

Chapter 451

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.

Once he had killed and drained enough to accelerate his speed, 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 but . He had dedicated considerable time and work into making the style imprinted on him his own and not just a series of programmed responses, but 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.

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 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 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 the accumulated afflictions, Jason drained them and grew faster. He started fighting 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 as 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 on 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 reaching 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, being the outer ring of Jason's entire domain, and 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 not 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, and clearing vast territories, full of anomalies, was familiar to him now. He also didn't need to rest for anything but mental exhaustion, able to replenish his stamina and mana at need by draining anomalies. He also 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, with two of them having 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 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 sixties styling 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, 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 adapting 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 and they were forced to retreat. They were forced to leave Gerling's companions behind, 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 was blackened and almost torn off after suffering multiple hit's 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, unsure 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 was 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.

Chapter 452

Small Mercies

Jason had made a tradition of triggering the territory transfigurations alone on his balcony, but he changed his pattern because he was unsure of what would come next. Shade's VTOL plane form was hovering 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.

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- 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.
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Jason opened his eyes. He could sense the dimensional rift at the boundary of his domain and he could sense 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 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. "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 it back into Earth 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 rift 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 and then we can finish it and finally get out of here. After that, we can 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 while 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 power that hurts ethereal stuff. 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.”

Disruptive force damage was a bane to incorporeal creatures, but Jason’s best source was Gordon, who was still awaiting a resummons. 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 them than Gordon, with the only question being 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 being the ones that gave Jason pause. The true threat was the entity just beyond his senses, however, due to not yet having 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, since 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 city of night, with dark, narrow alleys and moonlight glistening off rain-soaked streets. Jason immediately thought

of the establishing shot of pretty much every Batman movie. 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, with any vorger coming remotely close getting 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 them 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 onto 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, with only Jason's aura being 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 as 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 in a final 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 started clearing 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 as a spear plunged into Jason's back, bursting out of his chest.

"Which is more mercy than you'll get," Gerling said, leveraging the spear shaft to heighten Jason's pain. "It's time for this idiotic game of charades to end."

Chapter 453

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 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. It had to be something implanted.”

Again he twisted the spear.

“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 making preparations, 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 spear 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 forward.”

“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.”

“Do you even realise who made this thing?” Mr North asked. “The power of a great astral being is literally beyond your mind’s ability to comprehend. It lacks the frame of reference to contextualise it.”

The pained expression on Jason’s face vanished as his eyes went wide.

“Oh,” he said. “I knew I sensed something I recognised.”

The spear blurred and vanished, along with Jason’s injuries as he got to his feet.

“I may not be able to contextualise the 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 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, 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 due to his abnormal strength and the unique traits of his aura was he able 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.

Gerling, Mr North and the vampires shimmered and vanished as 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 manipulate

fears. It looked a lot like Shade if he's 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 know what this thing is?" 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 a 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."

"It killed that hag so that you would eventually become the same as the manifestation?" 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,” he said.

“Yes,” Jason said.

“You shipped us all back and forth via vehicle to reinforce that you couldn't portal?”

“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 go and the world can't afford to lose you. The welfare of the world must be the supreme law. I knew from the moment I was trapped here that this moment would come, and 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, you know.”

“I believe you,” Jason said. “Sometimes the things we love are the things we hurt the most.”

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.”

“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 accumulate and feed magic 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.

“Please ask her to make it quick and clean. Call it a final request.”

“I’ll ask. If she says no, I won’t push. She’ll probably say no.”

“I know. Now, leave. 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 Noereth 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 as 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 started growing dim as the orb started filling 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 it's 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. The Reaper can open passages for a soul, but also cannot 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."

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. It was just enough that he survived given that, 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.

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 having brought him back even from full bodily annihilation. He was still coming to his senses, when webs started whipping out from a series of nearby ritual circles, binding him between them.

“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 your strength power. 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.”

“No, Mr Gerling. Mr Asano was kind enough to let me take a small measure of revenge on the man who brought us here. After that, 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.”

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. “I’m done with vampires and magic factions. It’s time to finish the job and go home.”

