

Chapter 405

Not Entirely Ethical

Jason emerged from the water, up the ramp at the base of the cloud house that led into the ocean. The swim had been pleasant and relaxing, although his silver-rank body was far too heavy to float. He didn't need to breathe, however, so he was as happy under the surface as on it.

Emi continued to splash about, under the supervision of her father, Ian, and discordantly youthful great grandmother, Yuri. It had taken some convincing before Erika had allowed her daughter to go swimming kilometres out into the Pacific, with Jason taking steps to assure Emi's safety. He had put away the more modest cloud house and brought out the cloud palace. He configured it into a huge curve, forming an artificial lagoon, complete with underwater rooms that formed an artificial seafloor and a net at the lagoon's aperture. It formed a calm haven from the ocean waves, as well as any sharks foolish enough to come to the cloud palace in search of prey.

The cloud palace was a haven in more ways than one. In just the two weeks they had been working to identify their target reality node in Australia, the deterioration of world order had rapidly escalated. Australia itself was fine, in no small part due to an absence of the vampire lords making themselves known globally in even greater numbers than had been feared.

Several countries in Central America had already suffered total government breakdown, with several South American countries showing dangerous signs of following suit. America was a giant mess, already on the brink of mass civic conflict before vampires laid claim to Baltimore, Boston and Philadelphia.

Using the two gold-rank essence users in their ranks, the vampires in Philadelphia were resisted and killed but they lost many silver-rankers in the process of taking down eleven vampire lords.

China had been under a media blackout for months with the 'public protection measures' put in place months before letting almost no information out. The rest of Asia, as well as Africa, were both doing relatively well, with minimal vampiric activity, leaving the existing magical factions to continue fighting over reality cores. Russia and Europe were the exact opposite, suffering massive vampiric occupation.

Europe was the global hotbed for vampiric activity, with vampire lords laying claim to major cities all over the continent. Governments were working with the other magical

factions but Europe's Network branches had never been the powerhouses that China and the United States were. They would have trouble facing the vampires at the best of times, let alone in the midst of schism and factionalisation. Russia faced similar issues but oddly minimal resistance, with rumours of government collaboration with the vampires rapidly spreading.

The entire European Union had declared states of emergency but no effective response had been found. The vampire lords were forming councils in the various cities they laid claim to and were difficult to respond to. With small numbers of extremely powerful individuals, the vampires were too strong to face with the Network's elite forces but too few to face with overwhelming numbers.

Overwhelming force was a response tried in several cities, but while the vampires were killed or driven off, the price was unacceptable. The vampires, with their small numbers, used the population and infrastructure as shields, while Network forces were forced to rely on magically-enhanced ordnance designed to combat gold-rank threats. As a result, victory meant liberating a smouldering ruin, full of the dead.

Few nations were willing to pay that price after seeing the results and in many nations, the vampire lords were becoming de facto governments. Italy was the first nation to officially capitulate, in relatively bloodless fashion. France resisted hard but the razing of Paris and the vampires' bloody reprisals in other French cities effectively wiped out the resisting civilian authorities.

In the wake of his final talks with Kaito, Greg and Asya, Jason felt lighter than he had since before the Broken Hill tragedy. He smiled, letting the sun dry him out as he watched Ian dive bomb Emi, joining her in the water. Jason would take all the good moments he could get. Farrah came up to stand next to him, but instead of swimwear, she had the robust clothing she preferred to wear under her conjured armour.

"Another one?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Hopefully I can pinpoint the node today."

Farrah gave Jason the location and he opened a portal. He couldn't travel to the destination directly but could get within a hundred kilometres. During his time sweeping proto-spaces with the Network Jason had travelled to a lot of Australia, and now his portal could range out to sixteen-hundred kilometres.

They appeared in a small town still marred by damage from the monster waves. Shade bodies emerged from Jason's shadow and melded together to take the form of a

helicopter. Other than being black, it looked exactly like Kaito's. Jason and Farrah boarded and headed for the proto-space.

Some of the nations worst-hit by the current chaos had largely eliminated any Network presence, leading to a reappearance of monster waves. Australia was mercifully spared that, at least for the moment, despite the Chaos in Sydney and similar conflicts elsewhere. The leadership faction had moved to focus on reality cores, abandoning the old responsibilities to the larger but weaker faction, now going by the Global Defence Network.

One of the GDN teams entered a category three-dimensional incursion space, at which point the ritualist squad leader reported in to the expedition leader.

"Sir, we've done the checks and the readings are way off."

"How so?"

"The anchor monsters are already gone and the integrity of the space is too high. It won't break down until as much as twenty hours after it should."

"Then it looks like we've got an easy one."

"Sir?"

"He's here. Tell everyone to pack it up. With how thin we're spread, we can be more useful elsewhere than in a space that's already been handled."

Jason got a fix on the node and managed a successful repair before returning to the cloud palace with Farrah. Afterwards, they sat on a terrace discussing their work with Dawn.

"As I spend more and more time working within node space," he said, "it feels like I'm getting a better grasp on astral magic. It's not like a skill book, imprinting knowledge, but more like being immersed in the primordial clay of reality is giving me a direct sense of all the theory I've been studying. Concepts that were abstract and hard to grasp make sense to me now."

"I believe the nature of your being also has an impact," Dawn postulated. "Normal physical beings have a perception of conventional reality that is a hindrance to understanding the higher concepts within astral magic theory," Dawn said. "It takes an extraordinary mind or highly unusual circumstances to overcome that. Your being, like node space itself, is a gestalt of the physical and the spiritual, rather than two halves like Farrah, myself or this universe. Even someone with astral affinity will have trouble enduring it, yet you have no discomfort, do you?"

