

Chapter 404

When, Not If

Farrah dragged a vampire out of the lava by the foot. He was still alive, or at least undead, due to his silver-rank fortitude. His normal vampiric healing was not kicking in, though, due to the burn damage.

"Why are you letting him out?" Night Stalker asked. "You should finish him."

"We came to save you, not to kill the people you robbed," Farrah said.

"What if they come after us again?" Night Stalker asked.

"Then you can lament your mediocre life choices."

"Leave it, Bryan," Franklin said.

"Forget this; I'll do it myself."

Night Stalker moved to grab the crippled vampire, only to find himself looking down the length of Farrah's sword.

"This is all very tense," Jason said from behind the group, no one but Dawn having noticed his arrival. The car Farrah and Dawn arrived in had turned back into a group of Shade's bodies, one of which Jason had stepped out of.

"G'day, Craig," Jason said.

"Jason," Vermillion said with a greeting nod. "Thank you for the save."

Jason looked around at a section of street marred by magical battle. There were scorch marks everywhere, a takeaway shop had what was left of Vermillion's stolen car sticking out of it. The two essence users were battered but alive, both strapped down to the road by webs that had the gleam of metal. There were three vampires, all severely burned and far too hurt to keep fighting. Vermillion and his companions had torn and bloody clothes but their injuries had already recovered.

"This is Frank," Vermillion introduced. "And this is Night Stalker."

"Night Stalker?" Jason said. "Like the serial killer from the eighties?"

"It's doesn't sound like a serial killer name," Night Stalker insisted.

"Yeah," Jason agreed. "It doesn't sound like a serial killer name. It *is* a serial killer name. There was a guy in the eighties who raped and killed a bunch of people in California. If you're a vampire and you're going to run around calling yourself the Night Stalker I'm going to put you down now and call it a public service."

"It's fine, Jason. He's not running around killing people; he's just an idiot. How do you know so much about serial killers?"

"I went to school with this guy who collected serial killer trading cards. Greg and I used to..."

Jason trailed off, hanging his head.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "Craig, why are you chasing reality cores?"

"We're forming an alliance, with members of the EOA and the Network. We have the numbers but the leadership factions of each have most of the strongest members. We need to get stronger, fast."

"Are you going to be fighting in the transformation zones over cores?"

"Yeah."

"Don't expect further help, then. Reality cores aren't for anyone to have. That goes for you as much as your enemies."

"Our enemies are your enemies, Jason. Will you let them run rampant?"

"You're squabbling over who gets to be captain of a sinking ship, Craig, and you're throwing people overboard to keep it afloat. Look at the state of the world. The army is fighting mythical creatures in the streets of Sydney. America is on the brink of civil war because the Network wasn't careful enough with their secret coup. Europe is being taken over by vampires and China is reaching new heights of civic oppression keeping a lid on everything. Governments are turning tyrant or threatening to collapse entirely. We're on the verge of anarchy."

"Our alliance wants to remedy that," Craig said. "Keep preventing the monster waves. Protect the people. But we need the strength. Look, if you can tell me how to help you save the world or whatever, I will. I don't think I'm what you need, though. So let us do what we can and you do what you can."

Jason turned away, running a dirty hand over his bloody face.

"Craig," he said his voice weary. "Going after reality cores is pulling down the roof to burn for warmth in winter."

"And not going after them is putting down your sword while your enemy is picking his up."

"It doesn't matter who wins if the world burns."

"But it does if you save it," Craig said. "That's what you're doing, right? Saving the world. We're trying to make sure it's still worth a damn when you do."

"He's not wrong," Farrah said.

"Whose side are you on?" Jason asked.

"Yours," she said. "Sometimes that means telling you to let something go and get on with the job."

Jason looked at her, his expression unhappy, but he didn't argue.

"People taking reality cores are bad," she told him. "But do you think that telling Craig not to do it matters in the long run? You're frustrated that it's happening. We all are. But this is not the place to make that stand because it gets you nothing."

"I likewise detest that the denizens of this world would ravage it for power," Dawn said. "You aren't going to convince them to stop, however. People will always ignore the greater dangers in pursuit of momentary concerns. Humans, elves, this world or another. It is true every time, in every reality."

"The only way to stop people from taking reality cores is to cut off the supply," Farrah said. "Which we should probably get back to."

"You can do that?" Craig asked.

Farrah winced.

"I shouldn't have said that."

Craig shared a look with Franklin and they flashed into motion, grabbing a startled Bryan, dragging him to the lava flow and shoving him in, head first. Jason, Farrah and Dawn shared a confused look.

"Craig?" Jason asked.

The two vampires held Bryan under until he stopped moving, which didn't take long for the bronze-rank vampire.

"What was that about?" Farrah asked.

"Bryan was a plant," Craig said. "The faction of the Cabal loyal to the old vampires inserted him to infiltrate the new alliance forming against them."

"You're sure?" Jason asked.

"Yeah. We didn't give him a heads up about hitting the reality core storage but brought him along so he would think he was in the inner circle. We were going to use him for misinformation but we can't let the old vampires know you can turn off the tap. They'll make you their number one priority."

"I'm sorry," Farrah said. "I should be more careful."

"I didn't sense any duplicity from his aura," Dawn said. "Bloodline dominance?"

"Yes," Craig said.

"Which is what, exactly?" Jason asked.

