

Chapter 445

That Passion Didn't Come From Nowhere

Jason and Mr North were in an air-conditioned building at the edge of Jason's territory, watching the border where it met the claimed territory of persons yet unknown. It was one of the surface buildings of Jason's city, chosen for the second-storey viewpoint through a large window. They were relaxing in comfortable chairs.

The boundary was represented by a dark blue curtain of energy until, after several hours, it started to retract. The space in between the territories started once more filling with gloom.

"What's happening?" Mr North said.

"Whoever claimed that territory can't hold it. They've retreated into their completed territory and the claimed land is shrinking."

"What should we do?" Mr North asked.

"How confident are you about taking on those messengers?"

"You and I make a good team, Mr Asano. My abilities are more about control than power, while you are an affliction specialist. Given enough time, you can kill even gold-rank enemies. I can reliably pin down three at a time, maybe four. You have no problems with those numbers, correct?"

"Yeah, that's not an issue."

"Then I would say we can probably face up to six at a time. Seven would be a fight and more than that is entering perilous territory."

"So, the danger is adds."

"Adds?"

"Extra monsters wandering in while we're already dealing with others."

"Ah, then yes. I'm afraid that, despite your considerable potency, eliminating even helpless gold rankers is not a swift proposition for you. It's impressive enough that you can manage it at all but time will not be our friend."

"Keeping the fights down to six or less should be manageable," Jason said. "We stay mobile, pick off the isolated ones. Remember that they're not genuine messengers; they're anomalies and will act as such. Right now, they'll be invading the established territory of whoever tried the claim theirs."

"So, we play vulture," Mr North said. "Picking the bones of what's left behind."

"Yes, although I don't know how this will work," Jason said. "I've never had to contest a territory before. I wish saving the world had fewer learn-by-doing scenarios."

They left the building and moved over to the gloom.

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- You are at the border of your spirit domain. Minimum cost to expand: 431 [Stable Genesis Cores].
 - Adjacent territory has been expanded into by a nascent spirit domain. Also expanding into this territory will cause it to be contested.
 - Claiming a contested territory requires the destruction of all normal anomalies, the greater anomaly that will manifest once all normal anomalies are destroyed and the defeat of the other claimant. Defeat can take to form of surrender or death.
 - Expand your domain Y/N?
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“Yes.”

Strips of leather shot out from Jason’s blood robe, wrapping around the wings of a messenger from behind. He contracted the strips, squeezing the wings and yanking himself into the air. He landed both feet heavily into the angelic anomaly’s back, using the momentum to stab into it with his conjured sword, held in a backwards, two-handed grip. Despite the added force, it barely dug into the gold-rank anomaly’s flesh.

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- Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding], [Leech Toxin], and [Tainted Meridians].
 - Target is already suffering from [Bleeding]. [Bleeding] has been refreshed.
 - Weapon [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice] has inflicted [Price in Blood].
 - Weapon [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice] has refreshed all wounding effects of the target. All wounding effects on the target require additional healing to remove.
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The messenger flexed its wings, easily snapping the leather straps giving Jason the leverage to press his feet into its back. Immediately, its plunge towards the ground was arrested and its body flashed with blinding light. Everything went white.

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- You have been afflicted with [Blinding Light].
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Jason immediately used his cloak as a shadow to teleport through, emerging from one of Shade’s bodies that were scattered around the battlefield; an open-air temple amphitheatre. Shade was playing decoy and serving as a shadow jump platform for Jason. The gold-rank light attacks of the messengers were highly effective against the shadow familiar, however. This had thinned out the numbers of Shade's available bodies.

Gordon transformed into a nebula cloud and dashed to Jason's side, transforming the orbs floating around him into shields and using them to shelter Jason. Jason reached out blindly to Gordon, the incorporeal familiar's touch tingling his fingers.

➤ You have bestowed all instances of [Guardian's Blessing] to [Avatar of Doom].

Beams of light came searing down on them, Jason was protected by Gordon's shields and Gordon by the barriers from Jason's amulet. Jason had passed them along as the light beams were dangerous to Gordon, who had used all his orb shields to protect Jason and left himself exposed. Gordon lacked the spare bodies that Shade possessed, so Jason passed along his amulet's protection.

