

## Chapter 367

### Hunted

The proto-space version of Makassar was overrun with rainforest growth, the sky filled with volcanic ash. Four humanoid dinosaur hybrids were moving through the city, the gold-rank King in the lead. There were more of the silver-rank dino-men scattered through the proto-space as well.

King and his subordinate monsters were moving away from the aperture and the horde of humans they anticipated being on the other side. They did not want to be dumped amongst them when the proto-space shifted them into the larger reality. The powerful legs of the monsters sent them thundering through the city at pace until King suddenly stopped.

“What is it?” asked Chesh. The only female of the group, she was the leader of King’s silver-rank cohort, having proven her strength against Kowal and Silha.

“Something has changed,” King said, tilting his head as if listening for something. The former anchor monster could still sense the condition of the proto-space. “There’s something here that’s slowing down the passage to the next world. The time between each of our brethren crossing over will be longer, making them vulnerable to those awaiting us on the other side.”

“What is doing this?” Kowal asked.

“I don’t know,” King said. “I think some manner of unusual being has intruded upon this world. Spread out, find the others. Tell them to find this being and destroy it.”

“Is there anything else we can do?” Chesh asked.

“As this realm breaks down, breaches will form. Tell the others that if they find a stable breach, send our brethren through. Make sure they know only to go if it is stable. If it is changing in shape or size they must avoid it at all costs, for it will kill them.”

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As he appeared in the proto-space, Jason realised that it was a warped version of the equivalent space in normal reality. This was something he had encountered before and while it was uncommon, it was not so uncommon as to put him off. This version of Paotere Harbour was post-apocalyptic, with the wooden boats smashed, rotted and half-submerged. The buildings he could see were in disrepair and overgrown, reminding him of the astral space in which he had spent half a year. These buildings were not ancient stone ruins, however, but the modern constructions of his own world.

The ambient magic was thick and rich, more than any place he had been before. The magical strength to sustain gold-rank entities would actually be useful to him, making his

relatively low power level harder to sense. Like a quiet noise hidden by a louder one, the potent ambient magic would mask his presence.

The ambient magic that supported the gold-rank monster that was somewhere in the proto-space was not present on Earth. Once it crossed over, the monster would rapidly become starved for magic. The damage it could do until it did, especially in a densely populated area, meant that waiting it out would not be an acceptable approach for the Network forces. They would need to find a way to kill it without wiping out half the city themselves.

Jason had two goals in the astral space. One he completed just by arriving.

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- You have entered a proto-space in the process of dissolution.
  - As the physical space breaks down, dimensional apertures will appear, including stable apertures that allow monsters to escape to the coterminous reality. Other apertures will be unstable, containing profoundly destructive dimensional forces.
  - [Nirvanic Transfiguration] will slow the process of dissolution but cannot arrest it. Apertures from the proto-space will appear at a reduced rate.
  - [Nirvanic Transfiguration] will allow you to actively stabilise or destabilise nearby apertures.
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So long as Jason remained in the proto-space, the monsters from it would arrive in more of a drip-feed than a wave as their escape points appeared more slowly. Given the preponderance of silver-rank monsters, every moment he could stall their emergence would give the Network more breathing room to protect the civilians.

That would buy time for his second objective: to kill as many silver-rank monsters as he could before they reached the real Makassar. He had no illusions that he could match the Network's ability to sweep and clear but he would do his best. As for the gold-ranker, he would need to avoid it.

Even if he had been silver-rank instead of at the peak of bronze, there was no way for him to overcome a gold-rank monster. The jump from bronze to silver was something he had learned to overcome but silver to gold was on a whole different scale. If he was silver rank and the designated damage dealer in a whole team of silvers it might be different. With others protecting and facilitating him it might be possible, although at the early stages of silver that would be a sketchy proposition at best.

Jason knew full well that if the gold-ranker found him, he was dead. He had one chance to resurrect before silver-rank, though, and if this was how he spent it, he could accept that.

All of these thoughts passed through Jason's head in a moment. He could sense the monsters heading in his direction, probably attracted by the magical distortion of his

arrival. He had emerged on the open ground of the docks and standing in the open was a quick path to being swarmed and killed, so he looked around for the shadow of the closest building and then stepped into Shade and vanished.

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A dino-man who had chosen the name Loth for himself watched rainbow smoke rise up over a nearby rooftop. He had seen its like before, with monsters dissolving into the smoke sometime after death. What was new was the sheer amount, as if many monsters had died all at once.

