

## Bonus Chapter (Christmas 2020)

### Silver

Jason was on the roof of the main residence in Asano Village. There was a helicopter pad and, as would soon become important, the facilities to clean a helicopter. He didn't use the cloud house to meditate because the supply of diluted crystal wash that was the fuel for its cleaning functions was a limited resource. Once he crossed the line to silver, there would be quite a mess.

Jason had fed everything from purgation quintessence to high-grade cleaning chemicals into the cloud flask, to lessen its reliance on crystal wash. There had been some measure of success but it was ultimately stalling the inevitable. Jason had searched for a local substitute for crystal wash but there was, in the end, nothing quite like the original.

For this reason, Jason chose not to cross over into silver-rank in the cloud house where the finite supply of crystal wash would be tapped to clean some of the most intransigent filth it was possible to create. Instead, Jason chose the helicopter pad atop the main residence with its high-pressure cleaning systems. Farrah was watching over him, keeping her distance at the edge of the roof. She was not going to let anyone or anything interfere in one of the most important moments of Jason's life.

Standing at the edge of the roof, Farrah turned when she felt a surge of power behind her. What she saw was Jason in a cross-legged meditation pose, radiating silver light and floating an arm's length over the surface of the helipad. He unfolded his legs and dropped lightly to the rooftop.

Jason and Farrah shared a smile but she didn't move closer, knowing the process had only just begun. Soon enough, Jason moved into the purge phase of his rank-up, his body excreting much of its mass right through the pores of his skin. Although it had already diverged quite a lot from a human's, there was still flesh blood and bone in Jason's bronze-rank body. It was broken down and purged, oozing out of his skin until the skin was rendered down as well.

Jason's body was rendered down to a glowing body of light, shining through the filth that stubbornly clung to it as it floated in the air. A tide of magic washed out of him, arresting the attention of everyone in Asano village with magic or aura senses.

All around the village, those who had been given essences turned their head in Jason's direction. Some of the more distant ones set out to investigate, while the closer ones scrambled to get away from the crushingly oppressive strength of the aura projection.

In the medical centre, the handful of network personnel present felt like someone had walked over their grave.

Jason aura continued to dominate the village as a new body formed within the silver light, growing from a kernel until a whole new body was in place, hidden under the muck. The light faded and he dropped to the rooftop, staggering but managing to keep his feet. Soon after, Farrah was washing him down with an industrial hose that would not have been out of place on a fire truck.

“How are you feeling?” she asked loudly.

“Like an inmate in a dystopian sci-fi prison movie,” he called back as the powerful stream of water blasted him.

“You didn’t pass out. That was good.”

“I did get a bit woozy but my energy is coming back fast.”

“That’s your silver-rank recovery attribute at work.”

He had also consumed a silver-rank spirit coin.

“You should take down some proto-spaces to get a handle on your freshly-advanced powers,” Farrah suggested. “Especially since a good handful of your abilities ranked-up in a rush at the end.”

“No time,” Jason said. “I’m going to head for Japan today.”

“Then I’m going with you. I’ve been cooped up with a bunch of ritualists for months but now there’s nothing more to do than wait for the grid to come back online. Now that you’ve hit silver-rank, it’s time for you and me to do some damage.”

“It’s a diplomatic trip,” Jason said.

“Right up until it isn’t,” Farrah countered. “We should take my little apprentice, by the way.”

As Farrah continued hosing him off, Jason thought about how adrift he had felt when he arrived in the other world. If Emi truly became an adventurer and joined his return to the other world, he wanted her as prepared as possible.

When Farrah was done, a thin film of hard-to-remove gunk still coated his new body. That much wouldn’t be too taxing for a diluted crystal wash shower in the cloud house to remove. Jason opened up a portal to the cloud house but paused before stepping through.

“You’re right,” he said. “We’ll have to talk to her mother.”

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Jason felt like a live battery as he showered in the bathroom dome of the cloud house, still jittery from ranking up. Moving from bronze to silver was a significant jump in power and he could feel the magic moving through his body like an electrical current. He

could feel the ambient magic in the world around him, in the air and the water splashing against his skin. Jason's ability to control his own physiology had reached a new level and he was able to regrow his hair simply by concentrating.

