

Chapter 284

Brown Trousers Time

Jason was perched on a rooftop, looking at his uncle's town house from across the street. Shade appeared next to him.

"Find anyone else?" Jason asked.

"No," Shade said. "Just the one iron-ranker inside."

"Meaning that that he's either alone, or whoever else they sent is powerful and capable enough to escape our senses."

Jason had no intention of staying in the town house under current circumstances, but wanted to retrieve his mana lamps if possible.

"I only spotted one silver-ranker during my investigation of the network's personnel," Shade said. "His aura control was insufficient to avoid my detection."

"It's the ones who can escape your senses we need to worry about," Jason said.

"I agree," Shade said. "I would recommend either having me go, or sending Taika."

Although incorporeal, Shade's bronze-rank vessel could exert enough physical force to manipulate objects. He could also store limited amounts in his own dimensional storage space.

"You go," Jason said. "I can use you as a conduit to talk to whoever's in there. It's possible they sent an iron-ranker in the open to show they want to talk without applying pressure."

"The influence of Mr Vermillion?" Shade posited.

"Or wariness. They don't know what I can do."

"I don't think finding out will make them any less cautious," Shade said.

"No," Jason chuckled. "Probably not."

Shade sent one of his bodies into the townhouse, silently collecting the mana lamps. The iron-ranker didn't sense Shade, but noticed the change as the lamps stopped absorbing ambient magic. Standing in the middle of the townhouse, he looked around. Suddenly there was a shadowy figure that hadn't been there a moment earlier.

"Did the network send you?" Jason asked, speaking through Shade. There was no friendliness in the cold flint of his voice.

"Yes," the man said, looking over Shade. "Am I addressing Mr Asano?"

"Yes."

"My name is Michael Aram. Annabeth Tilden asked me to speak with you. We didn't think you were likely to come back here, but hoped you might."

"I came to retrieve something I left behind."

"I did notice a change in the magic. May I ask what that was?"

"Mana lamps," Jason said. "Is that a thing you have here?"

"We do," Aram said. "So, you really did... go over there. The other world."

"What do you know of other worlds?" Jason asked.

"Wait, worlds plural?"

"Not that much then. What do you want, Michael Aram?"

"Mrs Tilden asked me to open a dialogue. If you really are an outworlder, you no doubt acquired knowledge and resources along the way that would be of immense value to us. We, in turn are essential to you."

"Is that so?"

"We are the only source of monster cores."

A murderer's chuckle emitted from Shade.

"You think I need monster cores?"

"If you want to get stronger."

"I don't need cores to get stronger, just sufficiently powerful enemies to fight. Which means I might have some use for your organisation, even if you don't like it very much."

"You've only been gone a year and a half," Aram said. "How can you have gotten as strong as you have just from fighting? We have a member who refuses to consume cores, and it's taken him a eight years to reach category two. Since then, he's been bottlenecked."

"You really do need what I know, don't you?" Jason asked, his voice becoming more relaxed. "There are things you can help me with, and I am inclined toward collaboration. My concern is that your organisation will try to hold me upside down and shake all the goodies out. I'm not going to just waltz into that spider's nest of enchantments on your headquarters, without a care in the... what the...?"

The shadowy figure of Shade's body dashed away, leaving Aram alone.

"Mr Asano?"

Jason was kneeling on the sloped roof with his eyes closed, channelling his sight and voice through Shade as he conversed with Aram. With his heightened senses and ability to sense both auras and magic he was far from oblivious to his surroundings, but he only sensed the attack at the last moment. It came fast and seemingly out of nowhere, Jason only detecting it as an aura bore down on him, trying to shock him with silver-rank suppressive force.

It was almost the exact same manner as the last time he was attacked out of nowhere by a silver ranker, but Jason was a very different person from the time he was kidnapped. The attacking aura smashed into the iron shell that was Jason's own aura and rebounded, giving Jason a warning instead of freezing him in place.

Even so, Jason's silver-rank attacker was faster than him and already moving as he reacted. He managed to avoid the hand reaching for his head, but was unable to avoid it gripping his shoulder.

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- You have been attacked. Attacker has been afflicted with [Sin].

 - Special attack [Dark Slumber] has inflicted [Sopor Toxin] on you.
 - You have resisted [Sopor Toxin].
 - [Sopor Toxin] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
 - You have gained an instance of [Integrity].

 - Special attack [Dark Slumber] has inflicted [Vulnerable] on you.
 - An instance of [Resistant] has been consumed to negate [Vulnerable].

 - Special attack [Dark Slumber] has inflicted [Sluggish] on you.
 - You have resisted [Sluggish].
 - [Sluggish] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
 - You have gained an instance of [Integrity].

