

Chapter 318

A Moment For Drastic Measures

The aperture was in a tent that had been set up around it, with a makeshift military camp assembled around that. The story was the usual terrorism readiness exercise. The tent was almost of circus proportions, easily fitting a Network ritualist, Hector, Espinoza, plus Jason, with Asya as an escort and Abreo, with a pair of burly bronze-rankers as an escort. On top of that was the ritual circle around the aperture.

The aperture normally would have been invisible, but the ritual circle drawn under it was causing it to crackle with energy, revealing its circular shape.

“Sir,” one of the Network’s ritualists said, “we just don’t have a way in. I don’t see a means to break a ritual on the other side of the aperture from this side.”

“How long will it take to change that?” Hector asked.

“How long did it take to go from dial phones to cellular phones?” the ritualist asked. “Unless you have a whole new field of magic sitting around somewhere, we’re done here.”

“Mr Asano,” Hector said. “You’re meant to be the great font of knowledge from another world. Do you have a whole new field of magic sitting around somewhere?”

“Yep,” Jason said, not moving his eyes from the aperture.

“Then by all means, proceed.”

Jason looked down at the purpose-built wooden boards with the ritual circle drawn onto them. They were tightly slotted together so as to not break the ritual circle drawn onto them. Jason broke the ritual himself by drawing his foot through a chalk line in the magical diagram and the visible magic it contained faded and dispersed.

“Turn off those mana lamps until I need them,” Jason instructed. “I’m going to have to start with a harmony ritual to balance out the ambient magic, which I won’t need them for.”

The harmony ritual was one of the few lesser rituals that didn’t require iron-rank magical density. It served the same function as Clive’s Mana Equilibrium racial gift, except it took more effort, more time, some lesser spirit coins and wasn’t as effective.

Clive could level out the ambient magic with a snap of his fingers, doing such a thorough job he never needed to adjust his ritual circles. Even after performing his first ritual and having the mana lamps turned back on, Jason still needed to use powdered lesser monster cores to gauge how his second ritual was interacting with the ambient magic.

“This will open up the aperture?” Hector asked as Jason’s ritual become more and more complex. He was constantly referencing Clive’s notes, which Jason was lucky to

have access to. Clive had kept them with Jason's books on astral magic, which was beneficial to Jason after losing Clive as a resource.

"It won't," Jason said. "The purpose of this ritual is to figure out what we're dealing with."

When he enacted the ritual, it seemed at first like the one the ritualists had used, leaving magic crackling over the invisible aperture.

"So much for that," the ritualist said, happy not to have been shown up.

"Wait for it," Jason said, eyes still locked on the aperture. Slowly there was a shift in the magic and the crackling energy started forming into distinct shapes. Eventually the aperture was covered in floating, glowing runes that shifted, merged, split and transformed in complex patterns.

Shade emerged from Jason's shadow to stand next to him, to the surprise of the other people in the tent except for Asya.

"What do you think?" Jason asked him.

"I have little grasp of ritual magic," Shade said. "To my eye, however, it does seem less sophisticated than the seal locking the Order of the Reaper's astral space."

"It is," Jason said. "By a lot. That said, Clive and Emir's team took months cracking that seal. Testing, analysing, retesting. Even if I wasn't reliant on mana lamps for that, which I very much am, it will be time consuming. It may not be months, but I'm not Clive. Unless I get lottery win lucky, it'll be weeks."

"You're saying you can open it?" Hector asked.

"Very eventually," Jason said and turned to Abreo. "If you're holding anything back, Abreo, now is the time to talk."

Jason walked over to stand in front of Abreo, who shrank away only to bump into one of his unmoving escorts.

"If I discover that you could have helped me here and you didn't," Jason told him, his voice low and resonant, "the Network can't protect you from me. I will do to you what your men failed to do to me and take you away. The subsequent final few weeks of your life will be an experience that cannot be described, only felt. Do you know what it's like to have your soul scoured, Mr Abreo? It changes you. Marks you. No healing potion or magic power can undo it."

Abreo's gaze lingered on the scars on Jason's face as he trembled, almost shaking. Fear stained his aura like a poison, even as Jason's aura ground Abreo's into nothing, pressing on his soul like a knife to the throat.

“I can’t do anything, I swear! don’t know a way in. That was all Adrien’s to manage. Oh god, please believe me!”

Abreo’s guards were wide-eyed at the display of aura power, but when they glanced at Hector he shook his head, signalling them not to intervene. Jason relaxed his aura suppression and turned back to the aperture.