As he was towelling himself off, he sensed Asya, Dawn and Farrah approach the cloud house through the underground tunnel. He also sensed something with them on the tram car. It appeared to be a large crate of magical materials. With his spirit attribute now silver-rank, his perception no longer strained under the constant threat of sensory overload. He'd been working on managing it ever since his perception power ranked up, but now what took effort was a matter of ease.

Jason moved through a tunnel from the bathroom dome into a lounge dome, pouring a tray of drinks as he waited for Shade to show them in. Farrah arrived carrying the crate, which was more a challenge of awkwardness than weight, given her prodigious strength. Although they were both silver-rank now, Jason's raw physical power was still no match for Farrah.

"That's quintessence," Jason said, his magical senses recognising the contents of the crate. "It's all silver rank. That's a fortune."

"The international community wanted to show their appreciation for your efforts in Makassar," Asya said. "You saved a lot of lives, both in stalling out the second proto-space and dealing with the category four."

"I got lucky," Jason said. "It was a confluence of circumstances unlikely to be repeated."

"Not long after we met," Farrah said, "I mentioned to Rufus that you were lucky. You know what he told me?"

"Knowing Rufus, probably something he heard from his grandfather."

"Of course it was," Farrah chuckled. "He said that great adventurers are the ones that turn opportunity into fortune. Or something like that. The point is that when the same thing keeps happening, good or bad, eventually you have to accept that it's not luck. It's you."

"You were not chosen by the World-Phoenix," Dawn said. "You were an opportunistic selection made available when you were drawn between worlds by happenstance, but we could have done far worse."

"Thank you," Jason said.

"We would have preferred Kaito, obviously," Dawn added, "but you can't have everything."

"That is ice cold," Asya said with a wincing chuckle as Jason looked at Dawn, slack-jawed.

“What kind of thing is that to say?” Jason asked.

“You punched my nose through my brain,” Dawn said.

“What?” Asya asked.

“You’re still complaining about that?” Jason asked.

“Coming from someone still angry they reused footage for the fourth season of *Airwolf*,” Asya said. “I’m sorry, Jason, but that show was bad even before they cut the budget.”

“I could swear this conversation started by thanking me for being great,” Jason said. “It seems to have taken a turn.”

“Nothing says thank you like a giant crate of quintessence,” Farrah said.

“As I said,” Asya explained, “the international community wanted to show their gratitude. The International Committee, the branches, everyone. China seemed especially grateful to avoid questions about a powerful secret weapon they didn’t have to pull out.”

“Asya had them dipping into their supplies for the good stuff,” Farrah said.

“We know you’ve been trying to trade for certain hard-to-find materials for months,” Asya said.

“What I’ve been after isn’t enough to fill that crate,” Jason said.

“I suggested we add in what you need to upgrade the cloud flask,” Farrah said.

“Dawn gave us the specific requirements.”

“Farrah, that’s a fortune in materials on your world,” Jason said. “On this one it’s priceless.”

“Jason,” Asya said, “I’m not sure you understand how nervous the Network is about category four threats. Every solution we have is expensive, untested and almost certainly going to have outrageous collateral damage. At category four, even a monster dumb and slow enough to stand in front of our heavy weapons is still an iffy proposition. One that’s smart and fast? The Chinese sent us a magically enhanced nuclear device. It was our final contingency.”

“Also, shut up and take the loot,” Farrah said. “What kind of idiot complains about a huge pile of treasure?”

“Are you going to tell us you didn’t pay a price in Makassar?” Asya asked.

“Of course I did,” Jason said. “But so did thousands of others, starting with the citizens of Makassar. Are they all getting crates full of treasure shipped to them?”

“You were Rufus’ student more than mine,” Farrah said. “It seems you’ve picked up his habit of measuring himself by his failures. No matter how powerful he becomes, how

skilled he is, he always focuses on the times he fell short. The people he couldn't help. I'm sure you saw it after I died."

"Yes," Jason acknowledged.

