

Chapter 400

A Lot Like a Guess

Jason stood in front of the Network building, the cyclops and other Cabal members still standing in front of him. The air stank of burned flesh from the one that had tried to flee and was slain by the cyclops for making the attempt, leaving a dozen more. Jason stood flanked by Shades as he squared-off with the people in front of him.

The cyclops fired its eyebeam at Jason and one of the orbs turned into a shield to intercept it. The powerful beam swiftly annihilated the barrier but the momentary delay was enough for Jason to step into one of the Shades and vanish.

The other Cabal members took the chance to scatter as the cyclops was focused on Jason, some dashing into the building while others ran into the streets or even started Spider-Manning their way up the side of the building. The cyclops panned its eye over the space in front of the building for Jason, blasting beams at the Shades and eliminating two of them before the rest vanished into shadows.

Jason rose up from the cyclops' own shadow, between it and the building and immediately made a series of sewing needle dagger strikes into the towering creature's thigh while swiftly chanting spells.

"Bleed for me."

"Carry the mark of your transgressions."

"Your fate is to suffer."

The cyclops didn't enjoy the balanced attributes of an essence user, with speed being the price for its size and strength. It was fast for its size but still a brute, all power and no finesse. This made it easy pickings for Jason as he locked in his full suite of afflictions.

At silver rank, Jason's affliction array was more terrible than ever. Not only was he able to bypass immunities that had previously stifled him, but he also had more damage effects than ever. His special attack, Punish, had been one of his bread and butter powers from the beginning and continued to be a core technique.

Ability: [Punish] (Sin)

- Special attack (melee, curse, holy).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 2 (07%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage and the [Sin] affliction.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Price of Absolution].
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- Effect (silver): If the target has any instances of [Sin] they suffer an instance of the [Wages of Sin] affliction. If the enemy struck has no instances of [Sin] but does have instances of [Penance], they do not suffer [Sin] or [Wages of Sin]. They instead suffer transcendent damage from this ability in place of necrotic damage and suffer an additional instance of [Penance] and instances of [Penance] do not drop off for a short period.
- [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
- [Price of Absolution] (affliction, holy): Suffer transcendent damage for each instance of [Sin] cleansed from you.
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- [Wages of Sin] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Suffer necrotic damage over time. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
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- [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.

Punish was representative of the way Jason fought at his current rank. In the early stages of a fight, it added more necrotic damage than ever. Once Jason had cleansed an enemy, replacing the necrotic afflictions with the transcendent damage penance affliction, the special attack changed to support it.

The cyclops reacted to Jason's attacks, wheeling in place, but his size was an impediment when Jason stayed close. He kicked at Jason, who easily dodged, and tried to back off to leverage his eyebeam. Jason stayed underfoot, frustrating the monoptical giant.

One of Jason's orbs had been destroyed by the first eyebeam attack but the other one was still floating around him. It moved over to the cyclops and vanished as it applied the affliction that caused the cyclops to start spawning butterflies.

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- [Harbinger of Doom] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Continually drain mana from the victim to conjure a butterfly that seeks out nearby enemies. The butterflies are incorporeal and deal disruptive-force damage in a small area when destroyed. Butterflies that contact enemies inflict one instance of each non-holy affliction present on the enemy it manifested from, including [Harbinger of Doom]. This effect cannot be cleansed while any other non-holy affliction is in effect. Additional instances can be accumulated. At the time of manifestation, one butterfly is generated for each instance of this affliction.
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“Gordon,” Jason said and his familiar appeared. Four orbs manifested around Gordon instead of the usual six, with the two Jason had expended not yet recovered. Four was sufficient for Jason’s needs, however.

“Open it up,” Jason ordered.

One of the advancements Gordon had made at silver-rank was the ability to use any of his abilities via one type of orb, instead of having different orbs with individual functions. This meant that Gordon could use all four orbs to fire resonating-force beams at the building. Resonating-force was a damage type with superior armour-penetrating qualities and tore through non-magical concrete as easily as glass, opening the entire front of the building up as it threw out a cloud of concrete dust, obscuring Jason from the cyclops.

Inside the building, most of the Cabal forces were gathered on the ground floor as the ghouls forced their way up. The Cabal members had already become aware of the events outside after some of the long-limbed people fled inside, and now the wall was stripped away by energy beams that passed right through it and swept over them as well. They rushed outside even as Gordon vanished back into Jason’s aura and Jason sank into the cyclops’ shadow. In the meantime, butterflies moved from the cyclops in the direction of the emerging crowd.

