

Chapter 341

Too Valuable to Lose

In a Chinese village levelled by a powerful earthquake, the villagers watched as an alien figure used a beam of energy to cut through the girder blocking the hole in which a child was trapped. It was a floating cloak, containing not a person but an energy that looked much like the Helix nebula, commonly known as the Eye of God. Floating around it were eye-like orbs, which fired the beams that were cutting away the debris.

At first, the villagers had been afraid of Jason and his terrifying companion, but as they used their powers to retrieve person after person trapped within the rubble they became optimistic, albeit warily so.

The beams of Jason familiar, Gordon, made short work of the collapsed girder, revealing the narrow hole underneath. Jason could easily see through the darkness to the top of the little boy's head and extended his shadow arms down to pluck him out. As soon as he was free, his mother rushed forward to embrace him as the villagers looked on. They were all as dirty as Jason was under his cloak.

In her office, back in Australia, Sydney Network branch committeewoman Annabeth Tilden was watching a video file. It was news footage, intercepted without ever going into public distribution. It had been sent by the Beijing Network branch, along with an angrily-worded message.

"...took responders several hours to reach more isolated areas in the wake of the catastrophic earthquake. The collapse of the bridge you see behind me devastated this small village but the villagers themselves attribute the low number of casualties to a number of mysterious individuals, several of which they describe as appearing supernatural in nature. This is not the first..."

Anna closed the video file with a sigh and added it to a folder with the others. One of the more disturbing elements was that the news footage was not in Mandarin but in English. Not only was Jason being far too prominent in his actions but clearly someone wanted to publicise them in the west. Not all of them had been intercepted before going online.

"Jason may be playing rather loosely with the secrecy provisions of our agreement after our people attacked him in Hanoi," Ketevan said, "but at least he hasn't been showing off the stars in his cloak since then. No one has connected the stories to the Starlight Rider."

“Yet,” Anna said. “And they weren’t our people in Hanoi.”

“How many times have we had to explain that the people who went after him were Network but not *our* Network?” Ketevan asked. “I’m not so sure he’ll still see us an ally once he’s done with his journey of self-discovery or whatever he’s doing is.”

“I swear, I want to fire a missile at the Hanoi branch.”

“The International Committee more or less did,” Ketevan reminded her.

A month earlier, in Hanoi, Jason had underpriced the yacht in order to sell it off quickly. He decided to start his trip by playing tourist but quickly sensed the people following him.

The capture team had two category threes and a dozen category twos. They realised that Asano had clearly sensed them and they were forced to shed slower members as they pursued the elusive target through the city.

They finally tracked him down in the Hong River Slum Town, a bizarre mix of urban, industrial and rural. Illegal dwellings were bunched in with small farm plots, stores and even factories. Dirt roads and irrigation ditches defined the thoroughfares, with everything from the buildings to the very ground marking poverty, pollution and dilapidation. It was a backwater oddly located in a city of seven and a half million.

Without street lights, it was a dark and dangerous place at night, more for the environment than the residents. For the capture team, though, darkness was not an issue. Only one of the category threes, Thanh, had managed to maintain the chase all the way, courtesy of speed powers granted by his light essence. The same light essence was able to illuminate the area with his aura.

Thanh’s aura didn’t simply radiate light. Over a wide area, all darkness was banished. It seemed to have no source and was simply everywhere, filling every nook and cranny with soft illumination.

As the space lit up, Jason was revealed to be standing right in front of the capture team. The only remaining patch of darkness was inside the hood of his cloak, in which only a pair of silver eyes could be seen.

“I’m surprised anyone was this stupid,” Jason said in Vietnamese. His skill at actively using his translation power with specific languages was improving, although he was stubbornly clinging to syntax that gave an odd mix of perfect pronunciation and deeply odd grammar. Rather than try to adapt, the way Farrah had so quickly, he had made it into a rather obnoxious signature.

“I didn’t think anyone would be stupid enough to cross the International Committee after they gutted the Lyon branch like a fish,” he continued.

“You no longer need to concern yourself with things like that,” Thanh said. “You belong to us, now, so you don’t make decisions anymore.”

“It could be the Chinese,” Jason mused, ignoring the man. “They might be using you as a cat’s paw to test my capabilities without it blowing back on them. Maybe the EOA, looking to take me off the board before I start looking for them over their part in holding my friend prisoner. It could be that there’s no one and you’re really this dumb. I mean, you let me lead you by the nose until half of your team was left behind. Your trackers kind of suck, by the way. I had to aura project like a lighthouse for them to keep up and it was still hard to avoid escaping by accident.”

