

## Chapter 430

### Little Cost in Exploring

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What about vampires?" Erika asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The astral space," Farrah said.

"Shall we take a look?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Pretty sweet, yeah?" he said.

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

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

"Good job, Shade," Jason said.

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

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

"It's fine," Jason said.

"I mean, proper villainous," Erika insisted.

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

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

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

"No."

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

"What?" Erika asked.

"I mean training super hard."

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

"Giant black zeppelin, bloody hell..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How big is it?” Erika marvelled.

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

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

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

“There are monsters here?” Emi asked.

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

“You know where they are?” Erika asked.

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

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

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

He glanced at Emi.

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

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

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

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

“No, I had to control it.”

“From Africa?” Erika asked.

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

The dirigible had dropped low, close to the walls.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I did,” Jason said.

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

Yumi glanced at Emi, then back at Jason.

“People who think you are an inhuman monster.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What about the transformed people?” Emi suggested.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason turned to his grandmother.

“What do you think?”

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

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

“Yes.”

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