

Chapter 417

Old Habit

Jason expanded his spirit domain from atop a building, covered in guns and fully prepared to leap off into a superhero landing and start mowing down anomalies. His domain expanded out, adding more cityscape to Jason's incomplete second territory. The transformed landscape blended dark crystal construction with much brighter elements reminiscent of his cloud house. It also continued to bring more plant life into being, from rows of trees running down the streets to a garden-filled park.

As the newly-claimed space was more city, Jason was anticipating another wave of urban-variant angry villagers which turned out not to be the case. When the anomalies arrived they were still human, but far fewer in number. Dressed in spacesuit-like outfits, they were armed with the same kind of weapons Jason had looted from the last set of anomalies. He didn't spot either of the heavy weapons fuelled by genesis cores, but most were wielding the same blaster rifle he had looted from the last set of anomalies. He spotted one holding a copy of the devastating lightning gun.

Although the anomalies were only a fragment of what came before, it was still far from a small number. Jason's aura senses extended across his domain and he sensed them emerging all the way around what was becoming the vast circumference of his expanding territory. He wondered how vast it would be before his second territory was complete.

The new anomalies weren't just different from the previous ones in outfit and weaponry but also behaviour. Instead of rabidly tearing off to search Jason out, they were smarter and more cautious moving in small groups, observing their surroundings with guns at the ready. Rather than make the splashy entrance he had originally intended, Jason retreated down through the building, a four-floor department store. As he made his way down, he paused after spotting a poster in the menswear section advertising the Bertinelli Collection. It wasn't the time to go browsing clothes, so he moved on.

"I have to check that out after I have this shootout with a small army of astronauts."

He paused again.

"I know the fate of the world is at stake and I might die, but sometimes I just love my life."

Jason waited for a group of the astronauts to walk past the doors of the department store before he approached the doors himself, causing the motion sensor to slide them

open. He briefly peppered the astronauts with blasts from the pistols held in each of his hands before ducking out of the way as they swung their weapons to return fire.

Of the group of five, Jason had taken out two with headshots before they started reacting, the energy from his guns blasting apart their helmets. His remaining shots were wild covering shots as he dashed out of the way, landing only glancing hits. The remaining three anomalies moved into the store, panning the room with their guns.

The first floor was ladies' wear and Jason crouched down as he moved amongst racks of clothes. He sheathed his pistols and drew his sword as he pulled up his tactical map outworlder ability. It wasn't something that he used a lot but was perfect for a complex environment where he needed to track enemies with more precision than just his aura senses.

Jason could already sense more anomalies approaching the store, drawn by the gunfire. The retro sci-fi blasters weren't as loud as ordinary guns firing supersonic slugs but neither were they quiet. He needed to take out the group he had already started on before more of them arrived.

He emerged behind the astronauts as they moved down a tight row, sliding his blade into the back of the rearmost one's neck. By the time the other two heard it drop dead, Jason was already gone as they stopped in place, swivelling their guns back and forth. Since they were kind enough to stop moving, Jason took advantage by popping back up and shooting each of them in the head with a single pistol blast.

Jason may not have had his cloak to blend into the shadows but he still had years of experience being a predator. The second group to arrive were killed without firing a shot. Jason then left the building as too many of the anomalies were converging on it. Making his way through the streets, dodging groups of anomalies, he went to the far side of his domain and lured more of the astronauts into a building to be killed off.

He repeated the pattern several times, moving to new areas and wiping out two or three groups before abandoning his position. It didn't always go perfectly and several times he holed up to rub healing unguent onto a wound but he was operating effectively. His concern was the anomalies with the lightning guns, of which he discovered there were three. Scouting them out, he realised that not only did they have the powerful weapons but they looked to have reinforced space suits. How strong they were he could only find out by testing them.

For his first attempt to take one out, Jason attacked on an open street. He picked his ambush location and waited for it to walk past, accompanied by a trio of rifle anomalies. He rose up and fired both pistols, landing multiple hits on the lightning gun anomaly's

head. The bolts struck the slow-moving astronaut's helmet straight on, which was scorched and blacked but not broken. The whole group turned their weapons on Jason, who ducked down and rolled away from the car.

