

## Chapter 795

### Good Friends

Jason slowly meandered along an empty street with shops to his left and the beach to his right. The ghost town wasn't a true replica of his hometown but a nostalgic version of it from his youth. There was an Aussie rules football memorabilia store, several of which had cropped up, failed and closed as he grew up. He stopped in front of Mrs Kim's Takeaway, a favourite before she sold up and moved to Coffs Harbour.

He stared at the glass storefront, plastered in the usual stickers advertising ice creams and soft drinks. He went inside, the bell on the door jingling. There were no people, but the bain-marie was filled with artery-clogging delights, steam teasing at the bottom of the glass case. Jason opened the flip-top counter and moved behind it, then slid open its glass door. The smell of deep-fried oil wafted out, the scent of his childhood summers. He smiled sadly.

"I wish the territory hadn't taken this form," he said.

"Why is that?" Shade asked, emerging from Jason's shadow.

"Because it's time to expand my territory. As soon as that boundary thins, living anomalies will come swarming in. Even if they don't trash everything, I'm going to paint this town with their bodies. I don't want to see that. There aren't many memories of Earth I have left that aren't tainted in some way."

Jason grabbed a metal scoop and a paper bag, half-filling it with hot chips. He gave it a liberal sprinkle of chicken salt from a shaker before filling the bag and doing it again. He let the bag drop lightly to the bench a couple of times to shake down the salt.

"You look like you've done that before," Shade observed.

"I worked here for the summer when I was sixteen. The last summer before Mrs Kim sold the place. The new owner wasn't as good, but he didn't have to be. If you sell chips so close to the beach in this town, you can make enough money in the summer to coast through the rest of the year."

Jason plucked a chip from the bag and bit off half its length.

"Just as good as I remember," he said. "Which is probably better than they actually were. Memory is funny like that. For me, anyway. I imagine yours is a lot better than mine, you being immortal and all."

"Yes, Mr Asano, but that doesn't always mean better. I will never get to experience the kind of nostalgia you are feeling right now. Becoming a familiar allows astral entities like myself to slowly accumulate authority, but that was never my motivation. I want to

experience the cosmos in ways that I, as a shadow creature of the astral, otherwise could not.”

Jason looked at Shade with a speculative expression.

“You know, Shade, I use your senses all the time. See and hear what you see.”

“Yes, Mr Asano.”

“Do you think we could do it the other way?”

“We cannot, Mr Asano.”

“Something to work on when I summon your next vessel, then.”

Jason let out a cleansing sigh and put the other half of the chip in his mouth. He wandered outside and used his aura to float up into the air, Shade rising beside him. He looked over the town while snacking on his chips.

“Enough putting it off,” he said.

He closed his eyes, spreading his senses out through his territory. Each of the transformation zones Jason had experienced was a little different from the others. A quirk of this one was that expansion wasn't a matter of spreading out in every direction but choosing a neighbouring territory and expanding into that one specifically. He had no information on the neighbouring territories, so he chose one on the opposite side of the mountain from the town. He would spare it for as long as he could.

Jason conjured his cloak and flew around the mountain. He soared over green bushland that ran up to the shadowy veil that marked the territorial boundary. When he expanded his power to try and claim the territory, the veil would thin and living anomalies would start spilling through. The bushland was good terrain for him, hard for large numbers to group up and filled with shadows.

Jason closed his eyes, letting his senses blend into the space around him. He felt the earth, the trees and the air; the people inside the fortress and even the dim sims in Mrs Kim's bain-marie. He pushed out, the territorial boundary resisting for a moment before starting to shimmer.

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- You have chosen to expand the territory of your established spirit domain into an adjacent genesis space. Expanding your spirit domain into a territory of unstable genesis space will define and stabilise it but trigger anomalous reactions from the territory expanded into.
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He sensed the living anomalies spilling in through the veil and let himself drop from the sky. He fell through the canopy below, letting the bush swallow him.

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The territory Rick was in looked like a city where architect and alchemist was the same job, one carried out with extreme enthusiasm. It was a cross between a dirty industrial centre and a giant's alchemy set, with glass vats sticking out of walls and massive pipes running under steel catwalks that ran between buildings.

