

## Chapter 407

### Open Wound

As they walked through an army base in Germany, a handful of male Network troops threw up fists as they spotted the huge and hairy figure of Jack Gerling. The Germans had been avid about expelling the American Network forces from their country until the rise of the vampire lords changed everything. The powerful US forces had been critical in helping Germany deal with powerful vampires across multiple cities, leaving it as one of the least ravaged nations on the continent. In return, Germany was now the US Network's key staging point in Europe.

"Beer and titties!" they called out.

"Beer and titties!" he responded with a grin, pumping his own fist into the air.

His power and importance made him a recognisable figure on the base and he had gone out of his way to make friends with all the tactical teams. It cost him little to sow seeds that could potentially have him reaping a critical harvest in the future. He walked through the base, greeting various people as he went until he reached his personal quarters. The moment he stepped inside, the friendly expression on his face went blank.

He was being more careful with his boorish façade, having let it slip too much in the wake of the fight with Asano. The leadership was still very tight with the reality cores and the last thing he wanted was to be seen as too capable to control.

The American Network's leadership had made a priority of advancing more people to category four, especially with the rise of the ancient vampires. It wasn't the disaster in the US that it was in Europe but it was bad enough and only getting worse. The Network had been keeping a collection of people just short of category four and already reality cores had allowed two of them to cross the threshold.

This was in addition to the other category four who, like Gerling, had been woken up from stasis. Gerling was still the only one of the category fours the US Network had in Europe as the others were assigned to handle domestic problems. For the moment, Gerling was too valuable to be expendable.

Already, though, he had seen signs of the leadership becoming nervous about the category fours and the danger of them seizing power. Until he could be certain of a regular reality core supply, Gerling would keep leaning into his more self-indulgent urges, playing the hedonist thug.

His quarters on the base reflected this, being filled with personal luxuries he had obnoxiously demanded. His handler, Cleary, was more than happy to meet them, satisfied

with the minor concessions he gained for providing them. Cleary, especially, had seen behind Gerling's mask and was looking to alleviate his suspicions. By being consistent with his self-indulgence, he would slowly but surely lead Cleary to dismiss any doubts.

Battling Asano and Hurin had been a startling wake-up call for Gerling and although he maintained an outward display of hedonistic excess for his nominal masters, he quietly dedicated himself to growing stronger. The US had always had the best training programs, alongside China, and what Farrah Hurin had introduced to the Network had been used to refine them.

Gerling had gone through the same training as everyone else but had always coasted on the explosive potential of his abilities. Those powers were the reason he had been chosen as one of the first to raise to category four. It was only after the magical deficit forced him to let himself be placed in stasis that he realised that he had also been chosen for expendability if something went wrong.

Now, Gerling had a team of trainers helping him drive his abilities to new heights, refreshing the skills that had been drilled into him years ago and allowed to fall fallow. He kept his training quiet and his recreation loud, making sure to complain about the effort.

Inside his quarters, his personal assistant was waiting for him. He had two of them but only cared about one. Fiona was smart and ambitious. Gerling was confident that she knew that she would go further with genuine loyalty than reporting on him to Cleary. She did make those reports, but they contained exactly what Gerling wanted them to.

As for his other assistant, Gerling constantly amused himself by assigning the young man a series of lengthy and elaborate demands. To his surprise, his assistant's dedication and enthusiasm led to his unexpectedly fulfilling Gerling's often bizarre and indulgent requests.

Fiona handed Gerling a memory stick.

"This is everything I could get on Asano's encounter with the EOA in Venezuela," she said. "Several essence users were using that small town as a retreat so there are quite a few testimonials there from people with magical and aura senses. There is also a lot of footage shot from phones."

Gerling took the memory stick, tapping it against his other hand absently, lost in thought. He had watched the news footage of Asano, killing the EOA's enhanced humans more than a dozen times. It was Asano's aura that concerned Gerling the most. Being a skilled essence user with excellent command of his abilities was something Gerling could accept. The raw power of his aura, however, overturned Gerling's understanding of what

was and wasn't possible. What else was Asano capable of? Could Gerling obtain that power for himself?

"Anything new on here?" he asked, holding up the stick.

"Not any major details," Fiona said. "Additional confirmation that Asano killed them using his aura alone, based on what the witnesses were able to sense."

Gerling moved to a desk and plugged the memory stick into his laptop.

"Thank you, Fiona."

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"What do you mean by the world ending early?" Jason asked. He, Dawn and Farrah were still in the cloud boat, discussing the overlap between a proto-space and a transformation event.

"These transformation events are well outside of my experience," Dawn said. "This event is still ongoing, so no one can enter the zone to confirm anything until it completes its transformation and opens up again. That being said, I have seen all manner of dimensional events and sufficiently unstable dimensional forces all have similar results."

"And?" Farrah prompted.

"Based on the readings we've been taking from the grid, I believe that something very dangerous is happening."

"Dangerous like a super monster wave?" Farrah asked.

"Far worse, I'm afraid," Dawn said. "Dimensional ulceration."

"Oh, that's bad," Jason said with a wince.

"Can someone explain that to the person not specialised in astral magic?" Farrah asked.

"Imagine an open wound in the side of the universe," Jason said. "That's very, very not good in a universe whose dimensional membrane is stable and healthy. In a fixer-upper universe like ours... I don't even want to contemplate."

"In the best case," Dawn said, "it will establish a second source of magic that will start feeding into this world."

