

Chapter 403

When Someone is Under Your Gun

Jason pushed himself to his feet with a groan, his body still tingling from the electrical attack. The magical APC, looking like something from a sci-fi movie, had left him behind and was roaring around a corner in pursuit of the others.

"It's possible that you have been looking down on Earth's essence users too much," Shade suggested.

"I was thinking the same thing," Jason agreed. "If you would?"

Shade took the form of a motorcycle and Jason climbed aboard as Gordon disappeared into Jason. Two of Gordon's orbs appeared in his place and started orbiting around Jason as the motorcycle took off. The APC was fast but the much smaller bike was both faster and more manoeuvrable, leading Jason to soon catch up.

A machine gun emerged from a recessed panel atop the APC and started firing backwards, one of the orbs turning into a shield to intercept the bullets. The disruptive-force added to the damage quickly destabilised the shield but Jason started swerving left and right to buy more time before it collapsed.

The shield collapsed and the second orb took its place, although it, too, was swiftly chewed through. Bullets started hitting Jason and his cloak intercepted the attacks, but as with the shields, the disruptive force on the bullets was effective at negating much of his cloak's protective power. That left a good portion of the kinetic impact to slam into Jason.

Without a bunch of handy minions to afflict, Jason was at his weakest with both his physical fortitude and regenerative powers at their lowest point. That being said, at silver-rank the lowest point was still very good and Jason endured the barrage to draw closer to the vehicle.

"Let's give him some more targets," Jason said and six more bikes appeared alongside him, with Shade's bodies riding them. Jason conjured up starlight cloaks on each and they started weaving amongst each other, making which one was him harder to pick out. The machine gun started spraying them all, but with the bullets more diffuse, the cloaks were better able to endure them.

Jason cast a spell at the APC but as he did, the force field Gordon had torn down earlier snapped back into place around the vehicle.

"Bleed for me."

- You have afflicted target with [Necrotoxin].
 - You have afflicted target with [Sacrificial Victim].
 - You have afflicted target with [Bleeding].
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 - Target is fully shielded.
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 - [Blood From a Stone] does not take effect.
 - [Necrotoxin] does not take effect.
 - [Sacrificial Victim] does not take effect.
 - [Bleeding] does not take effect.
-

“Bloody hell.”

Jason had been spoiled by an aspect common to his spells, which was affecting targets directly, without an intermediary like a projectile. This was common in low-impact spells, the signature of affliction specialists like himself. Powers that provided comprehensive shields, however, were highly effective against such spells. Sadly for Jason, such powers were common, especially amongst healers. Jason had learned the frustration of that in the mock battles between his team and that of Prince Valdis of the Mirror Kingdom.

“Go again, Gordon.”

The nebulous familiar appeared and jumped out ahead of the APC in a series of dashes before once more blasting the vehicle's force field with blue beams. The front-firing rotary canon reappeared to harass him, preventing Gordon from constantly barraging the force field. Gordon also had two fewer beams, due to the orbs Jason had consumed as shields.

Seeing the limited effectiveness of his approach, Gordon instead fired two of his remaining six orbs at the shield, the orbs coming into contact just before they reached it and exploding with blue energy. The powerful blast of disruptive-force caused the APC's shield to immediately collapse again but Gordon was largely disarmed until his orbs recovered, which would take a minute for each. He fell back to be subsumed once more into Jason.

The APC had not been idle while Gordon worked. A roof panel slid aside and a stream of micro missiles fired up into the air before turning back and raining down on Jason and the Shades just as Gordon returned.

“Is this a bloody anime?” Jason decried as the bikes spread out. Gordon's last two orbs manifested beside Jason and started firing orange beams to intercept the missiles, the pinpoint beams intercepting the ones tracking Jason himself. The bulk of the projectiles hammered down on the Shades, however, rocking them with explosions.

Inside the APC, Andreas Kosmopoulos was watching the rear monitor where the chasing motorcycles had disappeared into a dust cloud as the missiles blasted the road.

