

Chapter 394

Trying to Be Merciful

In Venezuela, Jason identified and repaired another node. He was starting to get used to the process and had gotten the time required down to under an hour. After leaving the node space, he opened a portal back to the cloud house, currently disguised as a complex of hastily-erected prefab buildings in the mountain town of Galipan.

Close to Caracas, Galipan had long been a tourist staple but was rapidly turning into a refuge for mid-level government and military officials from Caracas and La Guaira. After a transformation event triggered open battle between the magical factions, many low-to-mid-level authority figures had immediately looked to escape.

Galipan had been overlooked by the upper-level officials, allowing the middling people to move in and force the locals out, claiming the inns and residences for themselves. The new prefab buildings were assembled for their support staff, not the displaced locals.

Jason's family had been laying low in the cloud house as Jason and Farrah once more went through a series of proto-spaces to pinpoint the right node. Dawn remained with the cloud house to intercept any danger, now that she possessed a silver-rank avatar.

No one left the cloud house other than Jason and Farrah. A bunch of foreigners would not be out of place back when it was a tourist village but now they would stick out like a sore thumb. They were all caught up watching the news from around the world as order continued to deteriorate.

Cities fell under martial law or became outright battle zones with soldiers fighting essence-users fighting superheroes fighting all manner of strange creatures. Channel after channel, news site after news site showed the world descending into disaster and unrest.

"...the 'puppet presidency' riots continue in many major US cities, with the new administration's attempts to mobilise the National Guard in response meeting resistance from some state governors..."

"...spokesperson stated that there was no internal strife in the CCP after the recent leadership changes, but with China's media blackout continuing, there is no way to know the true state of..."

"...infighting within the Global Defence Network has been blamed for the new monster surge in the small island nation..."

The family all sat together in the lounge room, watching as the world fell apart.

"It's like watching the end of the world," Erika's husband Ian said as Jason, Farrah and Dawn returned to the cloud house.

"That's what we're trying to avoid," Jason said and his family turned to look at the returning trio.

"How did it go?" Jason's father Ken asked.

"Another one down," Jason said. "Time to pack up and move on."

"Not quite," Dawn said. "There is still one more thing to deal with."

"What's that?" Jason asked, then tilted his head as if trying to hear something in the distance.

"Oh," he said as something entered the range of his aura senses, moving fast. "I'll take care of it."

"What is it?" Farrah asked.

"Some EOA lackeys," Jason said. "We've had a good run but someone was bound to find us eventually and the EOA is working with the government here."

"Why would the EOA go after you?" Farrah asked. "I thought North wanted you to do what you're doing."

"So he said," Jason told her. "Could be he was lying. Could be that he wants to test my ability to affect Builder magic after absorbing the door. Most likely is that he just hasn't told his organisation anything about it."

"What if his organisation ends up stopping you?" Farrah asked.

"Then Jason was never strong enough to get the job done anyway," Dawn said, then turned to Jason. "Deal with them and then we can depart."

A full twenty superheroes in matching pseudo-military outfits flew through the air, soaring up the mountain. As they closed in on the town of Galipan they slowed down and released a camera drone, in accordance with League of Heroes media protocols. They made their approach to the town low and slow, making sure the people there had the chance to notice them and to pull out their phones. The flying superhumans paused, hovering over the town and the new expanse of prefab constructions.

"Which one is it?" one of them asked their leader. "Should we start searching them?"

"No need," the leader said, nodding in a certain direction. The others looked, seeing a figure flying slowly towards them. It had a cloak of void black, spread out like wings, over a robe the colour of dark, dried blood. From within the cloak's hood was a pair of silver eyes that shone like starlight, while two blue and orange orb-eyes floated around him.

“Jason Asano,” the leader announced loudly, making sure his voice would be picked up on phone cameras. He spoke in English, which told Jason that this was all for the publicity.

“I am Autoridad,” the leader announced. “We are taking you and your associates into custody.”