“Taking weeks to get through is better than not getting through at all,” Hector said. “They’re bottled up and not going anywhere.”

“Not good enough,” Jason said.

“Obviously, we’ll be looking for alternatives,” Hector told him, “but it’s exceptional enough that we can get in there eventually. Getting through right now is impossible. We need to accept that and direct our energies where they can actually accomplish something.”

“It’s been my experience,” Jason said, eyes once more glued to the aperture, “that much of what people call impossible is an unwillingness to accept the price of moving forward.”

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “I worry that you are going to make a decision with long-term ramifications in the heat of the moment.”

“You’re a smart guy, Shade,” Jason said. “That’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

Ability: [Nirvanic Transfiguration]

- This ability will be evolved from the ability [Astral Affinity].
- Your body and soul will be combined into a gestalt entity both physical and spiritual in nature. This state will grant inherent resistance to effects that utilise the soul-body disconnect.
- The nature of your new body will render you immune to resurrection effects, including those of high-rank healing magic. If your body is disincorporated, your soul will return to a purely spiritual state, unable to reinhabit a physical form or re-enter a physical reality. This prevents the natural formation of an outworlder body on entering a physical reality. These restrictions will change on reaching diamond rank.
- When suffering lethal damage, instead of dying, your new body will undergo a nirvanic rebirth, returning to a state of full integrity. This effect cannot be triggered again until you have increased in rank from the last time it was used. This ability will change on reaching diamond rank.
- The strength of your aura will significantly increase.
- Your resistance to hostile dimension effects and disruptive force damage will be increased. This is an enhancement of the [Astral Affinity] ability.

- The effect of your dimension effects and your transcendent damage will be increase. This is a legacy effect of the [Astral Affinity] ability.
 - Physical reality around you will be more stable. You will be able to sense nearby astral space apertures and proto-astral spaces coterminous to your location.
 - You will be able to traverse astral space apertures, including those that are closed or have been sealed.
 - You will be able to directly enter proto-astral spaces coterminous with your location or directly leave a proto-astral space to a coterminous location.
 - 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.
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Of the many effects of the strange ability offered to him by the World-Phoenix, the ability to pass through sealed astral space apertures had seemed like a minor consideration. In this moment, it was a more crucial power than coming back from the dead.

“You held well-reasoned reservations about that power,” Shade said. “The wiser course would be to take some time to cool down and consider the consequences of claiming this power.”

“I already know the ramifications of not taking it,” Jason said. “Farrah in the hands of that man for weeks while I pick a lock, when I could have slipped in the window.”

“Have you not considered that you may have been offered this power in anticipation of this very scenario?” Shade asked. “The World-Phoenix may well have placed her where she arrived as part of engineering this result.”

“Of course it has,” Jason said. “But even if that is the World-Phoenix’s plan, my knowing that doesn’t mean it won’t work. This is what I need right now and what did I say, Shade?”

“Whatever it takes,” Shade said. “This is not a trivial choice, Mr Asano. Jason, this will change you. Fundamentally.”

Jason finally tore his eyes from the aperture to look at Shade.

“You’ve never used my first name before.”

“It is a moment for drastic measures, Mr Asano. I believe that you have the potential to reach the pinnacle of power and throw off the shackles of a mortal lifespan. This is a decision that may follow you for eternity.”

Jason looked at Shade for a long time, then turned back to the aperture.

“Shade, do you remember what my Dad said about big decisions?”

“Yes,” Shade said. “He advised that you consider the person you want to be.”

“If I’m going to live with this forever – and I think that’s a much bigger if than you suggest – then I want to be the man who chose to do whatever he could to save his friend.”

“Then you have your decision,” Shade said.

“I don’t suppose anyone wants to fill me in on what you’re talking about?” Hector asked.

“No,” Jason said.

➤ You can accept ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration]. Accept Y/N?

Jason mentally accepted the offer and silver light immediately started shining from within his body. Light started pouring from his mouth and his eyes, shining through his skin to make his veins and even his skeleton visible. The pain began early, not just to his body but his soul, but this was something he had endured in the past.

The other people in the tent looked on, startled, as the light shining from him grew brighter. They backed off as Jason’s clothes disintegrated around him, his skin becoming increasingly translucent. The veins and arteries in his body were absorbed, vanishing as his body moved even further from the human norm. Only his bones and the scars on his body remained visible in his increasingly transparent flesh.