“Home, Mr Asano?”

“Yeah. This world isn't it anymore.”

Chapter 454

Something Other Than Human

“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 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.”

Yumi and the interim French president walked along an empty street. The city of Saint-Étienne was, for the moment, still largely empty. Most of it was occupied by Jason’s spirit domain, which had remade the city. There were some remnants that the transformation zone hadn’t absorbed, left in ruins by the vampire occupation. It was not back to the way it was. The new Saint-Étienne was more like a French city as imagined by a man whose knowledge of France came from watching too many whimsical French films. The interim president was diplomatic enough not to point that out.

The vampires had abandoned France after the transformation zone was unsealed and Jason’s spirit domain became the centre of a new high-magic zone. It was retaken by eager Network forces, although it was made clear that Jason’s spirit domain only answered to one man.

“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 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. He has eschewed his worldly concerns, outside of preparing the clan for his departure.”

“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.

"You're the one who started taking over chunks of sovereign territory," Anna told him.

"That was never my intention."

"Then give it back."

"Anyone who wants it can come and take it," Jason said, his voice an iron fist in a silk glove. Jason led Anna from the helicopter pad outside the pagoda in Saint-Étienne, taking her inside. 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. Anna quickly learned to walk right behind him.

"They don't see me. Or, more precisely, their minds actively ignore my presence. It's an aura manipulation trick I picked up some time ago from Craig Vermilion. There is a lot to learn from how vampires use their auras."

"There's a new leader who had 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."

"Some of our intelligence suggests that she's holding back until you're gone. That she wants to avoid you trying again and knows that you intend to leave this world behind."

"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 aren’t happy about pulling back after the successful attacks on network holdings in Germany and want to take advantage of the civil war in the US.”

“She’s not stupid 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 need to finish up in the other world but for practical purposes, the job is done. To the best of my understanding, the dimensional membrane stopping the 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. There’s little point feeding them half of it. 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 bizarre 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 saw it with your own eyes.”

“I looted their bodies, but I’ve been deceived before and death isn’t always the end. I know 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. That, I am certain of. 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 and do many of its people are being absorbed into different Network factions.”

Jason nodded absently but didn’t say anything.

“Jason, we traced where the money went.”

“We’re taking in non-humans from all over the world, Anna. Even with the infrastructure I’m bringing to the table, that 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 wanted a say in how the clan was organised, he was welcome to increase his participation in administering it. Jason had declared surrender, washing his hands of the whole thing.

“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, all was repaired and odd folk roamed bustling about 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 it very fulfilling. There's a lot of damage to be fixed around the world and my father's powers and experience are well-suited to handling them."

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 out 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. I scare them."

"I won't lie, Jason; you scare us all. You went into that transformation zone with some of the most powerful beings on the planet and only two of you survived. One of you came out queen of the vampires and the other came out with a kingdom."

"I'm not a king. 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. They're 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 everything around her seemed to go still.

"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. I'm done with it all, Anna. I'm leaving the clan with as many resources as I can and I am going. 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, take her to see Grandmother."

"Of course," 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 you to avoid the same shortcuts that Mr North did," 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 wasn't the same as him. I hope that too."

"You're not a monster, Jason."

"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 sharing 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 were using a football field in an isolated outback town in Australia, never repopulated after the monster surge. The entirety of the circle could only be made out from the air.

Using their wings of fire and wings of darkness to 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, the last paint job flaked and gone before Jason was born.

"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."

"We've talked before about Rufus telling you that there'd be hard choices," Farrah said. "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 to you."

"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 okay, but you're underestimating the level of guilds 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 lower-class graduates who join the Burning Violet guild."

"There are lower class graduates?"

"Sure. The Remore Academy has a huge scouting program, looking for people with potential. The academy does scholarships, puts them up in dormitories and trains them until 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."

"They're going ahead with that?"

"Well, with the US civil war still going on, it's not exactly a testament to peace."

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 done with it all. I have to let it all 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 the people?"

“Yeah,” Jason said sadly. “I’m sure.”

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. Jason extracted Travis’ family from the United States personally.

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, 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.