

## Chapter 406

### Ahead of Schedule

"You want me to use this guy as a battery," Jason said.

The cloud house had taken the appearance of an unremarkable and isolated farmhouse in the Italian countryside. The gold rank vampire they had captured was locked in a cell from which they were confident it wouldn't escape. By silver rank, the cloud house was starting to show its diamond-rank potential as it grew more powerful and sophisticated. A single gold-ranker wasn't powerful enough to force their way in or out.

"Yes," Dawn said as they observed the vampire through a one-way window.

"You weren't wrong about it being ethically questionable."

"Vampires feed on people," Farrah said. "Seems fair that you do the same to them."

"And is that how we judge ourselves?" Jason asked. "By the standards of bloodthirsty monsters?"

"No," Dawn said. "We judge ourselves by our actions. Not just the momentary ones but the larger scope of what we do. With what we are trying to achieve and the obstacles in our way, draining one bloodthirsty predator to get any advantage is a morally acceptable act."

"And how far can we go?" Jason asked. "How many bad people is it okay to lock up and torture?"

"All of them," Farrah said.

"What about good people?" Jason asked. "How many can we sacrifice? Where's the line? What's the number?"

"There isn't a number," Dawn said. "Thinking there is some kind of objective value in all this that can be quantified is a fool's argument. Like all acts of morality, it's a matter of exercising judgement."

"Yeah, well..."

Jason's shoulders sagged.

"...I'm not so sure I trust my judgement."

"Then it is good that you are not alone," Dawn said. "Miss Hurin was not sent to this world on a whim. She was sent so that you would have someone to rely on."

"You're saying I'm the sidekick?" Farrah pouted.

Jason looked at her thoughtfully, smiling as she grinned at him.

"Alright," he said. "Thank you. I'm still not comfortable just draining this guy over and over, though. Also, I don't think he's got a lot left in him."

The vampire was not in good condition. Between Jason's transcendent damage and the fire powers of Farrah and Dawn, even a high rank essence user would have trouble surviving in his current state.

"We need to get some of the reality-core treated blood they drink," Dawn said. "He can work as a filter for you to top off, drain and then top off again."

"You talk about getting at their blood supply like it's a simple thing," Farrah said. "There was a reason we didn't raid the reality core storage in America."

"It's not the same circumstances, though," Jason mused. "The vampires don't have the ritual magic to emplace defences and mundane security measures won't stop us."

"Don't be so certain about the magical defences," Dawn said. "The Cabal may have recruited useful Network defectors."

"Yeah," Jason acknowledged, remembering the silver-rank essence users they fought in Australia. "If they can get top tactical personnel on board, recruiting some ritualists is certainly possible."

"Especially given how badly the Network is struggling in Europe," Farrah said.

The vampire lords had repeated the attack on the Sydney branch all over Europe, with far greater success. Sydney suffered massive damage from one vampire, while in European cities two, three, even six vampires had attacked network branches to eliminate their primary rivals. The Network was holding on in backup locations and tertiary branches, continuing to shut down proto-spaces, but their efforts were growing desperate.

"I believe that the circumstances are different enough that the potential rewards outweigh the risks. Only the vampire lords themselves would be powerful enough to stop us and you've seen their pridefulness for yourselves. They will not be as diligent as they should. At least until someone gives them a reason to."

"A gold-rank vampire is only going to play guard if a stronger vampire forces them to," Jason reasoned.

"And they won't be happy about it, so they probably won't be too diligent," Farrah said. "Still, it's a big risk."

"We still have Jason's trump card, if something goes wrong," Dawn said.

Jason had a magic item in his possession that he obtained a long time ago, during the Reaper trials. It was a diamond-rank consumable item containing the power of sunlight, which Dawn confirmed would be highly effective, even against vampire lords.

"That's something I want to keep in my pocket in case we find ourselves in a bad situation," Jason said. "We only get to use it once."

"If we're going to use it actively," Farrah said, "we should do it right."

“What are you suggesting?” Jason asked.

“What if we track down the biggest storehouse of reality cores and vampire blood in Europe to hit. Except, we leak that we’re going to hit it, so the vampires are waiting for us. But instead of trying to sneak in, we come in force. Carefully recruit some Network people and hit them hard. Use the item and wipe out as many of the bloodsuckers as we can.”

“In theory, that’s good,” Jason said. “There’s a good chance that if we’re recruiting, they’ll catch wind of it, though.”

“Then we let them,” Farrah said. “The vampires are prideful and won’t back down. They’ll bring even more of their number to utterly crush any opposition and prove their dominance. The more we can hit with the item, the more we can wipe out.”

“No,” Dawn said. “That is getting too big. We’re not here to kill vampires. Taking the chance to grow stronger when it costs us minimal time is one thing but taking the time to organise a large scale attack is too much of a distraction from our goal.”

“You’re right,” Jason said. “I like the idea of making a dent in the vampire population but that would be spending time we don’t have to buy risk we don’t need. I’m willing to spend days on this while we’re waiting for the right proto-space to pop. That kind of operation would take weeks of active effort, though. In the end, cutting off the reality core supply faster will ultimately save more lives than killing some vampires now.”

“Fine,” Farrah said. “I’m keeping this plan in mind, though. If we see a good chance to try it, I want to revisit this conversation. Dawn, it feels like every time we’re about to stage a great reality core heist, you throw cold water on it.”

“Boldness is a requisite of achieving our objectives,” Dawn said, “but to be bold is to walk on a foolhardy edge. We must be vigilant that we do not slip off that edge.”

“We still require a supply of treated blood,” Jason said. “We have to get it somewhere.”