Jason's affliction specialisation paid off against the special attack. His stacked resistance effects and ability to ignore rank disparity allowed him to resist two of the three afflictions and negate the third.

He reacted instantly, slipping free of the hand and dropping off the nearby roof edge, not even bothering to take a moment to look at his attacker. His cloak formed around him as he dropped, but he didn't reduce his weight to slow the fall. Instead, he formed a shadow arm and used it to grip the roof as he dropped, letting it stretch out before using it to spring back upwards. He sprung back over the rooftop just as his attacker peered over the edge. The attacker caught a raking slice across the torso from Jason's conjured dagger, stumbling back as Jason landed lightly on the rooftop.

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- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Network Assassin].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Price of Absolution] on [Network Assassin].

 - Weapon [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation] has inflicted [Ruin of the Flesh] on [Network Assassin].

- Weapon [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation] has inflicted [Ruin of the Blood] on [Network Assassin].
 - Weapon [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation] has inflicted [Ruin of the Spirit] on [Network Assassin].
 - [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has bestowed five instances of [Guardian's Blessing] on you.
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Jason alighted back on the rooftop, his cloak floating around him. He eyed off his opponent, satisfied at the silver ranker's failure to resist even a single affliction. His ability didn't give him a name even after coming into contact with the man. His ability to extract information was hampered by the enemy's superior rank, although the more generic label of Network Assassin told him a lot, too. Just as Landemere Vane had been described by his power as a Builder Cultist, knowing their affiliation could be more useful than a name.

The silver-ranker looked around thirty, but there was no telling with an essence user. He had short-cropped hair and black, paramilitary attire. His tactical armour wasn't magical, easily sliced through by Jason's dagger.

The man glanced down at the wound on his chest and back up at Jason. He looked startled that his silver-rank flesh had posed little more resistance than his non-magical armour.

"You should come with me, Asano. We want to work with you, not force you into anything."

"I could tell from the way you sneak-attacked me on a rooftop," Jason said. The man had a slight French accent, but that could have been a ruse. If Jason was a German assassin, he'd probably fake a French accent too.

"I don't have time to convince you. We couldn't take the chance you'll say no. Don't do this the hard way."

"You don't know me, but the hard way is kind of my thing."

"It isn't a question of whether you get away, Asano. It's a matter of how much you get hurt coming with me."

"Pain I can handle. *Your fate is to suffer.*"

- Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Network Assassin].
 - Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inescapable] on [Network Assassin].
 - [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has bestowed two instances of [Guardian's Blessing] on you.
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“The hard way it is,” the man said, holding up his hands to conjure knuckledusters on each hand, with three sharp tines sticking out of each. He leapt into the attack as mirror images appeared around him, all springing on Jason.

Jason lifted up his hand, which was oozing blood from the palm. A cone of leeches sprayed out over the images. Most passed through illusory doubles, including one in the position of the original body. His attacker’s real body staggered back as leeches clamped onto it, while the rest of the leeches were scattered across the roof by the spray.

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- [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Network Assassin].
 - [Bleeding] already in effect, [Bleeding] is refreshed.
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Leech Toxin] on [Network Assassin].
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Necrotoxin] on [Network Assassin].
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Network Assassin].
 - [Bleeding] already in effect, [Bleeding] is refreshed.
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Leech Toxin] on [Network Assassin].
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Necrotoxin] on [Network Assassin].
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Jason regretted that Colin didn’t trigger his amulet, but he was satisfied enough with his familiar’s storm of afflictions. Jason was a true affliction specialist now, able to lay on plenty of afflictions himself.

The enemy was only briefly startled and didn’t bother futilely plucking at the leeches easily biting through his clothes. He didn’t fail to notice Gordon manifest into being and nimbly dodged the four beams of energy firing at him from Gordon’s floating eyes.

The assassin jumped back while throwing out his hands and his own swarm of creatures appeared. Tiny, metal hummingbirds with long needles for heads, they buzzed with the flapping of their tiny metal wings as they darting out, spreading out to engulf Jason.

“Gordon,” Jason said calmly. Two of the familiar’s orbs launched forward, coming together just as they met the swarm. The resulting explosion of resonating-force annihilated the metal creatures, although many of the leeches scattered over the roof were likewise eliminated.

The assassin used the explosion to mask another special attack, with a storm of needled raining on Jason. His cloak intercepted the projectiles, but their silver rank power still pushed through more often than not. Their damage was diminished, however, and by the time they chewed through the Guardian’s Blessings, the damage was minimal.