Jason emerged from one of Shade's bodies on the second floor, in a small janitorial storage room. On the other side of the closed door, he could hear ghouls rushing about.

“Gordon, if any of the people outside decide to run for it, have the butterflies leave them alone,” Jason said. One of Gordon’s orbs briefly glowed a brighter blue, signalling his acknowledgement.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “Some Cabal members are climbing the exterior of the building and may circumvent the Network defenders to reach the people who have yet to reach the upper-floor magical defences.”

“Many of them?”

"Only a few on each side of the building, all iron or bronze-rank. Some are less interested in breaching the building as much as escaping the fight between you and the cyclops. I recommend deploying Gordon."

“How cool was that cyclops?” Jason asked. “That eyebeam?”

“I think, perhaps, you should try and maintain focus, Mr Asano.”

“What do you say, Gordon? Want to play window washer?”

Gordon flashed a blue orb and passed right through the wall.

“What’s the situation?” Jason asked.

"The gold-rank vampire seems to have scattered his new lesser vampires amongst the ghouls," Shade explained, having scouted the building as Jason confronted the cyclops. "The vampire's ability to directly control this many ghouls appears to be limited. I believe the lesser vampires are acting as sub-commanders to keep the horde under control."

"What am I dealing with on the other side of this door?"

"A number of ghouls led by one of the lesser vampires tried to ascend the stairs nearby but the stairs collapsed on them. They are forming a pile and climbing up over one another. The lesser vampire is someone I recognised from a network tactical team. We've worked with him in the past."

"Let's go save him, then," Jason said. "I'm just sorry we can't do anything for the rest of them."

Jason opened the door and stepped out into an open office space full of toppled cubicle walls teeming with ghouls. Only the closest ones noticed Jason arrival until he raised his arm, palm outward, and strafed the room with leeches that erupted from his hand.

This quickly drew the attention of the lesser vampire, easy to pick out for not being a twisted, animate corpse. The vampire dashed through the ghouls as Jason raised his other hand in his direction.

"Feed me your sins."

Nigel's tactical section checked the bodies of the long-limbed creatures sprawled on the stairs to confirm they were dead.

"What are these things?" Woolzy wondered out loud. "I thought the Cabal were all myths and fairy tales and such. What's this meant to be? Once upon a time, Stretch Armstrong turned out to be kind of a prick?"

"Is anyone else feeling that aura?" Darce asked. "It dropped down on us just as we started shooting."

"Yeah," Nigel said. "Asano is here."

"You don't suppose he's chucked in with the Cabal, do you?" Woolzy asked. "I heard he was friendly with one of their vamps and we did kill his brother. And his girlfriend."

"That was the Seppos and their bloody cat-four bloke, not us," Orange said.

"Are you willing to bet your life on him making that distinction?" Digit asked.

"If Asano was against us, his aura would feel a lot worse than arrogant," Nigel said.

"Jonno, Thorny, check the exterior for more of those things."

They had shattered the glass wall attacking the things climbing up the outside. Thorny gripped Jonno's arm as he leaned out to check the exterior, only to duck back in. One of the creatures fell past the window, almost taking him with it. He poked his head out again out, looking up to see a floating entity attacking the creatures clinging to the wall with energy beams.

"Asano's here, alright," he said. "I don't think we have to worry about the climbers."

Shade had scouted out each of the lesser vampires, which meant that Jason could jump directly to them. The problem was that after cleaning them he was left with a weakened, confused and vulnerable essence user, right in the midst of the enemy. He missed the presence of Kaito, who would have allowed him to throw them right out a window to be extracted by helicopter. He started locking them into storage cupboards, copy rooms and any other place he could find not overrun with ghouls.

The only place in the building Jason avoided was the section of the third floor where he could sense Farrah, Dawn and the vampire. The ghouls were pushing further and further up the building, with Jason appearing and disappearing as he needed. On the eighth floor, he encountered some of the Network defenders, helping Koen Waters secure a stairwell being overrun with ghouls. Colin started at the top of the stairs and began devouring his way down, enhanced by the flame power he received from Farrah.

Once Gordon returned, Jason had him use his resonating-force beams to bore a hole in the floor from the eighth floor all the way down to the ground. The butterflies that had multiplied on the Cabal members of the ground floor used the hole to start flooding up through the building, going to work on the ghouls.

