

Chapter 446

The Upstart Magician

“The necromancer was surprisingly easy to get on board,” Jason said. “It’s likely that the powers we’ve seen are the extent of his unlocked abilities.”

“Perhaps,” Mr North said. “Or perhaps he wasn’t so much eager to join our side as to leave the one he was on. It takes an unusual gold-rank vampire to put aside their instinct to dominate and get along with each other, which is not a good environment for a disempowered silver-rank essence user. You sensed his aura; the necromancer is a lot more desperate than he lets on.”

Jason nodded. They were still resting in Jason’s futuristic underground city after slogging through the angelic domain of the messengers. That domain was a ring around the space previously belonging to the necromancer and now surrendered to Jason. Its perpetual daylight was a cage, trapping the vampires inside it.

The original astral space had been perfect for vampires; the bleak, sunless light had been harmless. Now everything had changed and high-magic sunlight would severely weaken them, rendering them vulnerable to anomalies, let alone people like Jason and Mr North.

The necromancer had already explained his experiences in the transformation zone under questioning from Jason and Mr North. They were reflective of Jason’s experiences in the first transformation zone. He had awoken alone and discovered that his abilities were sealed right before being attacked by anomalies.

He was able to handle the early, weak anomalies and, like Jason, he had a looting power. Humans received a racial gift evolution from each essence they awakened and the necromancer’s death essence evolved a looting power that let him claim the spoils of death.

The looting power was how the necromancer had managed to reach silver-rank over the years, cutting deals with smaller Network branches. Always at the mercy of the International Committee and the larger branches for resources, there was no shortage of groups looking to trade monster cores for the use of a loot power.

This looting power led to the necromancer, like Jason before him, discovering the stable genesis cores. Using them, the necromancer claimed his first territory. When expanding into his second, he found ghouls and vampires alike locked in some kind of stasis. Using his knowledge of necromantic ritual magic, he was able to awaken the

ghouls, gaining control of them in the process and using them to fully claim his second territory.

He had not intended to wake the vampires but the power of the anomalies grew with each territory. In the third territory, the power of the anomalies was enough that even thousands of ghouls would have been chewed through eventually. The orb from the greater anomaly in the second territory had awoken the power to drain the necromantic energy from the ghouls and use it as a weapon. The ghouls were a finite resource, however, making it no more efficient than letting the anomalies kill them.

The vampires he had found in elaborate coffins, underground in a crypt. He decided to awaken them to help him handle the increasingly dangerous anomalies while recognising the danger the bloodsuckers themselves represented. He had hoped that he could control them like the ghouls, but he went in knowing that they were likely too powerful for that. The ghouls were inherently subservient to necromantic commands, which was how the vampires controlled them. Vampires, on the other hand, were made to rule.

After some internal debate, he had chosen to awaken all five vampires at once. He knew that even if he woke just one, he would still not be its match and it would likely kill the others and control him. By waking all five, they would be warier of each other than him. His leverage was that they would need him, so none would allow any of the others to fully control him, which granted him a measure of agency.

The fact that vampires could not naturally manipulate mana like an essence user meant they were unable to use the genesis cores to claim territories. This gave the necromancer more leverage and his role had been to open new domains. He would lead the anomalies back to the Necromancer's core domain where the power of the vampires could handle them.

The necromancer's territory was a land of perpetual night, much as the messenger territory was one of perpetual day. This suited the vampires perfectly. This methodology allowed the necromancer to claim his third territory with ease, but then they encountered the messengers.

Not only was it a realm of clear skies and sunlight, but the anomalies were far more powerful than ever before. With each territory, they had grown stronger but this went from a step up to a soaring leap. Only after speaking with Jason did he realise that Jason's domain was now adjacent to the messenger territory and the anomaly strength was based on that. With seven territories claimed, the enemies were naturally much more powerful.

Jason was able to transfigure even the surrendered territory of the necromancer but had not yet done so. He was waiting until after attempting to recruit the vampires for that. If nothing else, he couldn't be certain what being in the transfiguration area would do to them, although he suspected it would be lethal.

Jason could sense the necromancer roaming about the underground city and sent a Shade that he then shadow-jumped through.

"I wouldn't have expected it to be so big," the necromancer said. They were in a public area that was a massive internal space across a half-dozen levels, like a giant mall. Metal surfaces were everywhere, in silvery steel, along with smoothly polished stone. Slightly red-tinted lights lit up the cavernous space.

"Time to go," Jason said.

"Do you always go around with that hood up?" the necromancer asked, looking at him.

"I'm not sure a guy in a purple coat who calls himself 'The Necromancer,' should be casting chuuni stones."

"What's a chuuni stone?"

Jason shook his head, pulled his hood back to reveal his face and gripped the Necromancer's upper arm.

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- **Todd 'The Necromancer' Halverson.**
 - **Essence user (human, silver rank).**
 - **Essence ability advancement impediment (monster core taint): 94%.**
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Darkness emerged from Jason's shadow to take the form of a sinister black golf cart.

"Get on the golf cart, Todd."

Jason, Mr North and Todd the necromancer were in a car driving through the now-empty streets of the messenger city.

"What can we expect from the vampires?" Jason asked.

"I'm not sure," Todd said. "Your aura will have replaced mine in blanketing my domain, right? Combined with that ring of sunlight around the outside, they'll probably be agitated. I don't think we should be dealing with a bunch of ancient, agitated vampires."

"We won't be," Jason said. "I will."