"It's the thing that makes him weak and holds him back," Farrah said. "You have your own flaws to be getting on with, so don't go taking his too."

"What flaws?" Jason asked.

"Are you serious? You believe in freedom but have the heart of a tyrant. You'll do what you think is right, regardless of what it costs or who gets in your way. That would be obnoxious enough if you were always right but you have a nasty habit of getting confident first and informed second. Do have any idea how much damage a self-righteous person with real power can do? Remember Anisa?"

Farrah shook her head.

"You have to recognise how much potential you have by now," she continued. "You're like Rufus in that so long as you get out of your own way, you're going to be one of the greats. More than me or Gary or even Emir. You just have to avoid destroying yourself along the way. Also, like Rufus, you're kind of a diva."

"A diva?"

"You were prone to melodrama long before you had magic," Asya said. "Also, your signature power is a sparkly cape."

"It's not a cape!"

"Look," Asya said. "The evacuees of Makassar are getting crates of food shipped to them because that's what they need. You got shipped a crate full of treasure because that's what you need. While you've been here ranking-up, Dawn and I have been briefing the Network on what happens after the grid comes back online. We need you as strong as you can be for that."

"Unless you think you're strong enough," Dawn added.

"There is no strong enough," Jason said.

"Which brings us back to you shutting up and taking the damn loot," Farrah said. "You can be such a pain to deal with sometimes. You turn the easiest thing in the world into a huge deal."

Jason looked around and saw three faces in agreement.

"Alright," Jason capitulated. "Give my thanks to whoever sent all this stuff."

"Oh, Terrance is going to have you record a bunch of thank you videos," Asya said.

"That's what he thinks," Jason muttered, wandering over to the crate. He hefted it up and shoved it into his inventory before opening his spirit vault and walking in, leaving the three women behind.

"Where is he portalling to?" Asya asked.

"It's not a portal," Farrah said. "That leads to his spirit vault. It's the inside of his soul. Kind of. I think. I'm not entirely clear on the specifics."

"Jason's semi-spiritual nature had allowed one of his abilities to create an actual physical realm," Dawn explained. "You might consider him to be a living astral space."

Asya looked at the archway.

"His soul is through there?"

"It's more complicated than that," Dawn said, "but, broadly speaking, yes."

"Are we allowed to go in?" Asya asked. "He didn't say anything either way."

"You can only go in if you trust him," Farrah said. "And I mean really trust him, no reservations. He's the god of that world and has complete power over you in there. Unless you have complete faith in him, your own soul won't let you in. Jason's opinion is that anyone who can get in is allowed in."

Farrah turned her gaze on Dawn.

"Maybe she's powerful enough to not fall under control."

"My true body, yes," Dawn said. "This avatar is incapable of entering Jason's vault. Or, more precisely, doing so would sever its link to my true self and it would die."

Asya moved hesitantly to the arch and raised a hand. It reached the darkness inside and stopped like it hit a wall.

"Complete trust isn't easy," Farrah reassured her. "It's okay to like him as much as you do and still have reservations."

"Can you get in?"

"When Jason and I were strangers and he was all but powerless, he threw himself into danger to save me and my companions. The kind of trust we're talking about comes from either a closeness you don't have yet or from walking through fire together. Just because you aren't there yet doesn't mean you don't care about him."

"It means I have reservations."

"Of course you do," Farrah said. "Only Erika, Emi and I have been in there. If you had that kind of trust at this point in your relationship, that would not be healthy. You actually getting through that archway would probably scare him off."

“It would denote an inappropriate level of emotional investment,” Dawn agreed. “Farrah does not want from him what you do. To trust as a friend and a companion is no small thing but does not require the same vulnerability as the kind of connection you want.”

“I trust Jason with my life,” Farrah said. “You probably would too, but the heart is a whole other thing. You’re ready to start exploring that, but it’s just that: the start. You are where you should be.”

“Thank you,” Asya said disconsolately.

“You should totally pin him down and knock one out though,” Farrah said. “He’s stressed and you’re so horny it’s leaking out of your aura, even with that suppression bracelet.”

While Asya looked scandalised, Farrah threw her the best impish Jason grin she could muster and ducked through the arch.