“You are arrogant,” Thanh said. “That is your Japanese blood speaking.”

“Strewth, racist enough for you, mate?”

“We have studied your methods, Asano. You are a creature of the shadows. Without them, you are vulnerable and exposed.”

“You’ve got me there,” Jason said. “I definitely didn’t train with someone from a family of essence-user instructors the equal of anyone on two worlds who laboriously drilled me on how to fight when I was caught out of my element.”

“You like to jabber and distract,” Thanh said. “We know this about you. Quick words cannot change that we hold the advantage in numbers, in power and in the environment. There are no shadows for you to cower in.”

They were on a dirt road, with a heavily polluted irrigation ditch running along one side and a ramshackle slum house on the other. The six category twos were arrayed in front of Thanh, with Jason standing before them in his combat robes and cloak. With the appearance of the light, the attention of the locals had been grabbed and they were variously hiding, fleeing or even recording the proceedings.

“Can you blur me in those videos?” Jason asked Shade, under his breath.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Asano. This silver-rank light is having an extremely deleterious effect on my capabilities. I will be unable to manifest any of my bodies or run interference on detection abilities. I can only remain in the hood of your cloak, which remains impervious to the shadow deletion. Otherwise I would not even be able to speak with you.”

“No worries,” Jason said. “Part of why we left was to throw ourselves into training, right? This should push our limits nicely.”

“This may be throwing ourselves a tad hard, Mr Asano.”

“Maybe, but that guy Lyon sent left a lingering unpleasantness. I’d like to—”

“You have the nerve to stand in front of me and talk to yourself?” Thanh yelled, anger scoring his face. His aura blasted out, only to stop dead against Jason’s like it was a brick wall. Jason’s aura wasn’t strong enough to suppress the silver-ranker’s and eliminate the light, but it was definitely stronger, leaving Thanh visibly unnerved.

“KILL HIM!” Thanh screamed, forgetting that their purpose was to take him alive.

A grab-bag of powers came Jason’s way. One of the bronze-rankers underwent a bizarre transformation, his arms turning into snakes and his legs into those of a grasshopper. He pounced at Jason, who intercepted the snake fangs with his cloak as the man landed in front of him. He then pushed into the man and rammed a conjured dagger up under the man’s jaw to pierce his brain.

Bronze-rankers couldn’t fight through what should have been lethal blows the way a silver-ranker could. The man with a dagger piercing his brain was tough enough to cling to life but fell limp. Jason grabbed his collapsing body and used him as a shield to soak up the other attacks coming his way. A fire bolt spell, a spiked ball on a chain and a laser beam of light from the silver-rank Thanh all impacted against the body.

The bronze-ranker in Jason’s arms did not survive the attacks and Jason rushed forward, still using him as a shield. He rammed the corpse into one of the other bronze-rankers, leaving them both to topple over as Jason spun away, positioning himself so the group was obstructing one another’s sightlines as much as possible. His dagger, in a backhand grip, ran across the next victim’s throat before jabbing back into the side of the neck. Jason let him go as the man stumbled backward, clutching desperately at his throat with one hand as the other scrambled for a healing potion.

The shock of Jason’s counter-blitz only lasted moments and a fresh wave of attacks was already on its way. To an observer, it might seem that Jason was dangerously outmatched. From Jason’s perspective, the attacks were the wild, inexpert flailing of amateurs. That was not to say they were without strategy. The elimination of the shadows had a large impact and it wasn’t the only trick that seemed tailor-made for him.

Clearly, the enemy had learned of his fight against the last silver-ranker and the tether power that had pinned him down. One of the bronze-rankers had a similar ability and Jason had neither shadow nor cover to avoid it. Jason tossed his dagger into the air and a shadow hand emerged from his cloak to snatch it. His normal hands each pulled a throwing dart from the sheaths on his chest and flung them out.

The first was an explosive dart, thrown directly at the tether rod. The blast from a tether rod being destroyed had caused him to lose against his last fight against a silver-ranker, but this time he was triggering it himself. The second dart was thrown at the

ground, right in front of the rod. This was the dart Jason had developed after that same fight, using the artifice knowledge he gained from a skill book. It hit the ground and a door-sized wall of magically reinforced ballistics gel sprang into being, right as the tether rod exploded.

The force from the blast sent the person who used the ability flying, along with another of the bronze-rankers. It didn't kill them but Jason knew for himself how disorienting that blast could be. It would give him some breathing room with the other three who, like Jason, were protected as the blast hit the gelatin wall. Gobbets of the ballistics gel rained thickly but harmlessly over them.