Hovering in the air, the heroes spread out in a semi-circle around Jason. Jason’s wing cloak held him up and he looked almost like he was underwater as his cloak floated around him. The heroes had more sober and sensible outfits than their US counterparts, with their costumes bearing a militaristic and authoritarian style. The Venezuelan flag prominently on display. Venezuela was a country that had ousted the Network in favour of the EOA and their superheroes, an arrangement that was holding even through the current chaos.

“How much do you know about the process that gave you’re your extraordinary abilities?” Jason asked. “Did you know that the earlier, weaker versions of the process had a habit of turning people insane? The reason your generation doesn’t is that there is something inside you called a clockwork cor—”

“We aren’t here to listen to you Asano,” Autoridad cut him off. “Surrender or don’t.”

“I’m trying to explain why coming after me is a bad idea,” Jason said. “I’m trying to be merciful. I don’t know what will happen when—”

Jason was cut off again as eyebeams blasted from Autoridad in his direction. One of the orbs around Jason became a shield of force, rippling like water as it intercepted the blast.

“Look, banana republic General Zod,” Jason said. “This is your chance to walk away. Fly away, whatever. Please take it.”

“You essence magicians all think yourselves so powerful. You mentioned the weaker versions of us that came before. You know that they can boost their strength, yes? You may be arrogant enough to think that you’re stronger than all of us, but we now have a boost strong enough to work on us. Using the power of reality cores, we can become far more powerful than you.”

“Why are you the only one who gets to monologue? I thought I was the villain, here, superhero.”

Autoridad reached for an injector pen in a sheath on his belt.

“Don’t do it,” Jason warned.

Autoridad ignored Jason and grabbed the injector pen. Then he dropped it as he and all the other superheroes simultaneously started having seizures and fell from the sky.

They landed hard on the street below as people filming with their phones scattered out of the way. Jason floated down into the midst of the fallen heroes who continued to twitch on the ground.

Jason's cloak vanished as he alighted upon the ground, revealing an unconcerned face to the people filming him as he panned his gaze over the heroes. Silver liquid seeped out of their tear ducts as their twitching seizures come to a stop, along with their lives.

"So that's what happens," Jason muttered absently. Leveraging his soul attack was apparently quite effective against clockwork cores, due to the effect absorbing the door had on his ability to affect the Builder's magic. How it would fare against star seeds he didn't know but was looking forward to finding out.

The town was silent, people moving out of his way as he ignored them, walking over to one of the buildings. His family stepped out of it and he started absorbing the building into his cloud flask.

Once more flying over the ocean in Shade's plane form, Jason, Farrah and Dawn were in a small conference cabin, discussing their next destination.

"After refining the search parameters with the details from the last node," Farrah said, "we've got two viable target regions to search for the next. One is in Australia, the other in Europe."

"I would like to go home," Jason said. "I know the village has been kept out of everything we've seen on the news but I'd still like to check on it. There's also whatever mysterious thing Dawn arranged for us while she was between avatars."

"The question is Europe," Farrah said. "Venice had been entirely taken over by vampires. Are they looking to establish a safe haven for themselves and that's the end of it or is this just the beginning? Should we go now, before things get worse or give it time and wait for things to settle?"

Jason absently tapped a finger to his lips as he considered.

"Craig Vermillion suggested there's a lot more of these old vampires than we've seen," he said. "Especially in Europe. I think I'd prefer to know what we're walking into, even if it's bad, rather than be caught up in some kind of vampiric uprising."

"If we were," Farrah said, "maybe we could make a difference."

"We are making a difference," Jason said. "The sooner we cut off the reality core supply, the sooner the vampires go back in their box."

“Those cores aren’t like spirit coins,” Dawn said. “It will take time before they are consumed. Once the Cabal rouses their vampires, it will be some time before they return to slumber.”

“All the more reason to get this done, Jason said.

“We have had distraction enough,” Dawn agreed. “We are trying to help this entire world, not just some of the people on it.”

“Australia it is, then,” Farrah said. “Maybe it’s time to explain what you arranged for us. You said it was personal.”

“I’ll explain after Mr Asano’s sister is done with him,” Dawn said. “You and I should give them some privacy.”