The ritual on the aperture was washed away and the onlookers abandoned the tent entirely as they sensed the strange vortex of magic centred on Jason. Shortly thereafter, the tent itself was disintegrated like his clothes. The Network’s tactical units scrambled to surround him at a safe distance, a firing line of magical guns pointed in his direction.

Jason’s flesh completed the transition to translucency, making his scars stand out all the more. The onlookers watched as the white bones of his skeleton were transformed into silver metal.

Once that process was complete, an amorphous murk started appearing within his translucent form, like a stain. It started moving to the surface of his body and splattering out, landing on the ground in gobbets of rancid ichor. The horrific stench of it was something every essence user recognised, having been through their own purges.

“Is he ranking up?” Hector asked.

“I don’t know,” Asya said, standing beside him. “Is that what ranking up to category three looks like?”

“No,” Hector said. “No, it is not.”

For Jason, the process rivalled the star seed implantation for pain to both body and soul, his mouth wide open in a silent scream. It felt like his body and soul were being torn apart and then woven back together. He staggered then fell to his hands and knees, mind consumed with nothing but pain. He forced himself back to his feet, defiant.

The onlookers saw three globes of energy inside of Jason's translucent body, circling each other behind his rib cage. One was a sphere of pure darkness while another was a glistening orb of blood. The third was a blue and orange eyeball that gave off a sense of depth and power, as if to probe too close with their magical senses was to risk annihilation on gaining its attention.

Jason's body once more started to take on a fleshy opacity. The crest of his back, which had vanished with his flesh, manifested within him before moving out as his skin once more lost its translucency. The light coming from his body slowly dimmed to nothing. It left him standing naked, surrounded by people pointing guns at him. Most of the ichor had been forcefully ejected, but enough was left to mar much of his skin with the unpleasant residue. The hair from all over his body had once again fallen out.

He was unsteady on his feet, stumbling and almost falling as he took a step. He felt profoundly different both to himself and the people around him. For him, it was like being connected to the universe around him, his magical and aura senses both massively enhanced. He even felt something odd that he suspected to be the dimensional membrane separating physical reality from the astral. The aperture that had once only appeared to his magical senses was plain to see for him now.

For the Network personnel with aura senses, Jason was a transformed being. His aura had always been powerful but now it felt like a solid object, as real as the ground beneath their feet.

He pulled one of his precious few vials of crystal wash and tipped it over his head., cleansing the ichor from his body. He ignored his nakedness and the gun-toting people all around him. Shade emerged from his shadow.

"Might I suggest some of Mr Tillman's pilatory unguent," Shade suggested. "Then, perhaps, some pants."

"Sure," Jason said, pulling out a tin of Jory's hair growth ointment. "Could you?"

"Of course," Shade said, taking the tin. He judiciously applied it to Jason's head and eyebrows while Jason recovered, feeling completely spent. Shade, unlike Jason, could use the ointment without worrying about hair growing out of his fingers.

Dark mist surrounded Jason, and when it disappeared, he was wearing his battle robes and Shade was trimming his unruly hair and bushy, alchemically-grown eyebrows. Hector strode over, Asya trailing behind.

“Mr Asano,” Hector said. “What exactly just happened?”

“Something I’ll explain later,” Jason said, then pulled out a recovery potion and swigged it. “After I deal with your rogue personnel.”

He marched over to the aperture and vanished into it.

“Your Operations Director wasn’t kidding when she warned me he was a handful,” Hector told Ketevan in the camp’s commend tent.

“In fairness,” Asya said, “his friend has been kidnapped and it’s clear that she’s very important to him. Not to mention that the people behind all this fall under our umbrella. You think he cares about which branch they’re from or if they’ve gone rogue? From his perspective, the Network had kidnapped and tortured his friend, then kidnapped and tried to kill him. I’m not sure I’d be putting up with us if I were him.”

“He needs us,” Ketevan said.

“Does he?” Asya asked. “I don’t know what the World-Phoenix is but from what I could tell, it offered him a power I certainly don’t understand. With backing like that, even if he’s reluctant to accept it, what can he get from us that compares?”

A network functionary burst into the tent.

“Mr De Lange,” he said. “We’ve been interrogating the original aperture monitors, who are all Barbou’s people. They bolted after the dimensional space was sealed off but we managed to snag a few and we’ve gotten one of them to talk.”

“Why didn’t they go through with the others?” Hector asked.

“Some did, from what we can tell,” the functionary said. “The rest had various tasks to perform. One of which was providing a car when Barbou left the dimensional space from a different aperture, just prior to it being sealed. He was alone. No EOA, no prisoner. His people gave him a car and that was the last they saw of him.”