“We conduct a smaller operation than Miss Hurin suggests. Something quicker and safer. Rather than hit one of the core vampire territories, we choose a peripheral target and raid the blood treatment centre there.”

“Will there even be one in a less important location?” Jason asked. “Won’t they just distribute the blood from a central, secure site?”

“Even the weakest vampire lord is an edifice of power and pride. None of them would allow anyone else to hold them hostage with the blood supply,” Dawn said. “Every vampire lord requires a regular supply of treated blood, otherwise the low levels of magic will rapidly diminish their power until they return to a state of torpor. Given the enemies they are making of everyone, they cannot afford moments of weakness due to breaks in the

supply chain. Reality cores they likely ship around, but none of the vampires will let themselves get too far from their blood supply.”

“That’s a weakness that hopefully gets taken advantage of when the time comes to deal with them,” Jason said. “Unfortunately, the world has too much happening all at once.”

“So we pick a city that’s big enough to have vampire lords, but small enough that the stronger vampires are elsewhere,” Farrah said. “That rules out going back to Naples, right?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “It’s too big and they’ll be on alert after this guy disappeared.”

They all looked in on the vampire, lying still in a miserable state.

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Jason had used the cloud flask to produce its vehicle form. Previous it had taken the form of a large tour bus, while now it was a medium-sized yacht, moored amongst other pleasure craft at a dock in Venice. The only reason anyone was using the boats now was to escape the city. The tourist boats around them were all empty, which their aura senses easily confirmed.

“I’m still not sure Venice was the best bet,” Farrah said as they sat in the boat making plans. “Isn’t this the very first city the vampires took over?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “That’s why it’s the most damaged city. The Italian government hadn’t thrown in the towel yet and supported the Network standing up to the gold-rankers. Those original vampire lords were also some of the strongest, though. They left a crumbling city for larger population centres.”

“Vampires view population as a commodity, like herds of cattle,” Dawn said.

Jason and Shade had already done some initial scouting of the city. He had likewise been sceptical of Dawn’s suggested destination but what he learned eavesdropping on lower-rank vampires validated her choice. Venice was a soft target that no one thought of as one because it was known that the strongest vampires had emerged from it.

“The original vampire lords here have moved on to larger cities, leaving the weaker ones to manage it,” Jason said. “If you can call any of the gold-rank vampires weak. There are only two of them here.”

“Which makes it a good target,” Dawn said. “Venice is a symbolic territory for the old vampires, not a valuable one. This is especially true now that the fighting has caused so much destruction. There is no glory in ruling over ruins.”

While Dawn and Farrah remained hidden on the boat, monitoring the grid for proto-spaces, Jason went back out to investigate the city. Shade and his many bodies were an incredible boon on that front, with one body left behind so that Dawn and Farrah could speak to him through it and he could quickly shadow jump back to the boat.

Roaming the city, he found that the streets and canals were largely empty. He sensed the people unfortunate enough not to have evacuated during the fighting huddled in their homes, only venturing out for food. The vampires allowed some remnants of civic authority to remain operating, organising food distribution stations, even importing food from other Cabal-controlled territories.

Almost everyone out on the streets was a Cabal member, and most of those were vampires. There was no shortage of lower-rank vampires ready to cast off the veneer of civility and indulge their thirst for blood. Jason spotted more than one group breaking into a home and sending the occupants running before hunting and consuming them for sport.

Jason itched to step in but unless he had some plan to liberate the city, all that would do is bring more trouble down on the residents. Even if he made just a few lower-rank vampires disappear without a trace, the gold-rankers would be unwilling to tolerate challenges to their authority and investigate thoroughly. The first one to suffer would be the closest innocent people the vampires could find.

Jason and Shade trailed the low-ranking vampires around the city, gaining a better understanding of the city's state of affairs. It was like territory captured by an enemy army, with only the occupying forces out in numbers on the mostly empty streets. Many bridges and buildings had suffered catastrophic damage, with some canals flooding after being dammed by rubble. The vampires were pulling people out of their homes and forming work gangs to clear them out.

The canals themselves were otherwise empty of activity. The famously filthy water was even running clear in the areas not stained by building debris. There were swans and Jason even spotted fish swimming about. It was an oddly bright point in a city that had otherwise become a dystopian nightmare. He hated that after years of wanting to visit Venice, this was the state in which he found it.

Jason and Shade were also able to glean more information about the vampire lords themselves. The lords also needed more sleep than their less powerful brethren, despite the enhanced blood running through them. Vampire lords slept as much as twelve to fourteen hours, mostly during daylight.

Continuing to observe the lower-rank vampires, Jason learned of a growing rift between the vampires and the rest of the Cabal. The vampires were a minority within the organisation as a whole but waking up the vampire lords had turned them into a ruling minority. There was growing dissatisfaction amongst the cabal's many other factions, who were being edged out of positions of authority. There was also, from what he was hearing, a sizeable portion of the vampire faction that, like Craig Vermillion, did not support the old vampires.

Jason was scouting out the blood treatment centre set up in a medical clinic when Farrah called him back. He shadow-jumped back to the boat, arriving in the room where Farrah monitored the grid. It looked like the communications station of a spaceship, with screens and control panels everywhere. Farrah and Dawn were both watching different readings on the various monitors.

"You found a target proto-space?" Jason asked.

"No," Farrah said. "It's something else."

"Oh?"

"A transformation event had happened in a space that was already coterminous to a proto-space," Dawn said.

"Will they interact?" Jason asked.

"From the readings that the grid is throwing out, yes," Farrah said.

"What kind of effect is it having?"

"That is way beyond my understanding of astral magic," Farrah said. She and Jason both looked at Dawn.

"I believe," Dawn said, "that this world has decided to end ahead of schedule."