Rick jabbed his spear into the cobbled street vertically, like tapping a ceremonial staff. Dozen of spears pierced back up in a wide area around him, each one impaling a gelatinous creature. The spears then immediately sprouted barbs that riddled their bodies, visible through their semi-translucent flesh.

The creatures were vaguely humanoid, in a 'getting craned out of your house on the news' kind way. Their bodies looked like someone had put something they shouldn't in a jelly mould when the mould itself was already dubious. They were naked and fully, although not generously, anatomically equipped. They didn't have a mouth or nose, but they did have large eyeballs floating in their jelly heads.

More unpleasant than the appearance of the creatures was their smell. This was made significantly worse when they tore themselves off Rick's barbed spears, shredding their bodies in the process. This left them a splattered mess on the ground, crawling slowly in his direction. Marek descended from the sky to land next to Rick and immediately winced at the stench.

"I do not care for your approach to combat against these particular foes," Marek told him. "From a tactical perspective, it is a sound path to victory. From an olfactory one, it feels like defeat."

"We're not here to win," Rick told him. "We're here to scout the territory, find any allies and move on."

"Then move on we shall," Marek said, his voice choked off as he tried to not use his nose. "I envy your ability to shut off your sense of smell."

"I thought envying the 'lesser races' was against your religion."

"It's indoctrination, not religion, as much as Jason Asano is disinclined to recognise the difference. But if it were, my companions and I would be in apostasy. As has been explained to you at length."

"A couple of months ago you were cutting down adventurers for the people you claim to hate now."

"Our actions could not have been different. I will not lie and claim to feel great remorse for what I have done as a slave of the astral kings, but know that the alternative for us was death."

"Some things are worth dying for. Like not killing a city's worth of innocent people."

“I do not expect you to understand, Rick Geller. I hope you never do. Having your very soul enslaved is not something I would wish on another. But we took our chance to escape that fate. We did not turn against our old masters at the point of Jason Asano’s sword; we sought him out. To go against him at this point would obviate the purpose of everything we have done while soiling a relationship I expect to benefit us for centuries. Furthermore, attempting to escape him now would be suicide. As would trying to escape later once he unites the transformation zone. All of which means that you put us in an awkward position. I can only hope that you can see how our interests are aligned.”

The sloppy, stinking blob creatures were crawling closer and the pair left, Rick leaping to the rooftop of a three-storey building and Marek flying after him.

“My people found only undead and these living anomalies in this territory,” Marek said. “No allies or intelligent enemies, so we should head for the next.”

“Agreed,” Rick said.

Marek sent out aura pulses that serves as simple commands for his scattered allies. They had access to Jason's interface, but only as it pertained to the territories. They couldn't use functions like group chat. He and Rick stood waiting for them to regroup before setting out.

“What did you mean by me putting you in an awkward position?” Rick asked.

“If anything happens to you, whether I could have prevented it or not, Jason Asano will hold me responsible. That makes your life more valuable than mine, or that of any of my people individually. Asano did not put that dynamic in place by accident. You are more valuable to him than any of us.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that you and your band of murder angels could kill me any time you feel like. Telling me that you promise not to when we were fighting each other not that long ago doesn’t fill me with confidence.”

“Trust is built over time and this is the beginning of that time. We have mutual interests.”

“Oh, mutual interests, great. I’m starting to understand Jason’s approach of making friends rather than allies.”

“I suspect that we would not make good friends, Rickard Geller.”

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The living anomalies that swarmed into Jason’s territory took the form of bone feasters. His early days in Rimaros included a supply delivery to a fortress town besieged by this type of monster, although the living anomaly version was not quite the same.

The appearance was a match, being emaciated purple humanoids with giant mouths for faces. They had the power to grow and reshape bone, creating blades, projectiles and armour they wielded with surprising skill for frenzied monsters. That and their impressive agility served to compensate for a lack of raw power. They were monsters that could easily punish unskilled adventurers.

The normal version was silver-rank and relatively weak, manifesting in massive numbers. During the monster surge, Jason had fought what amounted to an army of them to lift the siege on the town. He swiftly found that these living anomaly replicas were different, courtesy of their higher rank.