Neither Gordon's layered shields nor the amulet's protective blessing lasted long, the light beams burrowing through them in short order. There was just enough delay for the blinding effect to pass and Jason reabsorbed Gordon before the familiar took more hits. Jason suffering a couple himself as he went on the move again.

"I'm sorry that one got loose," Mr North said as he and Jason sprawled on the amphitheatre steps. "Constraining four at once is trickier than I had hoped."

"There were eight of them," Jason said. "It was always going to be a rough fight."

"I have touched all the bodies, Mr Asano," Shade said.

"Thanks, Shade."

Shade was able to serve as a vessel through which Jason could use his non-combat abilities. Most often that meant sharing his cloak or shadow jumping without line of sight, but it also allowed Shade to tag fallen enemies for looting. Jason had another use for the dead anomalies first, however.

Most of Shade's bodies had been taken out in the fight. It would take a considerable amount of mana to replace them all but his Blood Harvest spell could reap mana from the dead. Even so, by the time he had drained the remnant life force from the bodies, Shade was still seven bodies short of his maximum.

"Time to go," Jason said as he triggered his looting power and the anomalies started dissolving into rainbow smoke.

Jason pulled out his phone and checked the time. Farrah had modified it so that it would still function inside his dimensional storage, preventing it from entering stasis.

"Nineteen hours," he said.

“Nineteen hours?” Mr North asked. They were resting after yet another fight with messenger anomalies.

“Since we were scouting this territory out and the other side claimed it,” Jason said. “A little over nineteen hours.”

Mr North looked up at the sky.

“Bright sunshine, the whole time.”

“Days and nights don’t obey the normal rules, here,” Jason said. “If territories aren’t linked, you step from one to the other and go from day to night. I think this territory might not have a night at all.”

“If the person trying to claim this territory wasn’t Gerling but a vampire,” Mr North reasoned, “that would explain why they failed to do much about the messengers. The light powers they possess would be bad for vampires even without perpetual, gold-rank sunlight.”

“It would explain why they retreated into their own territory and left so many messengers for us to find. If a vampire is making territory, I bet there’s an awful lot of night going on.”

“You can shape the territory you claim like that?”

“It’s subconscious, but when you transfigure a completely seized territory, I suspect it reflects on you in certain ways. I can’t imagine a vampire with a spirit domain that’s full of sunshine. Even a nascent spirit domain.”

“Nascent?”

“I think my impact on this space is allowing others to go through the process I went through of slowly developing the power to make a spirit domain. I’ve already completed that path, but I’m not sure they can.”

“Why not?” Mr North asked.

“Because I’ve already claimed too much territory. They would need to take it from me to claim enough for themselves to complete the ability, but this place had my domain from the beginning. I think it might be the anchor making what they’re doing possible. I could be wrong, but I think without my domain defining the rules for this space, they would no longer be able to claim new territories.”

“So they think that they’re doing what you did, but it’s doomed to fail.”

“I could be wrong. I don’t think so, though. There’s a feel to this place, like being in node space.”

“Which requires the Builder’s magic door to manipulate.”

“It’s my door now, and it’s actively working on this space.”

“It makes sense,” Mr North said. “The transformation zones are flaws in the original Builder’s work. The seams coming apart as the dimensional membrane of this world thins and cracks.”

Both men turned their heads as they sensed a new aura emerge from the edge of the contested space.

“The greater anomaly,” Jason said. “The other anomalies spawned here must have been killed in the fully claimed space.”

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- All normal anomalies have been eradicated. If the other claimant to the contested space is not within the space when the greater anomaly is destroyed, it will count as surrendering the territory.
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“Oh, nice,” Jason said. “The other guy has to come to us.”

“They don’t have your ability to inform them of the situation,” Mr North said. “Will they even realise?”

“You know what magic’s like. You let instinct guide you. They’ll figure it out, sadly.”

The greater anomaly looked much like the other messengers: a winged, androgynous humanoid draped in loose linens. It was larger than their normal two-metre height, Jason estimating around two and a half. The starkest difference was an additional set of gold-coloured wings, alongside the normal white ones.