"No," Jason said. "There's an effect my abilities identify as dimensional discorporation, which sounds delightful. As you said, my unusual nature renders me impervious to it."

"It could be said that node space is more the place you are native to than normal reality," Dawn said.

"I'm not sure I like that," Jason said. "I mean, it's fine to visit but I don't think I'd stay."

"The question is whether this improvement to your understanding of astral magic is improving your ability to identify and repair nodes," Farrah said.

"I think it is," Jason said. "It feels like it is but I guess we'll see as we keep going."

"I ask," Farrah said, "because I'm worried about what happens when the ambient magic crosses the threshold where magic starts manifesting directly. No more proto-spaces will make identifying nodes harder."

"I don't know how that will go," Dawn said. "What Jason is doing amounts to pioneering a new sub-specialty of astral magic. Or, perhaps more accurately, he's exploring a field that has always been taboo. This kind of interference with the physical/astral boundary is exactly what the World-Phoenix, and I as its representative, have always sought to sanction."

"But you have to cut open that patient to perform surgery," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn said. "If we haven't sufficiently repaired this end of the link between worlds before the magic here changes, we will find a new methodology. What it will cost us is time."

"I guess I should pack up the cloud palace," Jason said. "With how things are going in Europe, maybe we should have gone there before Australia."

"I don't regret it," Farrah said. "We cleared Australia's only vampire lord, which puts it in a good place. With how many vampires are coming out of the woodwork, it may be that Australia becomes a fallback position for humanity's magical forces. They're fractured and scattered now but the vampire lords are just too powerful. The magical factions will need to stop fighting and come together."

"Assuming the Americans don't just nuke Venice," Jason said.

Five spears made of red crystal slammed into Jason, throwing him back and pinning him to the wall. One went through his gut, one through his chest and one each in an arm and a leg, immobilising them. One went for Jason's throat but he managed to dodge enough that it ripped a chunk from the side of his neck instead of piercing through the middle.

“You made a terrible mistake,” the vampire said as it walked slowly toward him.

“I know,” Jason said painfully through gritted teeth. “I should have changed before going out. This outfit is ruined. Which is ironic, given that you’re the one in need of a wardrobe update. I’m sorry, mate, but if you think those lace cuffs are working for you, I’ve got some bad news.”

“You are a fool.”

“I’m a lot of things,” Jason said. “Focusing on that one seems rude when there are so many options. I’m quite peckish, for example, which you’d know if you were polite enough to ask. I don’t suppose you’ve got a sandwich on you? Probably not a sandwich guy, right?”

“I am going to turn you.”

“Could you turn me into a construction guy? You’re damaging a museum, here. You know they have Carracci’s *The Choice of Hercules* here? I love that painting, although his choice should definitely be to put on some pants. I know the Mediterranean is a pleasant climate but it would be nice to see one picture of Herc where he wasn’t tackle-out. That’s rough sunburn to get.”

“I’m going to hurt you before I turn you,” the vampire said as blood flowed from his hand, took the form of a sword and crystallised into a razor-sharp blade.

“I don’t suppose you’re talking about hurting my feelings?” Jason asked optimistically. The vampire raised its sword to strike when webbing wrapped around it and yanked it backwards, sticking it to a wall opposite where Jason was pinned. The vampire immediately started yanking itself free, even as a fire bolt struck the webbing, setting it and the vampire ablaze.

The moment the vampire was pulled away, Jason cast a spell.

“Your blood is not yours to keep but mine on which to feast.”

The red crystal spears in his body turned back into blood and were absorbed into his body, healing the wounds that they, themselves had made and freeing Jason. As the spell took effect, dark mist shrouded him, swapping out his bloody clothes as his blood robes and starlight cloak were conjured around him.

“You took your time,” Jason said as the mist vanished. Threads already on fire snaked in through a large hole in the wall, wrapped around the vampire as it pulled itself free and yanked it once more, this time right out of the building.

“He hit me through a wall with a sculpture of a naked guy hanging out with a naked little boy and some grapes,” Farrah said. “It was more worrying than the vampire.”

“I wasn’t sure I could stall the guy out until you stepped in. If I’d tried to cast my spell with him right in front of me, he’d have stopped me before I could finish the chant. I couldn’t even shadow jump with those things in me. I think they stop teleportation.”

“How did you stall him out?”

“Talked a bunch of crap.”

“Then I’m sure you were fine. You played to your strengths.”

Dawn came hurtling in through the hole, clearly not voluntarily as she went tumbling over the museum’s display floor.

“Perhaps a little help?” she suggested, calm in spite of her dishevelled state as she lightly hopped to her feet.

Jason extended a shadow arm and smashed the ceiling light. There were more lights in the large hall and darkness didn’t impede a vampire, but that wasn’t his goal. The dim light and sculpture exhibits turned the area into a playground of shadows into which Jason melted as the vampire stalked back in through the huge hole in the wall where Dawn had pulled him out.

This vampire was stronger than the one they fought in Australia, turning its own blood into versatile weapons. With Jason added in, though, it was not as hard as the one Dawn and Farrah had faced without him. Dawn used control effects while Farrah staggered the vampire with blitz attacks. The final piece of the puzzle was Jason, taking the chances Farrah and Dawn provided to lock in his afflictions. The Farrah and Dawn kept it off balance until the afflictions overcame it.

When the vampire went down, they were barely able to keep it alive. Fortunately, Jason’s transcendent afflictions dropped off over time, allowing the gold-rank fortitude of the vampire to leave it barely clinging to life.

“I guess you drain it,” Farrah said.

“Actually,” Dawn said, “I would like to try something. Bring him and we’ll go; he’s not the only vampire lord in Naples.”

“What do you want to try?” Jason asked as he grabbed the vampire’s scorched legs.

“Something not entirely ethical,” Dawn said.