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Jason’s spirit vault had undergone another expansion and evolution with his ascension to silver-rank. The first thing Jason noticed that it was moving away from the stark black, white and red colours that had defined the previous iterations. Now the colours were more natural, and varied, less of a confronting assault on the senses.

The central pavilion was now a vast and elaborate series of interconnected, open-air buildings drawing on a mix of Asian and European styling. Jade, marble, bamboo and wood abounded, while at the centre there was still a four-sided pagoda.

The bottom floor of the pagoda held the four archways that were the centrepiece of the spirit vault. One archway was for Jason himself, through which he and Farrah emerged, while the others were for his familiars.

Even after dismissing their bronze-rank vessels, Jason could sense Colin and Gordon through the arches. Only if they decided to forgo being his familiars would that connection truly be lost as new astral beings took their places.

Materials started flying down from a hole in the ceiling, above which was the storage area higher in the pagoda. Blood quintessence flew down like a swarm of insects to dive into the archway that belonged to Colin. So long as he had the materials, Jason didn’t need the ritual to summon new vessels for his familiars, using the archways instead. He had only used the ritual with Shade as a publicity exercise.

Colin’s arch was the familiar obsidian, but instead of being filled with darkness like Jason’s portals, there was a sheet of wet blood. In the past, Colin’s new vessels had emerged in a rapidly escalating stream of leeches that piled up. This time, something wholly different emerged.

It was a humanoid figure, wrapped in a hooded cloak over combat robes, all dark red leather in shades of dried blood. It stepped forward with none of the clumsy stumblings of Colin's bronze-rank form, striding confidently up to Jason. It raised hands with the red-purple hue of a bruise and pushed back the hood. The face underneath was identical to Jason's except for the skin, which was the same dark colouration as the hands, and the eyes, which were glistening red orbs.

"Aren't you fancy," Jason said with a smile and held out a hand, palm up. "Would you like to show off a little?"

The Jason-clone exploded into a fountain of leeches, one of which landed on Jason's hand and he stroked it gently with his thumb.

"G'day, little mate."

The scattered leeches all shot out streamers of red leather, glistening wet, that converged on a central point and dragged the scattered leeches together, reforming the humanoid shape. The whole process happened in a flash, taking only a few seconds. Then Colin stepped forward and melted into Jason's body, vanishing in an instant.

Jason felt a connection to his familiar's biomass much greater than in the past. His new silver-rank body was akin to that of Colin's and rather than it vanishing entirely, like a normal summoned familiar, Colin seemed to at least partially have merged with him. It didn't bulk him out, but his already heavy body grew heavier still.

He suspected that his growing symbiosis with Colin was not just a factor of Colin's growing strength but also Jason's nature, blending spiritual and physical elements. He anticipated that more so than Shade or Gordon, there would be additional effects that he would need to explore over time.

One effect that was a result of Colin's new rank he could already sense and his body became shrouded in dark mist. His clothes vanished into his inventory, which in his spirit vault meant whipping off his body and flying up through the hole in the ceiling. Then his body became covered in a slick coating of blood, seeping through the pores in his skin. That blood thickened and solidified into a leather combat robe. It looked much like the one worn by Colin's new humanoid form, minus the hood and with an even darker red colouration.

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Item: [Sanguine Raiment] (silver rank, conjured)

*Conjured robes with the power and resilience of an apocalypse beast (armour, cloth/leather).*



- Effect: Increased resistance to damage. Highly effective against cutting and piercing damage, less effective against blunt damage.
  - Effect: Heal over time effects have increased strength and duration. This effect scales with the amount of familiar biomass being shared with the summoner and amplifies the passive healing the familiar provides.
  - Effect: Drain abilities have increased effect. This effect scales with the amount of familiar biomass being shared with the summoner.
  - Effect: Resistance to blood effects is significantly increased.
  - Effect: Can be used to make ranged grapple attacks. Health is continually drained from grappled enemies.
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The mist faded and Farrah looked Jason up and down. He conjured his cloak to complete the ensemble, shadow draped over dark red.

“Nice to see you embrace the ‘I’m coming to kill your children’ look,” Farrah said.