Energy blasts sizzled past Jason or were blocked by the car. The arc from the electricity gun curved to latch onto the car, just as Jason had intended. He had immediately realised on using the lightning gun himself that the homing feature was both a strength and weakness, due to its indiscriminate nature.

Jason had been thorough in picking a spot with a ready escape path. He shot out the glass storefront next to him before dashing inside as energy blasts continued to fire in his direction. He holstered his pistols, pulled the minigun from his inventory. After slinging it over his shoulder he took out an unstable genesis core and dropped it into the hopper on top of the gun.

The moment the first anomaly came into view, Jason opened up with the gun, firing rapid, powerful energy discharges at a blistering pace. It chewed through the visible anomaly before Jason walked the stream of deadly fire back and forth in an arc, blasting through the wall and the anomalies on the other side of it. Jason sensed the all go down immediately, even the armoured spacesuit of the lightning gunner having been ripped apart.

Sensing another group approaching, Jason lugged the heavy weapon back out through the window and turned in their direction. Seeing the mess the gun had made of the anomalies, the car he had been hiding behind and even the wall on the other side of the street he didn't bother with anything tricky. He swung the gun in the direction of the corner they were approaching from and opened up as the anomalies came rushing around it.

Although he was tempted to keep mowing down enemies, the minigun didn't come with a shield. He knew that if enough gathered together they would gun him down like a firing squad, so he returned the gun to his inventory and got moving.

Jason managed to eliminate the other two other groups containing lightning gun wielders in similar fashion, although the last one left him in a bad position. The lightning gun chained an attack from the car Jason used for cover into Jason himself, inflicting him with muscle paralysis even as the minigun tore the anomaly apart.

Jason fell to the ground, barely managing to pull out a pistol to shoot the lightning gun anomaly's companions as they rushed around the car to attack him. He managed to gun them down but took blasts to the leg, shoulder and gut in the process. After chugging one of his few silver-rank healing potions he painfully stowed the minigun and staggered into

an adjacent building and rode its elevator up to the roof, then hit the emergency stop to prevent it from being used to follow him.

As he holed-up, applying healing ointment to his wounds, he sensed the remaining anomalies converging on his location. He had killed most of them by that stage but there was still somewhere in the vicinity of three dozen moving in on him.

Jason had the choice of trying to make a break for it wounded or giving himself time to heal more and the anomalies time to flood the building. He could risk trying to jump off the building, which would normally be fine but he was not going to be fully recovered either way. The risk was only moderate if he let himself heal up a bit but the consequences of getting it wrong were unacceptable. If he wound up crippled in front of a building full of enemies, he was dead.

Deciding the best course was to let the healing unguent do as much work as it could in the time he had, on top of Colin's tireless efforts, he monitored the approaching anomalies using his tactical map ability. Displaying maps of each of the three floors of the office building side by side, he watched as they slowly but surely made their way up, searching for him.

Jason was uncertain of how well he could handle them, given how many of them had come together. He would need to move before they completely converged on the rooftop. While Jason's raw physical and perceptual advantages helped him use guns with superhuman accuracy, he had no grasp of firearms tactics. He had been relying on variations of his usual stealth tactics, essentially treating the pistols as long, loud swords. It played to his strengths but would be less effective against larger groups where hit-and-run tactics would be harder to execute without being pinned down.

Jason pushed himself to his feet, sore but functional. With a dozen anomalies on each floor, his strike and hide methods would only take him so far before it turned into a shooting gallery. He was going to have to push himself to the limits to succeed.

He started by deactivating the emergency stop on the elevator and pressing the button for the floor below, then ducking out before the doors closed. He rushed down the stairs, stopping outside the door in the stairwell and pulling out the minigun again.

He quietly made his way through the door into a large cubicle pen where the anomalies were all pointing guns at the elevator that had just opened up. Jason unloaded on the room, smashing apart cubicles and gunning down anomalies. Catching them by surprise, only a few got off wild shots before they were cut apart by the energy discharges from the gun.