Jason and Mr North remained hidden, suppressing their auras to the maximum. To assist in this, Mr North had drawn out a ritual circle in webbing that would contain not just telltale auras but also sounds, scents and magic. They had decided to wait out the other claimant on the territory, rather than try and down the boss before they arrived. If they were in the middle of a brutal fight when the other party arrived, they’d be fighting on two fronts, half-exhausted or worse.

“What do we do if the other person has the same idea?” Mr North asked. “If I were a vampire looking to swoop in and take advantage, I’d be hovering just outside the contested space, waiting to strike. Preferably, through a minion. Either that or give up because of the sunlight and move on to the next opportunity.”

“Perhaps, but I don’t think so,” Jason said. “What you don’t feel is the connection to a territory you’ve claimed. You establish a link to your soul; giving it up is like cutting off a finger.”

“Vampires might give up a finger to stay out of the sun when the magic is this strong. When there’s a boss monster and unknown enemies hidden somewhere, certainly.”

"I guess we'll see," Jason said.

The territory claimant turned out to be the necromancer, as identified by Mr North.

"Why would gold-rank vampires permit a silver-rank essence user to be the one to forge a spirit domain?" Jason said. "Territorialism is in the blood."

"My guess would be the need for someone who could withstand the sun."

The necromancer did not sneak into the contested zone, instead, arriving amidst a ghoul horde. Hundreds, if not thousands of ghouls emerged into the contested space. Neither Jason nor Mr North thought bronze-rank ghouls would let a silver-ranker beat a flying gold-rank entity, but they were swiftly proven wrong.

Rather than as a fighting force, the necromancer used the ghouls as an energy source, drawing energy from them to fuel incredibly powerful magic attacks. With his first attack, as many as a dozen ghouls dropped, their magic completely drained as a sickly green energy emerged from them, gathered together over the necromancer and was flung at the anomaly. Even as those ghouls dropped, more came pouring across the territorial border.

The messenger returned in kind, complex magical diagrams appearing in front of it to amplify its magical blasts. Amazingly, the silver-rank necromancer held his own, drawing on more and more of the ghouls to create powerful magic blasts or a green magic shield to protect himself.

Jason's face curled into a snarl as more and more ghouls appeared, the number heading towards two thousand as they formed a sea of undead.

"Calm yourself," Mr North counselled. "You can't do anything for those people now."

"How many?" Jason asked. "How many people died for this sick piece of...?"

"Mr Asano, in this moment we need to be focused on his power. Obviously, the ghouls are a finite resource, but so long as he has them, he commands considerable combat strength."

"It's simple strength," Jason said.

"Or perhaps he's using it simply. Have you ever fought a necromancer, Mr Asano?"

"No."

"I suggest you avoid it if possible. They are amongst those essence users least concerned with confronting an affliction specialist. Along with powerful resistances, they often have powers allowing them to shunt all the afflictions they suffer onto their unliving minions. It's likely that even if you caught him in a sneak attack, he'd pass your afflictions onto a ghoul."

“Assuming he has such a power unsealed.”

“Assuming, yes. Whatever the conditions, though, never forget that a necromancer is as strong as his undead are plentiful. You would need to eliminate his ghouls before moving onto the necromancer.”

“I’ve killed thousands of undead before.”

“Not while the man who animated them is right there. The correct approach is negotiation.”

“And if he tries to kill us?”

“Then we do what we must.”

“That’s not a comprehensive plan.”

“Step one is helping him fight. As distasteful as it is, Mr Asano, we will need the power he taps into through the ghouls for the fights to come. We have to help him in this fight so that resource might be preserved.”

“That ‘resource’ is people. People he herded up, killed and turned into twisted puppets.”

“Yes. We’re here to save the world, Mr Asano. You need to come to terms with the fact that there is no line we can’t cross in the face of that.”

The ghouls parted like the red sea and the necromancer walked towards Jason and Mr North, who were standing by the body of the greater anomaly.

“Mr North,” the necromancer said. “It’s been so very long.”

“You’ll have to forgive me if I’ve forgotten your name across the years,” Mr North said.

“You don’t forget things, Mr North. You never knew my name. Never cared. You were always obsessed with your human augmentation projects, with no time for my art. All anyone calls me now is the Necromancer, and you may do the same. There is a validating singularity to it.”

The Necromancer turned to Jason.

“And the famous Jason Asano. That’s quite the intimidating aura you have there. You really do want to kill me, don’t you? Is it true that you’ve come back from the dead?”