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- An instance of [Guardian's Blessing] has been consumed to absorb damage. [Guardian's Blessing] has bestowed [Blessing's Bounty] on you.
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Even that damage was quickly repaired by the ongoing healing effects of the Integrity buff, which continually replenished his health, stamina and mana, along with the healing of the Guardian's Blessing. The needle storm was never intended to be the real threat, however, just keeping Jason off balance to set up the assassin lunging in with his claw-like weapons.

Sophie would have been more than a match for the silver-ranker, in speed and skill both. As it was, The silver ranker had the clear edge in speed, while Jason's experience and technique were clearly dominant. Month after month, day after day and even hour after hour of battle in the astral space had sharpened Jason's skills to a razor's edge.

When he first started training, he had naïve ideas about being some kind of perfect counter-attacker. Then, the practical realities of combat slowly pounded into his head that he was not an anime character. Training with Rufus and Sophie, then battle after battle after battle had allowed him to refine that original idea into a more practical form.

Jason and Sophie practiced the same, highly versatile combat style, but they did so in different ways. Sophie used the versatility to constantly dominate, adapting her attacks into what was worst for her opponent at any given moment. It was her style before gaining powers, which only enhanced its effectiveness by piling on speed and mobility.

Jason likewise moulded his approach to his powers. With his cloak and his stretching arms, his approach leaned heavily on deception. Hiding unconventional movement and posture behind his abilities, he was hard to pin down and full of unpredictable attacks. The fact that he rarely went for more than superficial wounds with his daggers also opened up a world of attacks that others would find inconsequential.

Jason used all this to full effect against the assassin. Leaping between Shade's bodies, masking his posture and movements behind his voluminous cloak. Reaching out with his shadow arms to make attacks that shouldn't be possible.

Jason dominated the fight. Despite the assassin's advantage in speed, his claw weapons never landed on Jason, even getting caught up in the cloak, which Jason used to yank him off balance. When the assassin tried to yank the cloak back, it passed through his fingers, insubstantial.

This did not mean that Jason was relaxed. He was fully aware of the power disparity and knew that only a handful of blows from the silver-ranker would breach the protection of his amulet and take him down.

The assassin continued to strike out literally and figuratively, hitting air as his attacks passed through the cloak. Jason's body was never exactly where it seemed, and every failed attack was followed up with a counter attack. Realising he was outclassed, the assassin tried to back up and regroup his thoughts. Jason didn't allow it, moving onto the offensive.

Every moment that ticked by was gold for Jason as his afflictions became more and more entrenched on the enemy. Likewise, Gordon was lashing out with two beams from his remaining eye orbs, although the disruptive-force damage was specialised against magic, adding only minimal damage to the silver-ranker. If Gordon didn't share Jason's power to ignore rank disparity as Jason's familiar, the damage would have been almost ignorable.

Eventually, the assassin became aggravated at Gordon, throwing out a stream of shimmering force needles that managed to harm the incorporeal familiar. Jason had Gordon unmanifest, returned to Jason to bolster his aura strength. Neither Jason nor the silver-ranker could suppress one another despite an ongoing struggle, so they were each affected by the other's aura. In this, Jason had the advantage, as his aura seemed to take full effect. The assassin's aura inflicted a weakening debuff that Jason's continually resisted, actually making him stronger.

Although he had seen it before, Jason was still amazed at the resilience of a silver-ranker. His opponent was fighting through what would have killed the most resilient bronze-rank anything long ago. The man looked almost undead under the ravages of Jason's necrotic damage.

Jason had more skill, not just with his combat skills but also in the tactical use of his abilities, outplaying one power after another despite his own being lower rank. The assassin, like most humans, was heavy on special attacks, and Jason was unsure if he was holding back the more dangerous ones. The idea seemed to be capture, rather than kill, after all.

Ultimately Jason was not Sophie. Stand-up fights were where she excelled, while he was all about making the most of complex environments. The rooftop on which they fought offered nothing more than a slight slant, the open space very much to his disadvantage. If not for Shade's bodies spread over it for shadow jumping, the fight would have gone far worse.

His original plan had been to turn the fight into a chase. Drown his opponent in afflictions, the make for more complex environments as they did their work. Unfortunately,

not all of the assassin's powers were effectively handled by Jason, with one making his plan unworkable.

The most effective power the assassin employed was a tether power, much like that used by Belinda. It did not impede him as long as he remained close, but trying to leave the rooftop brought about dangerously escalating damage. The tether even tracked him through teleports and he wasn't willing to risk a portal.

If the power managed to follow him, that kind of distance would cause the tether to kill him instantly. He knew that it would be possible to destroy the conjured rod to which the tether was affixed, but he also knew that would likely cause a powerful explosion. He would mostly likely survive the silver-rank blast, but it would hit him hard enough that the silver-ranker would have a chance to end the fight.