“It’s not that bad, is it?”

“It’s alright,” Farrah said. “You’re now the first person I’d think of if I woke up to find my livestock drained of blood, but it’s fine.”

“Wow. Alright, let’s see what Gordon has got going on.”

As with Colin, materials came flying down and into Gordon’s arch, a dark void containing the familiar eye nebula. Gordon’s new vessel floated out, looked much the same as before, with a disembodied cloak containing the blue and orange nebula in the chest. The difference was that instead of four blue and orange eye-spheres orbiting him, there were now six. The orbs were also slightly different than before as instead of half being predominantly orange and the other half blue, all six were an even mix of the two.

Gordon drifted closer and Jason reached out to touch him, to get a sense of the familiar’s new abilities. Unlike his other powers, the abilities of his familiars were not included with the description of the power that summoned them. When he touched Gordon, a list of the powers appeared and Jason raised his eyebrows as he read them.

“Bloody hell, Gordon.”

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“You look different,” Erika said as Jason walked into the study of the main residence. She put down the computer tablet she was working on and studied Jason’s face.

“I am different,” he said.

“You know if this keeps up, you and Kaito will look like twins.”

“That’s not uncommon,” Farrah said, following Jason through the door. “Siblings who are essence users often become quite similar, physically.”

“Great,” Jason said unhappily.

“I don’t see why you’re complaining,” Farrah said. “You’re the one who wins in that deal.”

Erika and Farrah laughed at the affront on Jason’s face, which then settled into a serious expression.

“What is it?” Erika asked.

“We need to talk about Emi,” Jason said.

“What about her?”

“I’d like to start taking her with me more as I do things. If the day does come where we’re in the other world, she needs as much experience under her belt as she can get.”

“Jason, I look at how different you are from the brother I grew up with. How much death have you seen in the last week? If you tell me that it didn’t mess you up, I’ll call you a liar and you want to drag my thirteen-year-old daughter closer to that?”

“I’m not talking about the violent stuff,” Jason said. “My friend Humphrey was fifteen when he received his essences but his mother wouldn’t let him become an adventurer until he was seventeen. She spent years before and after he claimed his essences in training and preparation, not just fighting but taking him around the world. Letting him experience different cultures and see the aspects of being an adventurer that aren’t about fighting and killing.”

“That’s easy to say,” Erika said. “What happens when things go wrong?”

“Of course they’re going to go wrong,” Jason said. “Hiding her away just means that she won’t be ready when they do. You said that I’m not the person I was before and that’s true. I was thrown into this with no foundation under my feet and I’ve been tumbling ever since. I want to give her the grounding that I never had.”

“We want to give her that,” Farrah added. “Jason talked about his friend Humphrey and my friend Rufus experienced much the same. Your daughter isn’t exactly a princess, Eri, but she isn’t exactly not, either.”

Erika rubbed a hand over her mouth thoughtfully.

“I don’t like it,” she said. “That being said, not liking something doesn’t make it go away. When are you leaving?”

“This afternoon,” Jason said.

“Then the answer is no,” Erika said. “I’m not going to allow this without taking the time to think it through and discuss it properly with my husband.”

“We can push it back to the morning,” Farrah said. “Give you the night.”

“We can?” Jason asked, looking at Farrah. “Alright, but I’ve delayed longer than I should already. We leave first thing, with Emi or without her.”

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A plane that looked more like a spaceship designed by ninjas hovered over the helipad of the Asano village main residence. The air rushing down to keep it aloft tore at the clothes of the people gathered underneath and made it impossible to talk. There were eight people present: Jason, Farrah, Dawn, Asya, Akari, Emi, Erika, her husband, Ian, and Jason and Erika’s grandmother, Yumi.

Yumi was unrecognisable from her previous self, now that she had received a full set of essences. Concerned about the infirmity of age, she had chosen essences designed to work around it. After lengthy discussions with Farrah, she chose the blood, flesh and bone essences, giving her the avatar confluence. As a result, she had been able to remake her body into an idealised version of her younger self, looking no older than Jason.

