

Chapter 439

Going Suspiciously Well

The astral space was a fog-filled realm of dilapidated manors and ruined castles, rising from a sea of mist. They were connected by crumbling stone bridges that spanned between them and Jason's instincts told him that descending into the mist would be a Very Bad Idea. With poor visibility and murky light, it looked like a place that should have had vampires all along.

Jason's previous visit was one of his most violent episodes, slaughtering Network personnel and EOA superhumans alike in his bloody determination to rescue Farrah. The environment was perfect for a shadowy stalker of Jason's ilk, which had not changed. This time he didn't slaughter his way through but moved unnoticed; another unremarkable shadow in the mist.

As he and Farrah had surmised, Jason found pens for humans, like those outside. For good or ill, these were mostly empty, while the ghoul cages here were filled to capacity. He estimated they would likely open up the astral space to ship out more people, soon. Jason unhappily but resolutely left them be, seeking out the place where the conversion process took place.

The primary goal of Jason's mission was to eliminate the infrastructure that allowed the ghoul creation process to be franchised out. The secondary target was the operation already pumping out undead monstrosities, along with the man behind it all.

The people of Makassar were victims twice over; once when they were killed and again when turned into the unquiet dead. They still haunted Jason's dreams and he would very much like to send the man who desecrated them to meet Shade's father. His preference would be for a long, personal encounter but he would accept nuking the man into atoms. Any ghouls and vampires that died in the process were gravy.

Gerling and his small team of silver-rankers chose differently from Jason when it came to invading the astral space. They chose the more isolated aperture and they chose assault over stealth. After eliminating the vampires guarding the entrance, they put Barbou to work cracking open the seal.

"I can't even be certain that I will still be able to access it," Barbou warned as he finished drawing the ritual circle. "Unless they haven't reconfigured the seal at all since..."

The moment he completed the seal, the invisible aperture shimmered into being.

"I guess they haven't," Barbou said. "That's just unprofessional."

The Chinese gold-ranker, Chen, was travelling along a French road in the back of a van. His fellow occupant was very unusual, but someone Jason would have recognised.

"You have executed the design adequately," Shako said, looking at the device in the van with them, strapped in place.

"And if I do this, you will deliver me the power that Asano is using to save the world?" Chen said.

"Yes," Shako said. "While Asano is still able to act, I am unable to intervene. He stole the device to repair this world from its creator and antagonists prevent him from making another. Only if Asano dies and the device is lost will he be permitted to create another, for this world will still need to be saved."

"Asano is elusive and resourceful," Chen said. "The place he has created for himself is a stronghold for him. This is a rare chance to catch him exposed, but could we not just send gold rankers into the astral space?"

"Asano is slippery," Shako said. "Even death has failed to stop him. He must be annihilated by forces that make sure his soul leaves for the realm of the dead, never to return."

"Couldn't you go in yourself to make sure?"

"I am restricted twice over," Shako said. "This avatar you see before you is merely a weak projection. The entry of my true self would damage your already fragile world. I am also bound by the same restrictions that protect Asano. I can teach and guide, as I have in helping you construct this device, but I cannot act."

"I'm worried that this will be dangerous if our world truly is as fragile as you say," Chen said. "A dimensional bomb, fuelled by a reality core."

"It is not a bomb, as you understand it," Shako said. "It will break down the astral space, annihilating everyone and everything inside. Asano will be gone, Gerling will be gone and you will have struck a great blow against the vampire threat. Your nation will be on the path from leading the world to dominating it. Then you will save it, not just solidifying this outcome but positioning you as the most prominent member of the most dominant force on this planet."

"I don't do this for my own glory," Chen said.

"Of course not," Shako said.

“Loud explosions are for the outside,” Gerling said. The vampires just inside the aperture had been eliminated with speed but Gerling held off on using his abilities. His explosive powers would be like sending up a signal flare.

“We move fast and take down who we must as quick and quiet as possible,” Gerling said. “The objective is to find Asano.”

Gerling had recruited someone very specific for the purposes of chasing down Jason. A silver-ranker with the light and trap essences, he was an expert in purging shadows.

“You realise this plan is idiotic,” Barbou said. “You think you can just randomly find him by checking shadows? You don’t even know if he’s here yet, or been and gone.”

“We’re doing more than checking shadows,” Gerling said. “We’re going to lace the shadows around this aperture with light traps that will reveal his location to us.”

“And if he uses the other aperture?” Barbou asked.

“My second team is attacking it from the outside,” Gerling said. “They’ll use a device that destabilises apertures, making it unusable for hours.”

“You have a second team? Are you sure they can handle the forces at the other aperture?”

“They’re silver-rank elites from the US,” Gerling said. “They scouted it out and signalled me the good-to-go before we came in.

“And if Asano doesn’t show up in your window?”

“He’s already inside. You see, all those people studying the magic town Asano made haven’t been idle. They might not have deciphered much, but they did find a way to tell whether Asano was in direct contact with the town. Something about magical resonance; I don’t pretend to understand. What it means, though, is that they can detect when Asano goes out of range, and they’re confident that Asano’s range covers the planet.”

“So, if he’s out of range,” Barbou realised, “he’s entered a dimensional space.”

“Now you’re getting it,” Gerling said.

“Surprisingly well-prepared, for a semi-shaved ape.”