While the anomaly feasters were ostensibly gold-rank, their power level was not. By the later stages of the transformation zone, when the last territories were being claimed, the anomalies would be a match for most monsters of their rank. In this early stage, they were relatively pitiful. This meant that Jason could handle them, although not easily. They still had gold-rank damage reduction and resistances against lower ranks, but many elite adventurers could ignore the rank disparity, Jason included. Capable silver-rank adventurers could handle anomalies at this stage, to the point that they made good training.

While the anomaly feasters were even weaker for their rank than the real thing, weak for gold-rank was still a large power spike over weak for silver. Their strength and speed were closer to that of a high-end silver-rank monster, and their bone powers were also enhanced. They couldn't do anything new with them, but the resilience and growth of their bones were much higher.

The anomaly feasters also grew the bones with more refined shaping than the real monsters could manage. This made for weapons that were sharper yet stronger, and armour that was less restrictive. This meant superior coverage with less impedance to their agility.

The difference between these bone feasters and the ones Jason knew meant that he needed to make the most of his advantages. His most prominent asset was the environment they were fighting in. His battle with the real feasters had been in a wide-open gulch with countless enemies and nowhere to hide. Fighting the anomaly feasters in the same environment would force him to quickly flee at best, and quickly die at worst.

In this replica of the Australian bush, it was a different story. It wasn't the thick rainforest of the far north but the feasters were still forced to break up to navigate the terrain. Jason, on the other hand, could move undetected and untouched, a wraith in the darkness. He was weakest at the start of fights when he had yet to harvest the life force of

the defeated. Even two or three of the bone feasters were dangerous in the beginning, being faster and stronger than he was. Their agility also allowed them to fight relatively well despite the uneven ground, mixed surfaces and obstacle-filled environment.

That was not enough to compensate for Jason's hit-and-run tactics as he flickered through shadows like a staccato ghost, landing hits and vanishing. They made the most of his moments of exposure, however, landing hits with arm blades or bone darts. It put his regenerative powers through a workout.

The armour of the bone feasters made it hard for Jason to score early kills. Their armour not only had superior coverage than regular bone feasters but also blocked many forms of magic attack. Jason's afflictions were largely ineffective and Colin's leeches couldn't find gaps to dig through before being scraped off or squished between armour segments.

Jason had a solution to this in another advantage he'd lacked when fighting the real feasters. His sword, Hegemon's Will, could not only absorb the power of Jason's conjured dagger but added a corrosion affliction when it did so. This proved effective not just at melting holes in the armour but preventing it from growing back.

This offered Jason weak points to target and land afflictions, although the whole process was laborious. He tried using Gordon's butterflies to spread afflictions faster but it proved futile. The projectile attacks and incredible reflexes of the feasters meant that the butterflies were taken out before they could spread. The scant few that did slip through proved incapable of sinking through the bone armour to be absorbed and were quickly scraped off. Jason discarded that strategy and resolved to finish things the hard way, which he ultimately did not mind. Fights like this would push his sluggish essence abilities towards faster advancement.

As the long and gruelling fight dragged on, Jason finally began making headway. Bone feasters were starting to fall to his afflictions and he was diligent in draining their remnant life force. This boosted his speed until it overtook that of his enemies, allowing him to fight more safely, even as he fought more boldly. Even so, there was still a long fight ahead of him. He knew that painstakingly whittling the feasters down would be a lengthy process unless something changed.

That change came with two silver-rank auras that shot out of the territorial boundary at speeds that would satisfy gold-rankers. Immediately after they arrived, a column of lava smashed down like a satellite weapon, incinerating bushland and bone feaster alike. The column swept back and forth, carving a fiery swath of destruction.

Jason rose through the canopy to where he could see Farrah, in obsidian armour and held aloft by fiery wings. She was blasting down with her lava cannon power, setting fire to the bushland. Sophie, floating next to her, moved next to Jason in a blur of motion he could barely track.

“We thought we’d help,” Sophie told him. “From what I’m sensing down there, it looks like you’re kind of slow. Well, not kind of slow as much as just slow. Really, really slow.”

“You think you would be faster?”

“Than you? Yes. Than Farrah? Well, she’s going to run out of mana pretty quick like that.”

“She’s starting a huge bushfire in my territory.”

“She uses fire to replenish her mana.”

“And I use my territory to not be burned to the ground!”

Sophie turned slowly in the air, taking a look at Jason’s territory.

“Why does that mountain look like the back of your head?”