"The dominus vampire bloodline allows those higher in the bloodline to completely control those below it," Dawn said. "When a dominus vampire creates another vampire, they can control it, along with any more that vampire subsequently creates."

“Bryan was part of the dominus bloodline,” Vermillion confirmed. “We’re pretty sure that one of the old ones in South East Asia somewhere was controlling him.”

“Bloodline domination functions rather like a star seed,” Dawn explained. “Like a star seed, it is intensely difficult to detect outside of special circumstances.”

“I had a bond with Bryan, using my bloodline,” Vermillion said. “The bond was severed when the domination was put in place.”

“A star seed hides so well because it infiltrates the soul,” Jason said. “How does this bloodline get in?”

“Only lesser vampires are transformed in body alone,” Dawn said. “Greater vampires – bloodline vampires – are changed body and soul. It is why they cannot be forcibly turned, unlike lesser vampires. They have to accept the change.”

“We have to accept the gift,” Franklin corrected.

“Mate, I’d return that gift,” Jason said. “It makes you eat people.”

After parting with Vermillion, Jason sent himself, Farrah and Dawn out to sea via portal and set up a cloud house. Distractions aside, they still had a node to repair and Jason needed to recover from the fight. A good number of Shade’s bodies had been wiped out by the APC’s weapon systems and it took most of Jason’s full mana supply to reconstitute one. He had managed to replace a few using the mana he had after the fight, far above his normal maximum but there was still work to do.

Jason went off to shower before he started meditating to replenish his mana as fast as possible. Midway through the shower, he swore out loud.

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- Cloud flask supply of [Crystal Wash] has been exhausted.
 - Supply additional [Crystal Wash] or an alternative cleansing agent to maintain cloud construct cleansing effect.
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He was surprised it had lasted as long as it had, the flask doing an effective job of diluting the huge quantity Jason had fed into it. That didn’t stop him from being aggravated when it finally ran out.

While Jason was showering, Farrah and Dawn went to balcony to relax as they overlooked the Pacific. Farrah took the chance to ask some questions.

“I’ve been wondering about the vampires of this world. Do you know why they have so much more self-control than the vampires of mine? Is it the lower magic, somehow?”

"That is one of two factors," Dawn said. "Magically-charged sunlight has a negative effect on vampires. In the short-term, this means their strength is greatly reduced in sunlight. In the long-term, it has a degenerative effect on their minds."

"Does that mean as the magic of this world gets stronger, the vampires will start losing control?"

"Eventually some of them will, yes," Dawn said. "There is also the other factor to consider, however, which is strength of bloodline. The vampires of this world were spawned as echoes of other worlds. The oldest likely had the full strength of bloodline originators, so many of this world's vampires have much richer bloodlines than those of your world. It will shield them from sun degeneration."

"So, even the old vampires now being woken up can be reasoned with."

"Yes," Dawn said. "Although, I would not hold out great hope. Their personalities may not have been warped due to their vampirism but they will still be huge arseholes."

Farrah raised her eyebrows at Dawn's unexpected vulgarity and they both started laughing.

Jason trudged through the cloud house, where he encountered Dawn.

"Oh," he said, looking up. "Dawn, you don't know how to make crystal wash, do you?"

"I'm not an alchemist."

"But you could get the formula, right? Or something that works the same from another universe or whatever."

"Not while I'm in this avatar."

"But if we killed you off, though, you could grab the formula from wherever and bring it back. Then we just have to find a decent local alchemist... why are you looking at me like that?"

Dawn walked away.

"Is that a no?" he called out after her.

He continued on his way, finding Farrah on the balcony, lounging as she looked out over the ocean. He fell backwards as a deck chair made of cloud rose from the floor to catch him.

"All done?" she asked.

"Every Shade, present and accounted for. How goes the proto-space hunt?"

Finding the right nodes to repair required carrying out rituals in proto-spaces. As they improved their understanding of the process through trial and error, they had a better grasp of which proto-spaces would help them and which ones would throw out false

positives. It allowed them to be more discerning in their activities, making the search for each individual proto-space take longer but ultimately saving them time.

"We had one hit but it was a gold-rank space. You were still down a bunch of Shades and I thought trying it at anything less than full strength was a bad idea."

"You didn't tell me."

"Bad ideas are kind of your thing."

Jason chuckled.

"I suppose they are."

He pulled a silver spirit coin from his inventory and slipped it into his mouth.

"I miss cooking," he complained. "I really want to make a hazelnut dacquoise."

"I miss home," Farrah said. "Did you realise that I've spent more time in your world than you have in mine?"

He sat up, looking over at her.

"No," he said. "No, I didn't. But yeah, especially if you don't count all that time I was in an astral space."

"I've found your world as wondrous as you did mine," Farrah said. "I'm ready to go back though. More than ready. I want to see hairy idiot Gary. Rufus is no doubt hopeless without me. I want to see my parents. My city. We were so eager to escape it and now I'm desperate to get back."

Jason's chair slid across the floor to arrive next to Farrah's and he gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

"You'll get there," he said. "It's when, not if."

"I know."

"You're going to have to play tour guide when we get there, you realise."

"Oh, gods, no. I don't even want to think about the trouble you'll cause."

They both knew that their arrival in Farrah's world would not be a light, fun time, but they were happy, for the moment, to pretend. That their arrival would herald the worst monster surge in the history of the world was something to think about later.