

Chapter 314

The Price of Transgression

Jason had just dropped lightly down to the lower deck as the boat rolled under his feet on the open ocean. The three men were startled as the object of the search they just ordered alighted right in front of them. He pushed the hood of his cloak back off his head to reveal his face and they looked each other over.

Jason saw that the magic flowing through them was complicated and felt more like the magic of an item than a living thing. Essence users, vampires like Vermillion and true magical creatures like Stash and even monsters had a magic that felt alive. In these men, the magic was more like their body parts had been used as the material for inert magical items while those body parts were still attached.

Most intriguing to Jason was that the three men were flooded with a power that was artificially raising their rank. It felt very much akin to someone using a spirit coin, but the power was not draining out of them after only a few moments.

More people were arriving to form up behind the first three. They were all bronze-rank, with less complicated magic and without the power boost flowing through them. Their magic felt like the EOA thugs he hadn't fought at Vermillion's café. They were a variant of converted, which were magically modified people he had seen the Builder cult use. The Builder's examples had been more improvised, using a modified core with extremely negative side effects. The Builder's forcibly-implanted cores essentially hijacked the body and trapped the soul, leaving mindless drones.

The ones he had seen on Earth had critical differences. For one thing, his aura senses revealed that the soul was empowered, like an essence user's, rather sealed away to serve as little more than a magical battery. The Earth converted were also more holistically imbued with magic, rather than it all stemming from a central core. He could sense the distinct magic in their flesh, their bones and even their skin.

There seemed to be two grades of converted. One was simpler, which was the bulk of the people he could sense on the yacht. The three leaders had more sophisticated magic inside them, along with whatever power was artificially raising them to silver rank.

Jason spoke to them as the group eyed him off. His voice was sober and almost soft, with none of its usual bombast. It nonetheless carried over the noise of water slapping into the boat, a trick of voice projection that he had picked up while learning to speak without using air from his lungs.

"My name is Jason Asano," he said, "and you've come here to kill me. You won't."

He subtly employed his aura to hold their attention without provoking them, although they were clearly on the verge of launching themselves at him.

“Here’s what’s going to happen instead,” Jason continued. “You’re going to try and kill me. I’m going to make an example of one of you and then offer the survivors the chance to surrender which, to be clear, means answering my questions and handing over this boat.”

“You seriously think you can intimidate us into just giving up?” one of the three leaders asked.

“Not yet. I’d like it if I only have to kill one of you, but I imagine it all will take all three of you before the others fall into line.”

Jason mentally dubbed the three leaders as numbers One, Two and Three. He could learn their names if they were smart enough to surrender. They wore heavy seaman’s clothes, heavy, warm and topped off with woollen beanies. Everyone on the yacht was a man and, aside from Jason, a heavily muscled one. It looked like someone had found a fishing crew at a gym with lax steroid abuse policies.

Under the clothes of the man Jason had mentally dubbed number one, a sigil of light started glowing. It looked to Jason exactly like a magic tattoo. Jason felt magic surge from the tattoo and into the man, who was suddenly propelled forward into a magical charge.

A second tattoo lit up on the man’s arm, which was wreath in fire as it passed through Jason’s empty cloak. Jason had already shadow jumped through it, moving the moment he sensed the surge in magic. In another shadow a freshly conjured cloak hid him as he examined the man more closely with his magical senses.

Unlike the body-horror converted of the Builder, the Earth converted seemed to have the power to accept multiple magic tattoos. Normally one was the limit and the ability to have more could turn these converted into second-rate essence user knock-offs. They would have few and less sophisticated powers, but if they could be produced in high numbers it would be an incredible force.

He could only sense a few tattoos on each of them, though, and he knew from experience that magic tattoos had much high cooldowns that essence powers. Of course, it was possible that limit had been broken as well.

The three were looking around for where Jason had vanished to, shouting at their subordinates to spread out and search.

“So much for making an example of us,” said Number One. “He flees at first sign of trouble.”

A line of darkness snaked from the shadow cast by the deck above, an arm holding an ornate black and red dagger. It made two shallow cuts on Number One’s leg and tried

to withdraw, but was grabbed by the silver-rank reflexes of Number Two. Despite the shadow arm's intangible nature, a small tattoo on the back of the man's hand was glowing and the hand had no trouble gripping Jason's shadow arm. The arm and the dagger both vanished as Jason relinquished the conjured items.

"He can hide in the shadows," Number Three said. "Enhance your vision."

"That will cost us boost time," Number One pointed out.