"Like the dimensional link we're going to all this effort to fix," Farrah said.

"Precisely," Dawn confirmed. "Except that this source will be impossible to cut off. Normally the World-Phoenix and her agents would work to remedy such a situation but Earth's dimensional membrane is like a thin sheet of glass, already full of cracks. Trying to repair it could shatter it entirely."

"That's the best case?" Farrah asked.

"The worst case," Dawn said, "is that the dimensional membrane rapidly collapses and this world is annihilated. That subsequently tears a chunk out of this entire reality, chaining into the universe completely breaking down. It's more likely the damage will be contained to your planet, or at least your solar system, but it may end this entire physical reality."

"So, worse than a super monster wave," Farrah said.

"Considerably," Dawn agreed.

"I'm assuming you have a plan," Jason said. "I'd really like to hear a plan."

"It may be possible for you to stabilise the effects," Dawn said. "During a transformation event, the entire area is sealed. I believe this is because the area is drawn at least partially into what you, Jason, have been referring to as node space. The dimensional changes taking place are being affected by the proto-space coterminous to that area, causing what is already a reality-shearing transformation to go out of control."

"You think I can use the Builder's door to enter the sealed space," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn said. "The World Phoenix personally sculpted a racial gift evolution that would make you the perfect living tool for resolving problems in dimensionally unstable space. Your presence alone will be a help."

"Hold on," Jason said. "You want me to go into a place that can't be entered and brave conditions that are completely unknown in an environment being torn apart and rebuilt at a level that makes subatomic particles seem shallow?"

"I know it seems too dangerous to—"

"Awesome," Jason said.

"Pardon?" Dawn asked.

"No piles of victims turned zombies. No saving who I can while the dead pile up around me. Just going some crazy pocket dimension for some good, clean world-saving? Get it right and everybody lives?"

Jason nodded his head, grinning.

"I think I've needed this for a long time," he said.

"You will have to go alone," Dawn said. "No one else can reliably survive the conditions within an active transformation event, except for the people who are part of it and they don't remember anything. They are, at the very least, unconscious. More likely, they exist in some kind of transitional state and you should avoid them as best you can. For your sake, as much as theirs. I was trying to tell you that it will be dangerous."

"You were also telling me that I would have to do it anyway right?"

"Yes. It needs to be done and only you can do it."

“You know that the transformation event will be crawling with people gearing up to snatch the reality core, right?” Farrah asked. “This will reveal Jason’s door power to everyone. They won’t understand everything about it, but the ability to enter transformation events is all they’ll need. They’ll start coming after him because they’ll think he can give them a head start on core collecting.”

“If only they knew,” Jason said. “Reality cores are pebbles on the ground in node space.”

“Unfortunately, there will be no getting past them unnoticed,” Dawn said. “There will be considerable attention on the transformation space. You will need to enter swiftly, in case anyone attempts to intercept you before you do.”

“Which is why I need to go alone,” Jason said. “You can’t come in with me and you can’t hang about with all the others outside.”

“Leave your family as well,” Dawn said. “If the worst happens and you fail, I will make sure they and Miss Hurin are sent to the other world.”

“You can do that?” Jason asked.

“If this world’s dimensional membrane enters a state of irreversible collapse, I no longer have to worry about damaging it. I can intervene directly and take them away in my dimensional vessel.”

Jason gave her a warm smile.

“Thank you.”

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Each transformation event had a tense prelude where the different magical factions arrived and everyone waited for the impassable barrier to drop so the search and fight for the reality core could begin. Fighting breaking out beforehand was more common than not. The rise of the old vampires had only added to the already strong position of the Cabal in these conflicts, as all their members grew stronger in transformation spaces.

There were places where Network held the edge, however. In Europe, Jack Gerling was the single most powerful individual. The old vampires outnumbered him, but his abilities were specialised in devastating large numbers of enemies, levelling the playing field. Rumours spoke to similar circumstances in China, although very little information got out. No one was even sure exactly how many gold-rank essence users they had, although no one doubted they had at least some.

The transformation zone that appeared on the plains of western Slovakia was special because of the proto-space it formed on top of. This drew unusually large forces from every faction, all of whom could now tap into the grid. The EOA gained access when they

took over Network duties at the request of several governments. The Cabal gained access more recently though Network defectors.

None of the magical factions had the understanding of astral magic that Dawn or even Jason possessed. They could tell that the transformation space was unusual but most were postulating that the result would be additional reality cores, not an inexorable doomsday clock.

The transformation zone was currently a glimmering dome several kilometres across. A giant rainbow under glass, it swirled with bright, wild colours. In the nearby city of Nitra, Jack Gerling was sitting at an outdoor café, rather than hovering around the dome. Even if the event was unusual, it was unlikely to open up for days, like always. The estimations were that it would take more time than normal, not less.

Nitra was something of a blessed city, being too small to host any ancient vampires but large enough to warrant Network protection during the monster waves. It was now a major centre for the Network after being pushed out of Bratislava by vampires. As a result, it had weathered the magical tribulations of the past several years in far better stead than most, allowing the residents to maintain at least some aspects of their normal lives.

As he sipped at his coffee, Gerling's gold-rank perception allowed his eyes to pick out something moving through the air, despite its great altitude. It struck him as odd as normally planes stayed away from transformation zones, and this one was jet black. After months of investigating Jason Asano's behaviour, he knew what a black vehicle going somewhere it shouldn't meant.

"He's here."