A heavy platform descended from the bottom of the plane, attached by cable on each corner. Ian kissed his wife and daughter a silent goodbye and watched as the others rose into the body of the plane. The moment the platform sealed them inside, the rushing air died off, allowing them to speak.

“Let’s go sit down so Shade can get some altitude without tipping us over,” Jason said.

The Japan party had expanded, Erika only allowing Emi to go with parental supervision. As Ian was busy with the medical centre, she decided to join the trip herself, passing the administrative tasks of the village over to her sister in law. Yumi had also gotten wind of the trip and added herself, which Jason had not resisted.

As they made their way from the room with the entry platform to the passenger compartment, the others looked around Shade’s plane form. It was the size of a private jet, and with Jason now silver-rank, there was no costly drain on his mana.

“I didn’t realise there were this many shades of black,” Yumi observed, looking around at the plane’s décor.

They settled into the flight and Yumi started probing Jason as to the actual purpose of the trip. Jason remained evasive, as the magic door that was their objective was a secret restricted to himself, Dawn, Farrah and Akari. He was happy to run the others on the plane around in conversational circles as it kept his mind occupied. The bloody events of the past week continued to prey on his mind and he found surrounding himself with friends and family to be a welcome distraction.

“Why isn’t Mike with us this time?” Jason asked.

“Aram is still in Makassar,” Asya explained. “There’s going to be a huge international contingent there for months, if not years. At least, there should be.”

“Problems?” Jason asked.

“The Indonesian government has been making noise about the Network coming in and taking over,” Asya explained. “They’ve been trying to seize control of Network assets, which has gone exactly as well as you’d expect. There’s also the lingering hostility with the local Cabal. The next battle in Makassar will be a diplomatic one.”

A few hours into the flight, one of Shade’s bodies appeared next to Asya.

“Miss Karadeniz, Mr Aram wishes to contact you quite urgently. If you would please follow me to the communications compartment.”

Asya followed Shade and came back a few minutes later as the plane shifted course. Jason frowned, remembering the news that caused a course-change on their last trip to Japan.

“Please tell me there isn’t another gold-rank proto-space that got missed,” he said to Asya.

“No,” she said, her expression grave. “The next battle in Makassar won’t be political after all.”

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On top of a semi-ruined building in Makassar, a portal arch rose up and Jason stepped through in his dark robes and starlight cloak. Jason had brought his full contingent of Shades, having left the rest of the passengers in Dili, which was just inside Jason’s new maximum portal range for reaching Makassar. His portal was only strong enough to transport one silver-ranker, so he had Farrah stored in his spirit vault. Now that they were both silver-rankers, that no longer prevented his portal ability from working. He opened another archway to let her out and they moved to the edge of the building.

The news out of Makassar had been horrifying and seeing it for themselves was even worse. From their vantage on the rooftop, they could see two-storey monstrosities of dead flesh and ugly steel. Zombie giants of flesh augmented by iron implants shambled through the streets.

Around the giants, the multitudes of dead victims of Makassar yet to be extracted from the ruins rose to join them as shambling dead. Jason’s fist clenched at his side as the bodies of the people he had failed to save the first time around were desecrated. He could sense the death magic emitted by the giants being invested into the corpses.

“For all that they’re monstrous,” Farrah said, “those things aren’t actual monsters.”

Jason pushed aside his fury, focusing on one of the giants. There was plenty of magic coursing through it, but as Farrah said, it was not the magic of a monster. It had the artificial feel of a living thing altered through magic, something Jason was familiar with.

“This feels like the Builder’s magic,” he said, his voice carrying the hard chill of permafrost. “Someone made those things.”

Extending his senses to the limit, he could sense the Network and Cabal presence already in conflict with the zombie giants and the army of the dead being animated around them. He vaulted off the edge of the building, gliding with his cloak as he aimed for the closest zombie giant.

Jason could sense it was silver-rank, as was the death magic it invested into the zombies rising up around it. That posed a potentially larger threat than the dinosaur monsters, through strength in numbers alone. The early death toll estimates were between one and two-hundred-thousand, which would be an ocean of silver-rank zombies. They knew the zombies would be far weaker than even the most meagre of silver-rank monsters, but a tsunami of them would be a terror to anyone without the power to deal with them.