"Which gets us nothing if we spend it poking uselessly into corners," Two pointed out, supporting Three. The eyes of Two and Three started glowing bright blue, as did the previously invisible tattoos around their eyes. One's eyes reluctantly lit up after. Looking around again, they spotted Jason standing casually in the shadows.

Once their gaze locked onto him, Jason ducked through a nearby pair of sliding glass doors that opened at his approach to reveal the yacht's main saloon. It was a larger version of the bar lounge on Jason's houseboat, which Jason dashed into while casting a spell on Number One.

"Bleed for me."

The doors slid closed behind him, only to open as the trio rushed past their onlooking subordinates.

"Should we help?" one of the henchmen asked.

"Don't get in our way," Number Two warned them.

Inside the saloon, soft lights and the tinted windows made for few shadows and Shade's bodies started moving around the room to give Jason shadow jump options. The saloon furniture would give Jason the advantage when he could just shadow-jump around it. Combined with the room's extravagant size, he decided it would make a good place to face off with the trio of converted.

They chased him in and he cast a second spell on Number One, before jumping from one of Shade's bodies to another and casting a third. The trio were clearly used to working as a team, spreading out for maximum coverage and limiting Jason's room to manoeuvre. When Number two started using his ability to strike intangible object to attack Shade's bodies, Jason decided to switch it up again.

His primary goal was achieved, with the affliction suite in place on Number one, so it became a matter of waiting. Recalling Shade's bodies, two of which were a little ragged from taking hits, he went through a door and deeper into the yacht.

The trio chased him through the door, up stairs and out onto the top deck, where he leapt right off and out over the water. Using his shadow arm and slow fall, he reached out to the lower deck and pulled himself back aboard, continuing the merry chase.

The trio pulled their subordinates into the pursuit with shouted orders, sending them scattering across the yacht to keep an eye out. In the mean time, Number One was increasingly suffering from the afflictions Jason had locked in place.

“Why aren’t I healing?” he asked out loud. His veins and flesh were increasingly becoming deathly black as the necrosis claimed his body at an accelerating rate.

“Because you don’t get to heal anymore,” Jason said reappearing in front of them. “You’re dead and you just don’t know it yet.”

“Fix him,” Number Two demanded. His body language screamed that he was itching to leap after Jason once more but he held himself back. He clearly understood that Jason was more likely slip away than hold still to have a remedy shaken out of him.

“I can’t help him, now,” Jason said. “He’s dead, whatever I do.”

“If I die, you’re coming with me,” Number One snarled.

“We both know that isn’t true,” Jason said. “Those of you still alive have another chance to surrender.”

“Keep chasing him,” Number One snarled, fearless even in the face of death. “All that teleporting has to cost him. His mana can’t last forever.”

Two and Three did as instructed, resuming the pursuit as Jason went back to fleeing all over and through the huge yacht. At one point, two of the bronze-rank henchmen chased him through a door to a dead end and he used his aura to suppress theirs, debilitating them with a soul attack. As he rushed past them, they each pulled out an injector even as they doubled over in pain and jabbed themselves in the legs.

The magic of their bodies advanced immediately to silver rank, as if they’d both just consumed spirit coins, but there were also differences. Their auras remained at bronze-rank and felt divorced from the magic of their bodies. Jason’s soul attack was not repelled but ignored, as if their bodies were now operating independently from their souls, operating on animal instinct. The men were slack-faced with empty eyes, more like the converted the Builder used.

They stood up straight with no indication of pain, even as wild magic coursed through their bodies. Whatever boost they injected themselves with was clearly less stable than what the trio of leaders had taken, and with far greater side effects. Jason quickly got himself away from the spooky, zombie-like henchmen.

The pursuit eventually brought Jason back to the body of Number One, who had expired on the lower deck. Two and Three arrived to see Jason draining the remnant life force from Number One’s corpse.

“As your life was mine to reap, so your death is mine to harvest.”

“You have the choice,” Jason called out to them as the corpse at his feet withered to a dried-out husk. “Surrender, or one of you is next. With you guys as my mana supply, I can do this all day. Can you say the same about those boosts you’re on? How long will they hold out, exactly? Is there blowback afterwards?”

Number Two snarled but Three grabbed his arm.

“He’s not wrong,” Three said fiercely. “We aren’t catching him and we used our boosts early so we could use those rockets.”

“You want to surrender?” Two asked incredulously. “After what he just did to Henri?”

“He’ll do the same to us.”

“No, he’ll die.”

Two yanked his arm free and rushed at Jason, who didn’t run. He held up his hand, his palm slick with blood as leeches started spraying like water from a garden hose. Shade appeared behind Jason, who stepped back, rising up from Number Two’s own shadow and making two shallow cuts with his dagger. Two was madly yanking leeches from his face as he yelled more in panic than pain.

