

## Chapter 428

### Another Day for Vampires

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You have been careful, right?”

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

Jason held up his hands in surrender.

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

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

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

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

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

“The ones still alive.”

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

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

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

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

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

Jason sat bolt upright.

“Did I hurt anyone?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Meaning?" Farrah asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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➤ Effect: ???.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How is it?" Farrah asked.

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

"It feels good."