Jason grimaced as he approached the ground, furious at being forced to take the fight to what had become victims in both life and death. Despite their unliving flesh, he did not draw his sword, having left it in his inventory. Instead, he conjured his dagger as he landed on the ground in front of the giant.

Gordon manifested next to Jason and immediately fired orange beams at the ordinary zombies slowly staggering in their direction. Each orb could now fire whichever of the two beam options was appropriate instead of being locked in, on top of the entirely new functions they had gained at silver rank.

With Gordon holding the slow-moving horde off, Jason chanted a spell at the giant.

*“Bleed for me.”*

After Jason chanted his spell, blood started flowing from the giant. Not the thick, black blood of the dead, but bright, red and fresh. Jason’s Haemorrhage spell added a new affliction at silver rank.

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- [Blood From a Stone] (affliction, magic): Negates immunity to blood and poison effects. This includes including intrinsic immunities, such as from not having a biology or corporeal form. Entities without blood can bleed while under this effect. Cannot be cleansed while any blood or poison affliction is in effect.
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Jason cast another spell.

*“Carry the mark of your transgressions.”*

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- [Mortality] (affliction, magic): Negates immunity to curses. This includes intrinsic immunities such as from not having a soul or not being alive. Cannot be cleansed while any curse affliction is in effect.
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The giant slowly turned on Jason as his dagger shot out on the end of a shadow arm. His Hand of the Reaper power also added a new affliction to any attack made with his shadow arm.

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- [Weakness of the Flesh] (affliction, magic): Negates immunities to disease and necrotic damage. This includes including intrinsic immunities, such as from not having a biology or corporeal form. Cannot be cleansed while any disease affliction is in effect.
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Jason went to work locking in the rest of his affliction suite, the sluggish monstrosity being strangely helpless for its rank. It had the resilience and strength of a silver-rank monster but the speed of an iron-rank, posing Jason no threat.

“Gordon,” Jason said and the familiar floated into the air, halting its beam attacks. All six of Gordon’s orbs left his orbit and flew down to disappear into the dead flesh of the giant. Although it would take a minute for Gordon to conjure up new orbs, the new affliction they delivered was worth it.

Six black butterflies with blue and orange wing colouration in the familiar eye pattern were conjured on the body of the giant, immediately flying off to land on and disappear into nearby zombies. Shortly thereafter, butterflies started manifesting on them, finding more zombies as they spread and spread until butterflies were streaming out of the entire zombie horde and the sky was thick with the beautiful orange and blue creatures.

The effect on the zombies was significantly less appealing than the colourful display in the air above them. Like the giant, their bodies started flowing with red blood and their already rotting flesh underwent rapid decomposition.

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- [Harbinger of Doom] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Continually drain mana from the victim to conjure a butterfly that seeks out nearby enemies. The butterflies are incorporeal and deal disruptive force damage in a small area when destroyed. Butterflies that contact enemies inflict one instance of each non-holy affliction present on the enemy it manifested from, including [Harbinger of Doom]. This effect cannot be cleansed while any other non-holy affliction is in effect. Additional instances can be accumulated. At the time of manifestation, one butterfly is generated for each instance of this affliction.
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Jason's full suite of afflictions was carried by every butterfly, moving out like the tide. He didn't even bother to fight anymore, watching the giant in front of him with malevolence as its body rotted. Even the iron and steel components of its body were bleeding and rotting as if they were flesh.

As the monster crumbled in front of him, Farrah approached. She had used her own chaining area attacks, so the zombies were not just rapidly decomposing but on fire as well.

"We need to find who did this," Jason said.

"Yes," Farrah agreed darkly. "These people had it bad enough, without being turned into grotesque, undead puppets. How do we find them, though?"

"I only know one group with access to the Builder's magic," Jason said. "We let the Network dig into it while we go to Japan."

"You think this is an attempt to stall us?"

"It's possible. We've delayed too much, in any case. We can see what the Network has dug up by the time we're done in Japan. Two angry people can't match the investigative power of the entire Network, after all."