He had been told of a being that was slowing their passage to the next world, so he was leading a group of the unthinking dino-monsters in search of a stable portal. All that rainbow smoke was likely to be related to the unknown being, however, and the priority was to hunt it down. If he destroyed it, he might get the chance to join King's cohort.

He had almost thirty dino-monsters under his control, although they were spread over a goodly area as they picked their way between the city buildings. The streets were broken and overgrown, some worse than others. It ranged from almost intact with maybe some grass growing through a crack to full-blown trees rising through holes in shattered concrete.

Loth's control over the monsters kept their aggression in check, although if pushed too close together, their base instincts would take over. That meant he had to spread them out, which the terrain made even worse. The outermost monsters of his group were at the very limits of his control range, where his dominion over them was weakest.

The bulk of Loth's forces were long-necked sauropods, the most common of the silver-rank monsters. He also had two triceratops-like, horn-faced chargers and one of the tyrannosaurus variants with the spike-projector forelimbs.

Loth marched confidently amongst his monster force. Although he mentally urged them to pick up speed, there was only so fast the hefty quadrupeds could go. The silver-rank monsters were fast for creatures of their size, though, imitating a small earthquake as they moved through the streets.

Suddenly Loth regretted collecting only the strongest of the dino-monsters, now that he needed information. The lower-rank creatures were smaller, quicker and would have made passable scouts.

His herd of monsters was powerful but a sleeping person would feel its approach. His concern was that the unknown being would flee, although if it was responsible for the rainbow smoke he saw, perhaps not.

He could communicate with the dino-monsters but they were not intelligent. The larger ones were little more than sacks of angry meat being driven by instinct and hunger. The pack hunters were cunning and at least smart enough to be acceptable for scouting.

Loth and his monsters were closing in on the area he had seen the rainbow smoke when he heard one of his dino-monsters yell in pain and rage. Loth sent an admonishing jolt of mental force, thinking one of the monsters at the edge of his range had loosened from his control and become aggressive.

Wary of a chain reaction of his monsters started fighting, Loth made his way quickly in the direction of his unruly monster. What he found was a sauropod thrashing its necks around angrily, seeking out an enemy it apparently couldn't find. Loth spotted the source of its rage: a black rot spreading from one of its rear legs to the rest of its body.

After realising it was not obstreperous monsters but an attack, he conjured a magical firearm. It was long, stylised with a dinosaur motif and shot heavy, poisoned spikes. He went on the lookout for whatever was responsible, assuming it to be the unknown being. Some distance away, he heard another cry of rage and pain.

Loth found himself running back and forth as more of his monsters were afflicted, one after another without catching so much as a glimpse of the one responsible. Packed close together, the instincts of the monsters took over as Loth's control slipped further and further away.

The rage and pain of the afflicted creatures caused them to lash out and the others fought back, rapidly turning the monster-filled streets into a meat grinder. The critical point came when the tyrannosaurus was afflicted and went berserk, annihilating what remained of Loth's hold on the monsters. Loth climbed the tallest nearby building to get up and out of the chaos.

As he looked down at the mess, he failed to see any trace of what was attacking his monsters, forcing him to escape them. Then a jolt passed through him as he realised that he wasn't being attacked at all. He was being hunted.

The madness below accomplished the twin goals of depriving Loth of his minions and isolating him from support. His instincts told him to turn around and he saw a dark figure walking across the rooftop, silver eyes shining under an otherwise impenetrable hood. Loth raised his gun and fired, the spike passing through the figure as if it were an illusion. Then he realised it was not a dark figure but a figure made of darkness, with no more substance than air.

As he made the discovery, Loth felt a blade slice between the armour plates covering his back. It was a shallow cut, barely breaking through his scales to strike flesh. He whirled but found no one. He turned back to the dark figure but it too was gone.

Loth cast his gaze around, looking for any sign of his attacker. Normally his senses were sharp but he could detect nothing. Pain bit his ankle and he looked down to see a long, narrow line of darkness that ended in a hand gripping a dagger slick with Loth's own blood. He was barely able to spot it before it snaked off the edge of the roof.

Rushing to the side of the rooftop, he wasn't foolish enough to stick his head over. He extended his gun instead, firing spikes from the muzzle into any lurking ambusher. Unfortunately for Loth, the spikes did little to the lurking ambusher in question.