There was an angry hammering on the cabin door and they could all sense Erika’s aura on the other side of it. Dawn and Farrah left the cabin, letting Erika in. Erika marched in and tossed a computer tablet on the table, paused on a video.

Jason didn’t ask, instead, reaching out to unpause the tablet.

“...disturbing footage and viewer discretion is advised. It would appear that the world’s first superhero has gone full villain, killing an entire team of Venezuela’s superheroes. The Venezuelan government have released a statement saying that this will impact their ability to prevent monster waves...”

Jason paused the video again and met his sister’s glare with a blank expression.

“What is it, Erika?” he asked softly.

“You’re just killing people on the news, now?”

“Yes.”

“What is my daughter meant to make of that, Jason? You know how much she looks up to you. She was scared of telling you that she didn’t want to go fight monsters with you and now she sees you slaughtering people on television?”

“Did they have the audio of that footage? They weren’t just coming for me, Erika. They were coming for all of us. I won’t let that happen. Not again.”

“And what? You’ll kill whoever it takes to make that happen?”

“Yes.”

Erika had been turned from angry to unsettled at the quiet determination with which Jason answered her questions.

“You were worried about the things you’ve done changing you,” she said.

“Yes.”

“You were right to be.”

With a worried look at her brother, Erika left the cabin.

"I know," Jason whispered to the empty room.

Craig Vermillion drove a small powerboat over Sydney Harbour, approaching a larger vessel and pulling up alongside. He tied off his own boat and hopped lightly from one to the other.

The larger boat was a modified fishing boat, to which a powerful chain winch had been affixed for dragging heavy objects up from the depths. Craig made his way past the crew, human minions of the cabal, and into the captain's cabin.

"Craig," the man inside greeted, getting up to shake Vermillion's hand.

"Franklin."

Craig looked at a large crystal bottle on the table, held securely in a foam-lined box. Inside the bottle was a purplish liquid.

"Is that it?" Craig asked.

"It is," Franklin said.

"Literal blue blood."

"I don't know how they make it," Franklin said. "I got a glimpse of one of their magic rocks. I'd rather be well out of all this, to be frank. Which I am."

"Still with that joke, Frank? You've been telling it for, what? Forty, fifty years? Has anyone ever laughed?"

"It's not really the time for laughter, is it?"

"Not an excuse, Frank," Craig said, then his shoulders slumped. "You know, if you don't want to be part of this, you don't have to be."

"I'm not one for rebellion, Craig."

"It doesn't have to be rebellion. You can just get out, let it all blow over."

"Do you really think that's going to happen?"

"The reality cores will only last so long," Craig said, gesturing at the bottle of modified blood. "Once they can't make any more of this, the old ones will go back to sleep."

"Assuming that your boy Asano somehow manages to undo all this mess."

"He will."

"He's one man. He's powerful, but compared to the old ones? We already know he lost to his own group's essence magician. This is the way things are, now, Craig. We need to compete."

"It doesn't have to be an arms race."

"Yeah, Craig. It does."

Vermillion sighed.

"I'm going," he said. "If I can't stop it, at least I won't be a party to it."

"You may come to regret that, Craig."

"When you're as old as us, Frank, regret is an inevitability."

"I suppose it is."

Franklin took out a memory stick and held it out for Craig.

"A list of safe houses and supply caches I don't think are on the books," Franklin explained. "No guarantees, though, so keep your eyes sharp. Security codes and protocols are all in there."

"They won't be happy if they know you gave me this."

"Then don't tell them."

Craig took the stick with a laugh and shook his friend's hand again.

"Good luck, Frank"

"You too."

"Are you sure you won't come with me?"

"Get going, Craig. You want to be long gone when we wake this guy up."

Craig went back to his boat and took off. He took the battery out of his phone and threw them into the harbour. Behind him, the huge chain winch on the boat stirred into rumbling, diesel-powered action. Craig and his boat were nowhere to be seen by the time it hoisted what looked like a stone sarcophagus from the water.