As the fight resumed in the wake of the blast, Jason's cloak protected him from some attacks, although its shadowy substance was also negatively impacted by the light. Its true value was to obscure his true body position, causing others to simply miss. He had long incorporated unexpected movements into his technique, with hours upon hours of flexibility and balance training. Between that and his cloak's ability to spread out and dance to Jason's whims, it was tricky to pinpoint his body's exact location at any given moment.

Jason's magical senses tracked incoming magical attacks before they were made. This included conjured and magical weapons, while mundane weapons would be useless. Knowing where the attacks would be, he was in a constant state of moving to where they wouldn't, never stopping still.

The result was that he seemed impervious to attack, moving like a ghost through projectiles and weapon swings. Part of it was that he truly did avoid many blows. Another part was that his cloak masked the blows that did land, while he gave no indication of being harmed.

For his part, his dagger flashed out to land again and again. His shadow arm extended at need, giving his dagger no less reach than the guy with the spiked ball and chain. It flailed like an unattended hose with the water turned to full, yet in the seeming randomness, his dagger bit flesh time after time, riddling the enemy with afflictions.

Jason also pulled out the hydra whip he looted from his very first bronze-rank monster, wielding it with a second shadow arm. The semi-autonomous heads thrashing wildly as they lashed out with savage teeth. The whip couldn't pile on bonus afflictions like the dagger but a single special attack could be delivered once for each of the five heads. The targets were somewhat random amongst whichever enemies were in range but that was only a minor disadvantage.

The whip could also be used to intercept attacks. Having the hydra's property of regeneration, it quickly recovered from most damage. Only the fire attacks of one of the bronze-rankers and the searing light from the silver-ranker's attacks left lingering damage.

Jason largely left the silver-ranker alone. Thanh was hanging behind the others making ranged attacks instead of diving in, which was exactly what Jason wanted. He only made occasional feints in Thanh's direction so that he stayed on the move. So long as the silver-ranker didn't plant his feet to play as a rapid-fire turret, Jason could handle it. So long as he was careful, the bronze-rankers were a useful tool for interrupting the silver-ranker's sightlines.

Jason had seized the momentum of the combat and was not letting go. The problem for his enemies was not that they didn't know how to fight, as they had clearly received meticulous combat training. The problem was that combat training was derived from Earth methodologies. The way they moved, the way they fought, even the way they thought was based around a paradigm on a baseline human, with the powers incorporated as an addendum.

At iron-rank, that wasn't too much of a liability, but bronze was the point where an essence user truly became more than human. If they continued to think and fight like a human, they were wasting huge portions of their potential.

Jason had been trained as an essence user from the ground up. The confluence of attributes, perception and powers worked together to comprise a series of force multipliers, the results of which demonstrated exactly what made Farrah and himself so valuable to the Network. It wasn't just improved meditation techniques to get people off cores but a holistic method of going from ordinary warrior to magical weapon.

Jason's enemies suffered a disconnect between their powers, their physical abilities and the way they sought to use them. They looked buffoonish next to Jason, who was combining and interweaving powers. He relied on his enhanced perception over his ordinary senses. His every motion made use of his superhuman agility and flexibility. Each physical attack was delivered with an appreciation of the power he could put behind it and the strain his body could take in landing it.

His enemies had the potential but they squandered it. They were humans with abilities while Jason was a superhuman, through and through. The results were stark, as even without shadows or pulling out his familiars, he gave the bronze-rankers a brutal education on the differences in approach.

Even so, a less-than-stellar silver-ranker was still a silver-ranker. The ability to banish shadows truly was an impediment to Jason, even if it wasn't the defining factor his

opponent had anticipated. Like his subordinates, Thanh squandered much of his potential, but a silver-ranker had far more potential to squander.

Thanh was clearly a ranged attacker, staying back and flinging beams of light and crystal shards in Jason's direction. He clearly wasn't as secure as he should be in his silver-rank resilience, wasting his silver rank strength. If he had moved in hard on Jason with his superior strength, toughness and reflexes, he would have prevented Jason from going wild on the bronze-rankers at least. Instead, Jason used the bronze-rankers as cover and shields to intercept Thanh's ranged attacks.

The ability to use the bronze-rankers as human shields was just the beginning. Jason loaded them up with afflictions, hitting them with spells even as he danced amongst them. They were incubators for the afflictions building up, each one charging the protective power of Jason's amulet.