“Did we get him?” asked the other person in the APC, a Cabal member named Javier.

“No,” Andreas said. “There’s no way that Jason Asano went down from that.”

The driver’s station in the APC was a futuristic command station with multiple screens and glowing control panels. There were no vulnerable windows in the vehicle, the exterior monitored through a series of external cameras. Asano was frustratingly hard to pin down, the vehicle’s normally excellent tracking systems having trouble targeting him. Even his image on the cameras was something of a blur, and the heat tracking wasn’t able to pick him up in the dust cloud.

Andreas glanced at the recharge time on the shield. One of his most critical defensive measures, it had now been rapidly brought down twice. His only consolation was that he was confident in the resilience of his vehicle. While Asano’s powers were famously destructive to life, the APC had no blood to bleed and no flesh to rot.

The conjured vehicle of a true specialist like Kaito or Andreas differed from most conjured items. The APC was much more powerful than something like Jason’s dagger but it held commensurate weaknesses. It was critical to many of Andreas’ other abilities that were either diminished or didn’t function at all without it. The biggest drawback was that once destroyed, there was a considerable cooldown before it could be called up again. There were other conjured vehicles he could use but these would only be lesser placeholders.

On the rear monitor, Asano emerged from the dust cloud. His decoy bikes were gone but he appeared unharmed. Andreas was retasking the rear gun when the damage report monitor started flashing red.

“MULTIPLE ABNORMAL CONDITIONS DETECTED,” came the APC’s mechanical voice.

“INTRINSIC NATURE COMPROMISED.”

“Intrinsic nature compromised?” Andreas wondered aloud. His APC had been subject to all manner of attacks over the years but this was something completely new.

“Andreas,” Javier called out in a panicked voice. “What’s that?”

A red liquid was leaking from between the spot where two wall panels joined.

“Some kind of mechanical fluid, probably,” Andreas said. “Asano is using some kind of attack I’ve never seen before.”

“ADDITIONAL ABNORMAL CONDITIONS DETECTED. INTRINSIC NATURE FURTHER COMPROMISED.”

Javier transformed into a wolfman, occupying more of the interior space but the APC was designed for moving groups of people. He sniffed at the liquid. Meanwhile, Andreas tried to get to the bottom of the continuing alarms.

“Define error ‘intrinsic nature compromised,’” he commanded.

“MECHANICAL SYSTEMS ARE NOW SUBJECT TO BIOLOGICAL VULNERABILITIES ON MULTIPLE PARAMETERS.”

“What does that mean?” Andreas asked.

“It means that your vehicle is bleeding,” Javier growled with his wolf mouth.

“It doesn’t have any blood,” Andreas said.

“I don’t think the guy who fought a zombie army with magic butterflies really cares.”

Vermillion’s stolen car was being pursued by multiple silver-rankers on foot. Three were vampires, including the one that had transformed into the gargoyle-like creature harassing them from the air. The other two were essence users, poached by the Cabal.

Vermillion’s stolen car had endured a lot of abuse but the pursuers had avoided using their most powerful attacks for fear of damaging the stolen goods, not realising those goods were not in the car at all. Finally, the car succumbed to a death by a thousand cuts and the engine gave out, the car slowing to a stop in the middle of the street.

A new black car dashed up, skidding to a halt in between the bullet-riddled car and the people chasing it. Dawn and Farrah stepped out, facing off against the pursuers. Seeing that Vermillion and the others in the broken car were not running, the pursuers slowed down to face off with the new arrivals. Vermillion, Frank and Night Stalker moved out to stand with Dawn.

“Farrah,” Craig greeted. “It’s been a while.”

The two essence users and the two vampires on foot came to a stop. The gargoyle-like creature flew down and transformed into a naked man.

“Larry,” Frank admonished. “Put on some damn pants.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do, traitor,” Larry said. “Besides, the ladies might like what they see.”

Dawn and Farrah looked Larry up and down, shared a glance and both smirked derisively.