“You won’t.”

“Hardly diplomatic, yet you are restraining the urge. You don’t think you can beat me with my little pets here.”

Jason’s face was hidden under his hood but his aura practically trembled with fury.

“We’re here because we need your help,” Mr North said.

“My help?”

“This place must be consolidated into one domain,” Mr North said. “None of us are strong enough alone, which is what truly restrains Mr Asano. Caution isn’t really his thing.”

“So, you are here to surrender your territory to me?” the Necromancer asked.

“It doesn’t work like that,” Mr North said.

“What are you even doing here?” the Necromancer asked. “Why are you running around with him?”

“I was caught up in this while on other business, although it has proven for the best. If we don’t all work together, not only do we all die but the world goes with us. Whatever means you may have developed to preserve yourself through death is unlikely to survive that.”

“And I’m to take your word for it?”

“Either that or fight,” Mr North said.

“Even assuming you’re telling the truth, why can’t I be the one to claim this domain?”

“Because Asano’s domain is the only thing making that possible,” Mr North said. “His domain goes, so does yours. It feels like you’re gaining power for yourself, but it’s an echo of his.”

“What makes you so sure?” the Necromancer asked.

“Because I’m the one who brought the power he’s using into this world.”

“He can just hand it over to me, then. So long as someone has it.”

“If only it were that easy. Asano didn’t just take the power but absorbed it. It was quite the surprise, believe me. It’s part of him, now, and not coming out.”

“I’ve taken lots of parts that weren’t meant to come out from people.”

“Maybe you could, with enough resources and a decade of astral magic theory. We don’t have time for that, however.”

“What do I get for my participation, then?” the Necromancer asked.

“Amnesty,” Mr North said.

“THE HELL HE DOES!” Jason roared. “You expect me to just let this guy go, after what he’s done?”

“I’m hardly incentivised to go along then,” the Necromancer said. “I’m better off betting that you’re lying, North, and taking all the power for myself.”

“We can’t let you go,” Mr North said, glancing to Jason. “That’s a bridge too far for Mr Asano, I’m afraid. Your research has doubtless shone some light on medical magic, however. Perhaps even medical science. We’re offering you the Nazi scientist deal. You’ll be quietly left to conduct your research, even funded.”

“You expect me to go along with this?” Jason asked.

“Yes. I’m sorry, Mr Asano, but this is how it has to be. We need him, so we have to make compromises.”

Jason’s eyes glimmered in his dark hood but he didn’t respond.

“Jason,” Mr North said. “We have to hear you say it.”

Jason turned to the Necromancer looking at him for a long time. He was wearing a long, outlandish purple coat. It left him looking as if he were cosplaying a necromancer instead of actually being one. He had the usual polished and youthful features of a silver-ranker, with no indication of any bizarre alterations he had made to his body using his dark arts.

“Fine,” Jason finally spat out.

“I said we have to hear you say it,” Mr North said.

There was a long silence.

“Mr Asano, at least you can pick which Network branch he ends up with. You want the Americans or the Chinese to have him.”

“I want the grave to have him.”

“Not an option. Remember the stakes.”

A low growl came from Jason’s hood.

“Amnesty,” he said bitterly. “The Nazi scientist deal. You have my word.”

Jason spat out the last words like they were poison and Mr North let out a sigh of relief. He then turned back to the Necromancer.

“I know it’s not ideal,” he said. “But it’s the only chance you have at a future. We live long lives.”

When the Necromancer finally agreed, it surrendered not just the contested space but his entire domain.

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- Your spirit domain has absorbed a nascent domain.
 - Separating the space with the current territory will have a disruptive effect on the dimensional membrane of the surrounding reality. Claim additional territory to reduce the severity of this effect. Current severity reduction: 83.9%
 - Return to core territory to initiate transfiguration of new territories.
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At Mr North's suggestion, they rested back in Jason's underground city. North made sure that Jason and the Necromancer were thoroughly separated before checking on

Jason. He found him in a room, the anger he showed the necromancer nowhere to be seen.

“Too much?” Jason asked.

“A little hammy, but you do passion quite authentically. It will play well to a necromancer wearing an enormous purple coat.”

Jason didn't smile.

“That passion didn't come from nowhere.”