Three and henchmen following the noise watched in horror as Two staggered around while Jason added more spells. Rather than run them around again, Jason was using Colin for a more brutal approach, rapidly overloading Two with afflictions. Some of the henchmen moved to go after Jason but Three ordered them back. Two’s gaze fell on the ocean water and he had a revelation, launching himself toward the edge of the yacht.

“Drop,” Jason commanded and the leeches fell instantly to the deck as Two threw himself over the side.

“Come back,” Jason commanded. The seawater splashed onto the deck by ocean swells was already having a negative effect on his leeches, killing off a decent number of them. A bloody strip emerged from the pile of Colin and flew over to Jason’s hand. The leeches melted into a ball of blood and were drawn along the bloody rag as if sucked through a straw.

Jason then went to the side of the boat where Two was treading water, glaring at him with a face already blackened with necrosis. At bronze-rank, just as at iron, Colin remained the most powerful weapon in Jason’s arsenal.

With killing number one, Jason had wanted to drag it out, to show the others his suffering. With number two he wanted to close it out quickly and demonstrate the threat he posed, so he cast another spell.

“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”

Two screamed as Punition piled on damage for each of the many afflictions on him.

“We surrender!” Three called out. “Can’t you let him live?”

“When I warned you,” Jason said without turning around, “it was not because I would refuse to stop. It was because I didn’t have the option. When I fight, I fight to kill. My powers offer me no alternative.”

He turned around to face Three.

“There is a price for transgressing against me. How many more of you are willing to pay it?”

He glanced back at the man suffering in the water, rising and falling with the ocean swells.

“Feed me your sins,”

Jason drained Two’s afflictions and left new ones in their place, which glowed as the started annihilating him from the inside out. Two was strong and resolute, but the transcendent damage was where the screaming began.

“We surrender, damn you!” Three called out. “Stop it!”

“I can’t stop it,” Jason said, looking at Three. “I can only finish it. *Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death.*”

Behind Jason transcendent light shone down on Two. When it faded shortly thereafter , nothing was left by empty ocean.

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- [Elite Converted] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.
 - 413 [Euros] have been added to your inventory.
 - [Satellite Phone] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Cellular Phone] has been added to your inventory.
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Jason turned his gaze on Number Three.

“It’s time for us to have a talk.”

“How did you do that?” Bruce asked, looking at the EOA thugs lined up on the deck. Most were on their knees, although two were on their backs looking decidedly unwell.

“We had an amicable chat,” Jason said, “and they decided the most prudent course was to come quietly.”

“Amicable,” Bruce said, looking at the black stain on the deck. He knew the smell of death and the black residue stank like the Devil’s armpit.

Bruce had been anxious about what they would be dropping into after the powerful rockets had come their way. He’d been able to shoot them down before they struck the semi-conscious iron-rankers but it left him with trepidation about what awaited them below.

Once he dropped back into range of Jason's voice chat, he was told to land directly on the top deck. His wind gliding power let him do so without trouble and the strange, self-guiding parachutes did so almost as easily.

Both sides had people in recovery. The Network's iron-rankers were given another round of potions, except for Ketevan who remained the most badly injured but was not yet ready for another. On the EOA side, their leader was clearly exhausted, while two of his men couldn't even stand, their auras flickering unstably.

"I told you at the start what surrender means," Jason said to Three. "I take the boat and you talk. If I think you're holding back, we go back to the other thing."

"I'll talk," Three said. "Just leave my people alone."

"Your people?" Bruce snarled. "You killed our people. My team. My friends. I should execute the lot of you."

"Don't vent your rage on the snake's body," Jason said. "Save it for when you take the head. Which Number Three here is going to tell us all about."

"Number Three?" Bruce and Number Three asked simultaneously.

"Sorry, I was just calling you that in my head," Jason said. "What's your name?"

"Reynaldo Agostinelli."

"Alright, Reynaldo," Jason said. "I have a lot of questions. Bruce, use the sat phone on the table there to check in with your people so we can figure out our next move."

Bruce picked up the phone, only for it to start ringing.

"Expecting a call?" Jason asked Reynaldo.

"It will be the man who sent us," Reynaldo said. "The Network man, Adrien Barbou. We should have checked in by now"

Jason knew that Barbou was the Operations Director of the Lyon branch, Annabeth's direct counterpart. Shade had not managed to spot him in the time he had been watching the Lyon branch.

"The Network set this up?" Bruce asked, disbelievingly. "Why would he work with the EOA?"

"I don't know," Reynaldo said. "They tell us what to do, not why."

Jason took the phone from Bruce and answered it.