“Hey...” Larry said, moving his hands to cover himself before turning back into a leathery monster.

One of the essence users hadn’t shifted his gaze from Farrah.

"I've been wondering about you for a long time, Hurin," he said. "Coming here, acting like you're so much better than us. Teaching us how to use our powers as if we're ignorant primitives. You're supposed to be so great; I'd like to see it for myself."

Farrah conjured her obsidian armour and jagged sword.

"Happy to oblige," she said.

Farrah had never been plagued by Jason's self-doubt and fears of moral decay. If someone wanted to make themselves her enemy, she would cut them down and sleep like a baby that night.

"It doesn't have to get violent," the other essence user said. "Just give us what you took and we can all walk away."

"The hell we can," one of the vampires spat. "You think they can just take from us and walk away?"

"Their vampires are second-grade weaklings," another vampire said. "Why make concessions when we are stronger?"

Each side had two essence users and three vampires, but the three Cabal vampires were silver-rank while Vermillion, Franklin and Night Stalker were only bronze.

"I hate to break it to you, but you got duped," Vermillion told them. "You chased the decoy. The blue blood and the reality cores are long gone."

"Enough talk," the first essence user said, raising his arm. An obsidian wall raised up in his face, which shattered as the lightning blast from his arm struck it. The shattered fragments then rocketed toward the essence user in a storm of razor-sharp stone. Dawn timed the casting of a spell to activate right as the essence user was distracted and he didn't notice the magic circle appearing under his feet. As the stone storm passed, webbing shot up from the circle to swiftly mummify him and Farrah smoothly followed up with a spell of her own.

"Fire bolt."

A blazing orb shot from Farrah's hand towards the essence user mummified in webbing. The webbing ignited immediately, throwing off an intense heat as it burned. Even so, it was being consumed slowly and kept the essence user bound as he had to force his way free.

"Oh, that's nice," Farrah said, admiring Dawn's spell as her fire bolt chained to the other essence user and the vampires. One quick spell was far from enough to deter silver-rankers, even if vampires were more vulnerable to fire. Their skin burning, they lunged forward into the wall that was Farrah and Dawn, the two women proving as impassable as a steel barrier.

One of the vampires was trapped in more threads that shot up from the ground, immediately igniting from Farrah's flames still burning on him. Another found Farrah's whip-sword wrapping around him, the obsidian fragments piercing his skin and the lava cord searing his flesh. The Vermillion and his companions teamed up to fend off Larry, the flying monstrosity.

Bankstown was now supernaturally volcanic, which suited Farrah just fine. There was a pyroclastic flow running alongside the road and she dragged the vampire wrapped in her sword in that direction.

"This is going to be fun."

"CATASTROPHIC SYSTEM FAILURE."

"Your machine has a penchant for the obvious," Javier growled. The APC was melting around them, the walls were dripping black, poisoned blood from panels starting to look more like distressed flesh than metal as it fell off in gobbets. Andreas was trying every weapon ability he had while feeding as much mana as it would take into the self-repair system.

"SELF-REPAIR HAS NEGATED CONDITION 'BLEEDING' AND WILL RESUME NORMAL FUNCTION. CONDITION 'BLEEDING' HAS BEEN APPLIED. SELF-REPAIR SYSTEM DIVERTING RESOURCES TO NEGATE CONDITION 'BLEEDING.' SELF-REPAIR HAS NEGATED CONDITION 'BLEEDING' AND WILL RESUME NORMAL FUNCTION. CONDITION 'BLEEDING' HAS BEEN APPLIED. SELF-REPAIR SYSTEM DIVERTING RESOURCES..."

Andreas slapped his hand on the mute button. The rapidly degrading state of the APC was causing all the large weapons to fail. He had deployed the smaller ones but Asano wasn't even defending anymore, letting the bullets hammer into him.

"Is that guy immortal?"