The minigun fell silent as the unstable genesis core was drained and Jason put the gun away. On his tactical map in the corner of his vision, he watched as the anomalies below swarmed towards the stairwell. He pulled out the sci-fi bazooka and another core, loading it into the top. Moving to the other side of the room, avoiding broken cubicle walls and massacred astronauts, he turned around and fired the weapon at the wall where the stairwell passed behind it.

The stairwell had two dozen anomalies storming up it, but they were destroyed as a good chunk of that side of the building was eradicated. Jason was blasted through the wall by the backwash of the blast, blacking out.

In the cloud yacht in Venice, Jason's family continued to watch coverage of the Slovakian transformation zone.

"...no idea where the tentacle monster on top of the dome came from but the gathered forces continue to fight it even as it continues to grow..."

Jason came to half-buried in debris in the middle of the street. Dried blood flaked off his eyes as he forced them open and his head swam, the world seeming to spin around him. He tried pushing a broken lump of plaster-covered brick off himself but a stabbing pain in his arm made him stop. He was pointedly aware that without Colin healing him, even while sealed away, he may not have woken up at all.

He shifted about enough to make sure nothing was stabbing into his body anywhere too serious and allowed himself time to heal until he could extricate himself. No anomalies showed up and would have likely have killed him already if any were going to. Finally, he dragged himself out of the debris and stripped off what remained of his clothes and sat all his weapons on the ground. The bloody, ragged remains of his outfit told the story of just how injured Jason had been, pushing even his silver-rank endurance to the limit. He left only his boxer shorts that had suffered remarkably little, the white with red love hearts pattern only a little bloodstained, despite the rest of him being largely coated red.

Suddenly thinking of something he hadn't done in a long time, Jason pulled a recording crystal from his inventory and tossed it into the air. Despite it being so long, the old habit felt comfortably familiar.

"I haven't done this in a while, the magic being kind of crap in my world so the recording crystals don't work so well," he said to the crystal. "I'll catch you all up at some point but I'm kind of in the middle of something right now. I guess I can hit the highlights. Farrah's alive; that's a winner. So am I, for that matter, which may be more surprising. I die

kind of a lot. Is three times a lot? I mean, three isn't a big number, but not many people hit the triple when it comes to carking it. I think three counts as a lot.”

He controlled the crystal with a gesture to pan around.

“I'm saving the world, so I'd best get back to it. As you can see, I'm standing in my underwear in the middle of the street, covered in blood, next to a building I just blew up. The street is in an extradimensional city I'm taking over so a hole doesn't get blasted in the side of the universe. Mondays, am I right? Oh, wait, you have a six-day week. Still, it's a day of the week, it's not that hard to pick up from context.”

Jason moved the crystal to focus back on him and waggled a disapproving finger at it.

“Clive, I know you've got questions but stop interrupting. People are trying to listen to the recording. Be courteous and wait.”

Jason pulled out a flask of cleaning solution and poured it over himself. It was something he made himself, from his skill book-derived alchemy abilities. It was a poor substitute for crystal wash but Jason had to put something in his cloud house after the crystal wash ran out. It stung as it reached his various wounds, Jason wincing like an eighties action hero when the love interest treats his wounds.

“Jory, if you're watching this, I want you to know I have a new appreciation for the quality of your crystal wash. I am going to need quite a lot of it once I get back, by the way. Like, a lot. I don't want to go running out again, so waaay more than last time.”

Jason tipped another flask of the cleaning solution over his weapons before putting them away.

“Anyway, none of my essence abilities work here, which sucks. I spent the last few hours fighting it out with a small army of astronauts with ray guns, which was pretty awesome. I'll explain what they are later.”

He took a look at the building he had been blasted out of. On the side where Jason woke up, it was utterly devastated. When he circumnavigated the building, he discovered that the other side was completely gone.

“Maybe I don't need a bigger bazooka. It's going to be hard finding something to loot.”

Remembering the department store and its menswear section, he turned and trudged in its direction.

“Now, getting some magic weapons was useful and all, but now for the real boost in power. It's time for a pants upgrade.”