They found Todd's ghoul army standing around where he left them. Compared to their normal, barely-controllable ravenousness, they stood as if in a daze. They were

located where they had fought the greater anomaly, next to the border between the messenger territory and that of Todd's former domain. The car pulled to a stop in front of them.

"If we end up fighting the vampires, I can't contribute without the ghouls," Todd said.

"We aren't fighting the vampires," Jason said. "We're just going to talk. If I can get them on board, I'll bring them out. Otherwise, I'll transfigure the whole space they're in and see what that does to them."

"I would advise against lying," Todd said. "The vampire's aura sensitivity is high and they're very powerful. They'll know if you aren't telling them the truth."

The dividing line between the two territories was stark, despite both being part of Jason's domain now. Looking up into the sky, there was a line where the blue sky suddenly transitioned to black night, the sunlight stopping dead. In the realm of darkness, the ground was dark soil, devoid of life. Black, purple and grey ziggurats and towers punctuated the landscape, their architecture gothic and almost organic.

"Looks like territory claimed by the undead faction in a strategy game," Jason said.

"I know, right?" Todd said. "So badass."

Jason pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Is this what I sound like to other people?" Jason asked Mr North.

"More or less."

"Bugger."

Mr North walked up to the border, stepping back and forth over it as he looked around.

"How very unusual," he observed. "Are you going to send your familiar to speak by proxy, Mr Asano? That would be safest."

"No need," Jason said. "They're already watching us. And listening."

"Oh? I don't sense them."

"They're in my domain, now," Jason said. "I've known where they were at every moment since Todd surrendered his territories."

Five figures emerged from behind nearby buildings. They looked warily at the sunlight on the other side as they approached the border but their auras gave away no emotions. One was wearing what looked like a period costume, much like the vampire Farrah and Dawn fought in Australia. The other three male vampires wore modern, exquisitely-tailored suits in black, black and black. The solitary woman wore a formal but contemporary ball gown of vibrant red. Somehow, it had remained immaculately clean.

One of the suited vampires spoke as they drew close to the border where night met day.

“You’ve turned coat, Necromancer.”

“For the moment,” Jason said, “there is only one side. We all live or die together.”

The vampires dismissed the necromancer. With his lack of power, without his domain and with his clear subordination to Jason, he vanished from the vampires' attention. That was instead turned directly onto Jason.

The vampires could not cross the border without being weakened but the same could not be said for their auras. Five overbearing gold rank auras pressed over and onto Jason. His eyes glowed brightly as he drew on his aura which suffused the entire domain. Even the five gold rank auras were pressed like boats before a tsunami, crashing back so forcefully that the vampires were literally staggered.

“Make no mistake,” Jason said. “Your choice is not join or fight. It's join or die.”

“Join what?” the female vampire asked. “Who are you?”

“My name is Jason Asano.”

“The upstart magician,” one of the suited vampires said. “You were behind the events in Great Moravia.”

“Great Moravia?” Jason asked.

“Slovakia,” the female vampire said. “Do try and learn the new names, Wassily.”

“Andrei said it was Great Moravia. Russian imbecile.”

“I thought you were Russian,” the vampire next to him said.

“I'm Polish.”

“Isn't that basically the same thing?”

“I'LL KILL YOU, YOU SON OF A DOG!”

With a flash of gold-rank speed, Wassily had the other vampire gripped by the jacket.

“Wassily,” Elizabeth said. Her softly spoken word was carried on a wave of aura that stopped Wassily dead.

“Fine,” Wassily spat, shoving the other vampire away.

“You got lucky, Wassily,” the vampire said.

“That's enough,” Elizabeth said. “From you as well, Klaus.”

“Who even cares what the place is called, Elizabeth?” Wassily asked, returning to the previous topic. “The names will change when we divide the lands between ourselves.”

“I would advise against counting unearned spoils,” Elizabeth said and turned back to Jason.

“Did you cause all this to happen to destroy our operations, here?” she asked.

“No,” Jason said. “I did come here to sabotage your operations, but not like this. One of my enemies thought they could eliminate us all together while I was in here, not realising what their actions would bring about. The events here threaten to destroy the entire world.”

“It isn’t possible to destroy the world,” one of the vampires said. “Nothing has that much power.”

“Not only is it possible,” Jason said, “but I’m not even certain it’s avoidable. Have you ever gone to a high-up point and looked deep into the gloom beyond claimed territory?”

“Giant shapes in the dark,” Elizabeth said.

“That is what awaits us at the end,” Jason said. “I don’t know what they are, but that’s what we’ll have to deal with. I barely held things together the last time, in Slovakia, and I never went as far as finding and confronting whatever waits at the end. That time, because I didn’t finish the job, the world was shaken.”

“The increase in magic across the world,” Elizabeth said.

“Yes. The world cannot take another shake like that. If you want there to be a world left to rule, you need to add your strength and ours. There is also a powerful essence-user somewhere in here, and even altogether, we may not be enough.”

Jason felt the eyes of the vampires on him. Their auras did not attack again but they picked over his own, looking for the telltale inconsistencies of deceit. They sensed the strength with which he restrained his emotions, terrifyingly strong for his rank. They could taste his frustration at needing their help and being forced to ask for it. The anger at being forced to let them go in return for their assistance when he would never have a better circumstance to fight them instead. They sensed him direct the same feeling at Todd beside him.

“Do you intend to betray us, Jason Asano?” Elizabeth asked directly.

“No,” Jason said. The frustration at his need to make a deal edged past his best attempts to mask his emotions.

“I cannot speak for the others,” Elizabeth said, “but I will participate in this endeavour.”