

## Chapter 429

### Less Freud and More God of Healing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason nodded, sadly.

“They don’t trust me anymore.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You don’t know how I acted.”

“Yeah, Jason. I do.”

He nodded his acknowledgement, remaining silent for a moment.

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

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

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

Farrah stared at him without saying anything.

“What?” he asked.

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

Jason watched her leave.

“Was that melodramatic?” Jason asked.

“I thought it was fine,” Shade said.

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

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

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

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

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

“I kind of am Batman,” he said.

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

“Hurtful.”

“What did you tell me?” she asked.

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

“Have you been having Shade eavesdrop on us?”

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

Erika bowed her head.

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

“It is.”

She raised her head to meet Jason’s gaze.

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

“It’s a superficial change, Eri.”

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

“I am.”

“You aren’t making this any easier.”

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

“Jason, it’s not like that.”

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

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

She leaned forward, resting her forehead on his chest.

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

Jason wrapped an arm around his sister.

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

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

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

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

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

“No, you were rubbish.”

“You didn’t have to agree quite so emphatically.”

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

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

Jason laughed.

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"Seriously?"

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

"They actually have therapists?"

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

Erika let him go.

"So, what next?" she asked.

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

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

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

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

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

"Did you really save the world?"

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

"But it wasn't?"

He flashed a grin.

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