Jason arrived at the spot where Dawn and Farrah had what was left of the vampire. Farrah had called him over through the party chat but he hadn't arrived until most of the ghouls were cleared out. Once the Network teams could move back down and retrieve their formerly-vampiric companions he had stashed around the building, Jason sought out Farrah and Dawn.

"Why haven't you finished this guy off?" Jason asked after they exchanged stories. "If you think keeping him alive because he might be useful later is a good idea, you need to watch more movies."

"A vampire is not alive," Dawn said. "Its body is a vessel for stolen life force."

"Okay," Jason said.

“This vampire’s stolen life force is infused with reality core energy. I suspect that if you drain the life force from vampires, you may be able to absorb that energy yourself, accelerating the advancement of your abilities.”

“Hold up,” Jason said. “You mean I can use this vampire like a monster core?”

“Very broadly speaking,” Dawn said. “I’m not entirely certain it will work but if it does, it will only be with vampires, who do not truly own the life force they contain.”

“I don’t want to do that. Monster cores mess up your ability to advance without using more monster cores.”

“Reality cores have the same effect,” Dawn said, “albeit to a lesser degree. In this instance, however, the vampires serve as a method of refining the energy. Their bodies should have already soaked up the elements that stain the soul and impede non-core advancement, like filters.”

“Should have?” Jason asked. That sounds a lot like a guess. You did just say the words ‘I’m not entirely certain,’ which do not fill me with confidence.”

“There is a very good chance that there are more of these vampires than anyone realises,” Dawn said, “and very few of them will be as weak as this one. If you can get even a little stronger, that may prove critical going forward.”

“No,” Farrah said. “It’s not worth risking your entire future over. Will he advance any faster than if he were using cores?”

“Almost certainly not,” Dawn said.

“Then why bother?” Farrah asked. “Advancing through silver-rank takes years. Eating a few vampires won’t make a big difference.”

“It does not have to be a big difference to be important,” Dawn said. “You are both still at the early stages of silver-rank, where your growth is at its fastest. Asano’s abilities are strong against vampires. Advancing them even a little will be to our advantage.”

“It’s easy to tell someone else to cripple their potential when you’re already diamond rank,” Farrah said.

“That’s enough,” Jason said. As the two women argued, his gaze hadn’t left the scorched, helpless vampire.

“Yes, Dawn’s asking me to take a crappy risk, but we all know what’s at stake. What’s the worst that can happen? I have to rank up using cores from now on? I’ll trade that for keeping the world safe.”

“You don’t even know if we need to go around fighting vampires,” Farrah argued.

“Even if there are a bunch of them out there, how does that affect our objectives?”

"Perhaps, not at all," Dawn said. "So long as you can convince Jason to not help people when there's an uprising of gold-rank vampires going on, we may not have an issue. Of course, if they learn about the door and its ability to access reality cores, they may come after us."

"It's my choice," Jason said, holding his hand over the vampire.

"Your blood is not yours to keep but mine on which to feast."

The life drain power was enough to finish the vampire.

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- You have absorbed refined reality energy. It will be applied to advance your least developed abilities. The purified nature of the energy will not impede your ability to advance through non-energy absorption methods.
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 - You have absorbed insufficient energy to advance any of your abilities.
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Jason's tense shoulders slumped with relief.

"All good," he said. "Looks like I might want to hunt some vampires, if I get the chance."

"See?" Dawn said to Farrah. "I told you it would be fine."

"And I bet the odds looked great when you weren't the one taking the risk."

"What's done is done," Jason said. "It was my choice and it worked out, so there's no point arguing."

"You shouldn't have let her pressure you into it."

Jason laughed as he gave Farrah a reassuring smile.

"Do you think that she's enough to force me into a choice I don't want to make?" he asked. "If I can stand up to the Builder and I can stand up to the goddess of Knowledge, I can stand up to her."

Farrah frowned but gave a reluctant nod.

"Alright," Jason said turning back to the vampire. "Let's see if I can shake the last bit of sauce out of the bottle."

He held his hand out and cast another spell.

"As your life was mine to reap, so your death is mine to harvest."

The remnant life force within the vampire was drawn out and absorbed.

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- You have absorbed refined reality energy. It will be applied to advance your least developed abilities.
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 - Ability [Verdict] had advanced from Silver 0 (93%) to Silver 0 (94%).
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“Huh,” Jason said. “I think I’ll need to kill a lot of vampires.”