Jason was willing to stick out the fight, as his position improved with every passing moment. He was accumulating power while his opponent accumulated afflictions. Crucially, this included an affliction from his Hand of the Reaper power that simultaneously chipped away at the assassin's speed advantage and ability to hold off his afflictions.

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- **[Rigor Mortis] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Penalty to the [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Each time a new instance is inflicted, deals necrotic damage for each existing instance.**
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Jason was satisfied with how the fight was progressing. The silver-ranker was a monster core user, with the typical weaknesses that entailed. Rufus had long ago explained that without being forced to use all their abilities in order to advance, monster core users tended to develop certain flaws.

One was that they weren't as intimately familiar with their powers as someone better trained, using them less effectively and often more as an addendum to their combat instead of an integrated aspect. The big one was they developed a habit of using whatever subset of their powers had proven the most useful early in their careers, often ignoring the others and missing out on the powerful synergies of a comprehensive power set.

Jason, by contrast, had used almost every power in his repertoire, from using his perception power to observe the magic of special attacks and dodge them through his array of afflictions to his familiars.

His only regret was that he had been forced to blow up much of Colin's leech supply before the apocalypse beast could have a definitive impact. Colin was normally Jason's strongest weapon, but he didn't regret the explosive attack, however. He'd seen the effects of a swarm attack too often to underestimate one from a silver-ranker.

Jason had forced the assassin into a race against time; silver-rank speed and endurance against circumstances that were turning the fight further and further against him with every passing moment. Even when he managed to land an occasional hit on Jason, the afflictions were multiplying so much on the assassin that his amulet quickly replenished the shields.

Jason used his Punition spell for a burst of damage, harming the assassin further for each of the afflictions on him. The Jason drained the afflictions away with Feast of Absolution and leaving a brutal mess of holy afflictions in their place. The assassin felt the power burning away at his insides and saw the light shining from under his skin.

Knowing that his one advantage over Jason was the raw power of his rank, the assassin bet everything on a last-ditch, desperation move. He had hoped that Jason would be stupid enough to smash the tether rod, but he hadn't. Betting his own resilience, battered though it was, the assassin smashed the rod himself. The resulting blast unleashed a shockwave that sent both Jason and the assassin tumbling off the roof and down to the street below.

The assassin realised that his gamble had paid off as he was the first to recover and push his way painfully upright. Despite the ravaging power still coursing through him and all the shields and healing Jason had put up, the sheer superhuman fortitude of a silver-ranker was that remarkable.

That was not to say that Jason wasn't recovering quickly. He was, by that point, drenched in ongoing healing effects from the afflictions he absorbed and the power of his amulet. The assassin wasted no time, reconjuring his fist weapons without spikes before leaping on Jason and brutally wailing into his head, relying on the obvious healing Jason was getting to keep him alive.

As for keeping the assassin alive, he pulled out a cleansing potion worth more than most cars and tipped it down his throat. His possession of two such potions was what had kept him from abandoning the fight as Jason layered affliction after affliction on him.

To the assassin's horror, the potion he expected to wash away everything Jason had done like a cleansing flood only partially eliminated the afflictions. The terrifying light continued to glow under his skin, even if it was greatly diminished. He wouldn't be able to take the other cleansing potion immediately and drank a powerful healing potion to keep himself alive.

Aram had recorded almost all but the earliest moments of the fight on his phone. At a far remove, neither his aura nor his non-magical recording device has been spotted. He

had been watching in disbelief as Asano fought not just evenly but at an advantage against a category three, their ranks clear to Aram as he felt their powerful auras clash. The category three looked to be on his last legs when he blasted them both off the roof and the category three brutally attacking Asano.

He watched the man take a potion, which diminished the eerie glow coming from within his body, followed by another that partially healed the man's ravaged body. Even after, the man looked less like a living being and more like a glowing zombie. As he was taking the potions, three men pulled up in a pair of cars. Clearly they knew the man, who yelled a series of angry instructions, although Aram was too far away to make them out.

The man jumped into one of the cars and tore off at speed, leaving the three men behind. Aram wanted to step in, but the three men were all category twos. He couldn't handle one, let alone all three. He watched them inject the contents of a huge syringe into Asano before placing a collar around his neck and bundling him into the boot of the remaining car before taking off in a different direction to the man that had fought Asano.

Aram sent the video file to Annabeth and then immediately called her.

"How did it go?" she asked, not bothering with a greeting.

"Ma'am, check the file I just sent you," Aram said gravely. "I think it might be brown trousers time."