The spikes easily pierced the bloody rags shrouding the figure perched on the lower ledge but did little to the leeches inside. Strips of wet, red cloth shot up, wrapping around the gun and Loth's arms and he scrambled back over the roof. The gun was pulled from his hands as his retreat dragged the bloody rag entity over the edge of the roof. It was half the size of Loth, whose silver-rank strength was easily up to the task.

Loth desperately yanked off the strips of cloth wrapping themselves around him but more and more kept shooting out from the entity. As fast as he worked, they grabbed his arms, legs and torso faster than could get rid of them. They were not much of an impediment to his movement, because of his strength, but they were dragging the entity closer and closer to Loth, even as he continued to back across the roof. He didn't know what would happen if the entity reached him but every instinct screamed at him not to let it.

Giving up on pulling the strips off by hand, Loth conjured a sword and raised it into the air, ready to swing down and sever the strips. Before he could, a set of vibrant energy beams struck the blade, spoiling his grip.

Turning to the new enemy, Loth saw that it was a floating cloak occupied not by a person but by an unnerving glowing eye. Four more eyes floated around it, which were the sources of the beams still firing in his direction. In his moment of distraction, the rag-entity reached him and leeches started squeezing out between the cloth strips like the flesh of a soft fruit being squished in a fist. They swarmed over him and he collapsed, screaming. He never heard the spells being chanted at him.

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Jason stood at the edge of the building, watching the monsters tear one another apart. Jumping off the roof, he dived in to accelerate the process. Since arriving in the proto-space with only one of Shade's bodies, the way he fought reminded him of his earliest days as an adventurer. His skills were greater, his abilities more advanced and his

attributes well into the superhuman range, but there was an old-school feel of desperately walking on a knife-edge.

Only against the largest groups, organised by one of the intelligent monsters did he hunt. Otherwise, he threw himself into the fray to get the most done in the least time. He paid the price, frequently pushing it too hard and getting slapped down. His armour was hanging off him in ribbons, despite its self-repairing properties, and he was painted red in his own blood. Jason had been damaged enough to kill him a dozen times over but his defensive measures and self-healing kept him going.

When the last of the large monster clutch was dead, Jason held out his hands to either side of him.

*“As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest.”*

The remnant life force of the monsters rose up and flooded into Jason, taking his health far beyond its ordinary limit and into the realm of role-playing game hit points. This had already proven key to surviving long enough to drain health when fighting against the gangs of silver-rank dino-monsters.

Without an army of Shades to play decoy and escape hatch, Jason found himself with less margin for error at the same time he was pushing the boundaries of what he could take on at once. As a result, he was relying on drain and recovery powers to get him through situations where he would normally rely on stealth and evasion.

Jason left the dead monsters behind, already on his way to the next fight. Shade lingered, flickering over the battlefield to touch each of the dead monsters.

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➤ [Would you like to loot \[Tri-Horn Charger\]?](#)

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As of his rank-up, Shade could use Jason's non-combat abilities, including the power to initiate looting. So often, when dealing with proto-spaces, Jason was faced with too many monsters and too little time. As he left fallen monsters behind to confront the next ones he left potential loot to literally go up in smoke. Now that Shade could trigger the looting for him, that was no longer the case.

Since Shade had ranked up, Jason had accumulated more than his inventory could store, most of which he shovelled onto the Network. Given the circumstances, the Network was hungrily devouring every resource it could get its hands on, making Jason a more critical asset than ever. He also stowed an amount in the storerooms of Asano village, which had its own magical maintenance costs.

Jason did keep certain choice items and materials for himself, though. Colin's silver-rank vessel had two fairly straightforward requirements, which Jason had already collected. One was a wheelbarrow-load of silver-rank blood quintessence and the other, disturbingly, was a portion of Jason's own skin. The materials for Gordon's next vessel were less gruesome but more elusive, evading Jason despite all the looting.

Jason looting ability always had a merciful ability to be used at range, helping him avoid mouthfuls of rainbow smoke. That range was limited but could be extended through Shade's presence, like Jason's other non-combat powers. After Shade queued up all the looting dialogue boxes, Jason accepted them all at once and items started appearing in his inventory as his currency counters ticked up.

Jason was well away by the time he triggered the looting. As rainbow smoke drifted up around him, Shade was about to leave when he spotted a green blur shooting at him. He dashed for the nearest shadow but was too slow, the blur grabbing his head in a clawed and scaled hand. Shade struggled to escape using his incorporeal nature but the claw was reinforced with magic that held him inescapably in place.