Between his cloak and his regenerative abilities, the smaller weapons the APC had been reduced to couldn't hurt Jason much faster than he healed. Given the resilience of a silver-ranker, that meant the fight was as much as over and he just had to put an end to it. From the back of his motorcycle, he cast a spell.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

Punition dealt damage for every instance of every affliction on the target. Jason sank extra mana into the spell and the APC's structure started to sag like a bouncy castle with a hole in it.

Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell.
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (17%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Penitence].
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- Effect (silver): Damage per affliction can be increased by increasing the mana cost to high, very high, or extreme. This reduces the cooldown to 20 seconds, 10 seconds or none. Consecutive, extreme-cost incantations have truncated incantations.

- [Penitence] (affliction, holy): Gain an instance of [Penance] for each curse, disease, poison or unholy effect that is cleansed from you. This is a holy effect.

- [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.

Maximising the mana cost also maximised the damage and negated the cooldown, turning the spell into a high-damage mana-sink. He cast the spell again straight away, with the truncated incantation, then once more, the spell burning through his mana supply.

“Suffer.”

“Suffer.”

With each spell, the APC deflated alongside Jason’s mana supply, but to his surprise and admiration, it was not yet destroyed. Unsure if it would even work, he cast another spell.

“Feed me your sins.”

Jason drained the accumulated afflictions from the APC, which apparently qualified as an enemy. He was unsure if it was because he’d been able to levy afflictions on it or because it was a special kind of conjured object. Either way, Jason was replenished by consuming the massive array of afflictions he drained from it, filling his mana and stamina well past full. They continued to rise, along with his health, as the enemy afflictions were converted into a stackable recovery buff.

The APC no longer looked like a stricken beast and more like the vehicle it was, albeit one that had been plunged into a lava pit. It was glowing bright with transcendent

damage that cared nothing for active defence mechanisms and auto-repair systems as it chewed away at the metal. Jason cast the final spell.

“Mine is the judgement and the judgement is death.”

The two men inside the APC were surrounded in transcendent light and the APC finally succumbed. They fell to the road as the moving vehicle around them vanished as the conjuration ended. That was not enough to injure someone of their rank and they quickly jumped to their feet.

Looking around, they saw a dark figure walking towards them, the motorcycle behind him dissolving into a dark cloud and being drawn into his shadow. Silver eyes watched them from a dark hood as he slowly approached. With the cloak wrapped around him and his smooth steps, it was almost like he was floating. The intimidating visage was broken as Jason pushed the hood back off his head, revealing a face bloodied from a bullet that had hit him in the head.

“Hello, Andreas.”

“Jason,” Andreas said warily. “I’m sorry about Kaito.”

“Not so sorry that you wouldn’t try and kill his brother.”

“You’re protecting someone who stole from us.”

“Reality cores aren’t yours to possess.”

“Only you get to have them?” Andreas countered.

“No one gets to have them,” Jason said. “You’re strip-mining reality. You think that won’t have consequences?”

“We’ve heard your claims,” Javier growled, still a hulking wolfman. “No one believes you’re going to save the world, Asano.”

“I know. I’m going to save it anyway. Go home, Andreas.”

“You’re letting me go?”

“Yeah. Do me a favour and remember that when someone is under your gun and you have a choice to make.”

Javier looked from Andreas to Jason.

“You aren’t just going to let this go?” he asked.

Andreas looked at the wolfman.

“He beat me at my best, and now I’m at my worst. You want to try him on, that’s your business.”

Javier turned to lunge at Jason but Jason's aura came crashing down like a hammer. With just one target and nothing else to distract him, Jason could apply his aura at full force.

Title: [Giant Slayer]

- Overcoming a much stronger enemy has left a permanent mark on you that can be sensed by others. This may trigger a fear reaction from the unintelligent and the weak-willed if your aura is significantly stronger than theirs. Your actual rank being lower than theirs does not diminish the effect.
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The wolfman froze, trembling like a prey animal.

“Take him home, Andreas.”

Andreas looked at the stiff Javier and felt the fear drenching an aura hunkered down like a mouse under the gaze of an owl. He turned to look at Jason.

“Thank you.”