Gerling punched Barbou in the face again.

When Gerling had assaulted the area external to the astral space aperture, he had used his powers to full effect. With the aperture sealed, no communication was possible so he had been free to go all out. It had originally been a nondescript spot by an empty road, outside the city. After it was revealed to the International Committee, a secondary outpost was built, which had been taken over by the vampires. The outpost was now in ruins, and

what was left was painted red by the combination of Gerling's explosive powers and the vampires that previously occupied it.

Chen's van arrived after the fact. The normal van was not as fast as a gold ranker but was far less suspicious should a gold-rank vampire be around with their powerful senses. There were plenty of delivery vehicles on the road since the humans the vampires held prisoner needed to eat or die.

"He hasn't changed," Chen said, looking around the ruined outpost. "Such a barbarian."

The van had contained only Chen, Shako and a silver-rank driver, who was carrying the drum containing the dimension collapsing device.

"My information is that the seal is sophisticated and difficult to open," Chen said as he and Shako looked at the spot in which the invisible aperture resided. Shako snorted disdain and held out a hand. Stone lines in the shape of a ritual circle rose from the concrete floor and the aperture bloomed into being.

"Didn't even need an incantation," Shako said derisively. "What passes for magic here is an embarrassment."

Chen went through the aperture to make sure nothing was waiting for them on the other side, found the vampires there dead and came back.

"Do we need to take it deep into the dimensional space?" Chen asked.

"No," Shako said. "You can set it off right on the other side."

"You heard him," Chen told the driver. "Set the timer for ten seconds and get out."

"This is going surprisingly smoothly," Jason whispered. There was no one close by but he was not going to tempt fate and the hearing of gold-rank vampires.

"This appears to be the least trafficked room within this central area," Shade said.

"The bomb is unlikely to be discovered in the time it takes to exit the astral space."

They were in an old wine cellar, the racks mostly rotted and the only bottles remaining in shards on the floor. What had once been a manor above had been completely wiped away and replaced with the most disgusting place Jason had encountered since the kitchen of a cannibal cult. Somewhere between an abattoir and a manufacturing plant, it combined grisly exsanguination with industrial production.

Jason completed the ritual to hide the bomb's presence then activated it according to Travis' instructions. He had gone over it again and again until he remembered the relatively simple process perfectly but he checked it against his notes anyway. Once he was certain, he set the timer and left.

Slinking through the dark, he restrained his aura as much as he could, knowing there were gold-rank vampires about. Restraining his aura diminished his supernatural senses that relied on it, but he only needed to sense far enough to avoid danger. As he made his way from the most populated, and therefore dangerous, area, things were going suspiciously well. Just as he had that thought, he sensed a powerful wave of dimensional energy move across the astral space like a tsunami.

“Oh, come on,” he complained. “I didn’t even say it out loud.”

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- A dimensional event has triggered the collapse of the astral space you are in.
 - Your ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has a stabilising effect on the immediate space around you and will maintain a section of physical reality around you that will not collapse.
 - The presence of physical space that cannot be collapsed has anchored the collapsing astral space. Due to conditions in the physical reality to which the astral space is connected, a transformation event has been triggered.
 - A transformation zone has been triggered. Due to being coterminous to an area of disintegrating dimensional space, the transformation zone will demonstrate abnormal properties.

“Are you kidding me? Again?”

Jason looked around as the ubiquitous fog started to take on a rainbow hue. He was standing atop a stone spire rising from the fog and covered by a castle, most of which had collapsed away. The fog started to coalesce, almost into a liquid, and started rolling away from him to reveal more of the collapsed castle.

The castle itself started to change, dissolving into mist as well, but this did not share the rainbow colour of the space around him. It even retained the shape of the castle from which it had dissolved and then expanded to replace the missing sections.

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- The transformation zone has formed an abnormal genesis space. Your ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised a section of that space.
 - Your ability [Spirit Domain] is asserting authority over the stabilised space and forming a spirit domain. Abnormal effects will not occur within your spirit domain but anomalous effects will attack your spirit domain in an attempt to homogenise it with the remainder of the transformation zone.
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Jason watched as a castle made of clouds was made from the ruins of what came before. The rainbow energy forming from the fog became a bubble surrounding the castle.

- You have established a permanent spirit domain. The maximum total area your spirit domains can cover is limited by your soul strength and your rank. Current amount of maximum spirit domain established: 3287%. Increase your rank to increase your maximum total spirit domain size.
 - Once genesis space had formed territories, abnormalities will begin to attack your spirit domain. You may expand your spirit domain by expanding it into other territories within genesis space.
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Jason ran a hand over his face.

“Farrah is going to be so mad I didn’t bring her. Wait, what about the nuke?”

Outside the astral space, Shako looked at the dissolving aperture, his face filled with rage.

“No! What is this? WHAT DID YOU DO?”

“We have to go!” Chen yelled.

The mass of dimensional energy was plain for both of them to sense, like the outer edges of a tropical storm. Shako ignored him and Chen shot away, as fast as his gold-rank speed would take him. Only when he was well clear of the dimensional forces did Chen stop and turn around. Initially invisible, those forces had taken on a rainbow hue before being sealed away inside the dome of a transformation zone as it shimmered into being. Chen trembled as he looked at it.

“What did I do?”