he plopped back down.

“The owner died, yes,” she said. “But as it turns out, coming back from the dead is kind of his thing.”

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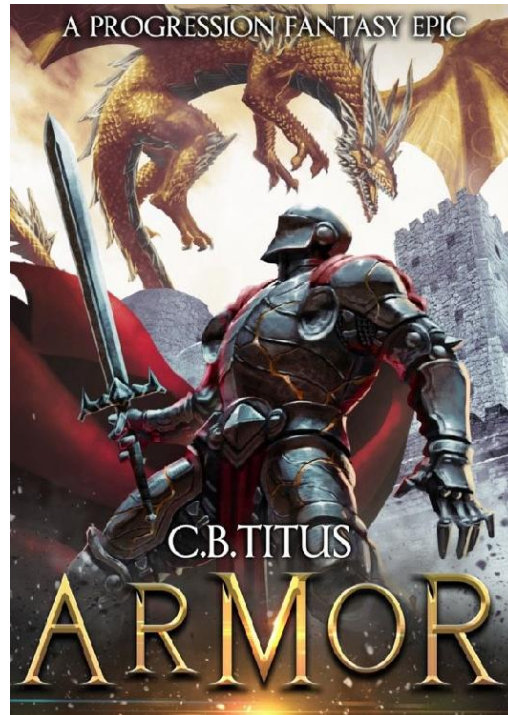
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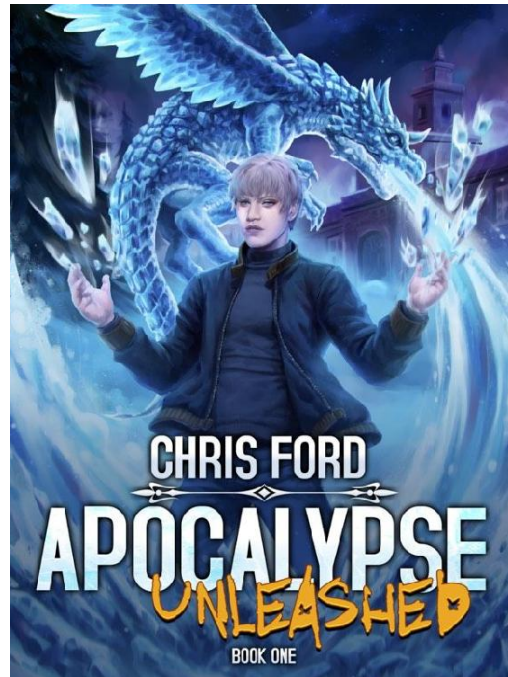
Description: *A tiny snake with great potential.* That was who I was. That was *what* I was. A tiny snake with great potential. The sole creation of the Great Core. It was just us, the Great Core and I, tucked away in our little corner of the World Dungeon. Together, we hid from the bad-things and the Coreless of the world outside - safe from the horrors that would consume us. Until, one day, the Coreless found us. Until they tried to steal away my creator. Until, with no other option, I *swallowed* the Great Core that had made me. Only after that did I become what I was always meant to be. At last, I became the Great Core's Paradox in more than name. *[The Endless Cycle]* began.

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I was created as the ultimate dungeon trap. A living suit of armor that devours any adventurer who dons me. My master created me for his entertainment, leading adventurers to ruin. Betraying them at the last moment, just when their glorious victory was on hand. I have been found again by the newest member of a quartet of dungeon crawlers. Poor fool. This time will be no different. Or does it have to be? Maybe I don't need to spend eternity left in a deep, dark dungeon waiting to devour would-be heroes. Maybe, just maybe, I can take him over and use this new identity to leave and masquerade as an adventurer myself. Betray my master—my purpose—and grow strong enough to find a new one. One problem. Hopefully, my new companions won't realize I'm not who, or what, they think I am.

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On the day of Aiden and Olivia's math final, things take a surprise turn... The end of the world. During Finals, the worst thing most people worry about is a failing grade. For Aiden and his sister Olivia, they must contend with the apocalypse. But at least there won't be any more math tests! With his trusty pen in hand, Aiden is determined to protect his sister no matter the cost. The future seems bleak as the school warps around them to become a maze of death and otherworldly monsters start appearing. Essence, their one and only lifeline in this new world, changes everything, granting them power to fight back against the tide of chaos. Aiden does what he must to survive and save his sister. In doing so, he begins to uncover the larger picture as a Quest leads them into the great beyond. In a world of magic and monsters, all the cards are stacked against them. Do they have what it takes to work the System and come out on top?

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In the West, there are worse things to fear than bandits and outlaws. Demons. Monsters. Witches. James Crowley's sacred duty as a Black Badge is to hunt them down and send them packing, banish them from the mortal realm for good. He didn't choose this life. No. He didn't choose life at all. Shot dead in a gunfight many years ago, now he's stuck in purgatory, serving the whims of the White Throne to avoid falling to hell. Not quite undead, though not alive either, the best he can hope for is to work off his penance and fade away. This time, the White Throne has sent him investigate a strange bank robbery in Lonely Hill. An outlaw with the ability to conjure ice has frozen and shattered open the bank vault and is now on a spree, robbing the region for all it's worth. In his quest to track down the ice-wielder and suss out which demon is behind granting a mortal such power, Crowley finds himself face-to-face with hellish beasts, shapeshifters, and, worse ... temptation. But the truth behind the attacks is worse than he ever imagined ... ***The Witcher meets The Dresden Files*** in this weird Western series by the Audible number-one bestselling duo behind ***Dead Acre***.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shirtaloon was working on a very boring academic paper when he realised that writing about an inter-dimensional kung fu wizard would be way more fun.

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