Despite his superiority, Jason went far from unscathed. As many hits as he avoided, there were just too many enemies and much of his fight was about minimising hits that couldn't be dodged. The relatively weak-but-rapid attacks from the silver-ranker alone packed a dangerous punch against Jason, even in his magic armour.

If Thanh had challenged Jason alone, he would have had a very good chance of winning. With silver-rank powers, silver-rank attributes and the power to deny any shadows, he held no shortage of advantages. The bronze-rankers seemed like another advantage, but they were, in fact, the equalisers.

The crucial thing that made the bronze-rankers liabilities to their leader was that they were the means by which Jason could endure hit after hit. Each affliction Jason incubated on the bronze-rankers added a shield to Jason's amulet. As Thanh punched through the shields, they transformed into healing. Jason's Leech Bite attack drained health to further top him off. When that wasn't enough, his Feast of Blood gave a burst of drain-healing. If it still wasn't enough, he drained the afflictions from a bronze-ranker. His Sin Eater power turned every affliction he drained into ongoing recovery of health, stamina and mana.

With each bronze-ranker that he drained, Jason's regeneration grew stronger. The downside was that as each enemy succumbed to the holy afflictions left in place of the original ones, it became easier for Thanh to land hits.

Once the bronze-rankers were all dead, there were no more obstacles to Thanh's attacks. In spite of this, the precision of his attacks dropped as his frustration rose. It had reached the point where Jason's armour was ragged and he should have died a dozen times over. Jason had fed on the life force of the bronze-rankers and used them to build up

an absurd level of regeneration. If Jason didn't have them to use, Thanh's chances would have been far better.

Despite all of that, defeating a silver-ranker was no mean feat. Even if Thanh was getting sloppy, Jason was out of human shields and Thanh's attacks were outpacing his healing. Jason focused on trying to take down Thanh but the man had a number of slippery movement powers. It slowed down his attacks to use them, but it didn't stop them altogether.

If not for extensive training with Sophie, Jason would have been at a loss to counter the man's speed. As it was, he wasn't landing hits, only applying as much pressure as he could, employing every trick he knew to fight a faster opponent. The key was forcing them into rapid direction changes, which exhausted them much faster.

Energy attrition was not wildly effective against Sophie, whose endurance almost matched Jason's. While a silver-ranker's endurance was formidable, Jason could sense it slowly but surely diminishing. For his part, the same effects that restored Jason's health were keeping his mana and stamina topped off.

The goal was to tire the silver-ranker out, getting him to pause long enough to spray him down with Colin and move the fight into the end game. The man clearly knew Jason's tactics and would be aware of his most dangerous familiar, thus would not let himself be blindsided. Only by forcing the situation would Jason use Colin effectively, and missing would mean the silver-ranker could easily avoid him.

Things were not going Jason's way, as Thanh had his own plan. While Jason was trying to run out the clock of Thanh's mana, Thanh wanted to overwhelm Jason's health regeneration before that happened. The silver-ranker had the attribute advantage and things were going his way.

Amongst Thanh's suite of powers was a burst of ultra speed, such as Sophie, Rufus and Danielle Geller all shared. Thanh appeared to lack any big-hit powers but it allowed him to cue up an array of projectiles to fire the moment the power ended. From training with Rufus and Sophie, Jason recognised the telltale blur and threw himself out of the way, but there was no truly dodging that level of speed. Each time it happened, Jason was ravaged with attacks. The only blessing was that each use was a devastating drain on Thanh's mana.

As Thanh landed hit after hit, Jason felt the jaws of death growing ever closer. Rather than let them feast, Jason chose to turn the tables and feast on death instead. He paused, startling Thanh enough that a light beam missed wildly as Jason chanted out a spell.

"As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest."

Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain).
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Bronze 6 (09%).

 - Effect (iron): Drain the remnant life force of a recently deceased body, replenishing health, stamina and mana. Only affects targets with blood.

 - Effect (bronze): Affects all enemy corpses in a wide area.
-

The bronze-rankers were half-rotted away, half dissolved into nothingness as Jason had not used his finisher on any of them. Thanh watched in horror as the blood-red glow of their remnant life rose up from their bodies and was drained into Jason, a series of bloody trails moving through the air and seeping into Jason's body.

Thanh's senses told him that under the ragged armour and bloodied skin, Jason was more than just physically recovered. Jason's mana and stamina had already been diminishing far slower than Thanh's own and now both pools were completely replenished.

Thanh was not yet fully exhausted but had thrown no shortage of mana at Jason in the form of magical attacks. All his hyper-speed burst attacks had been undone, leaving only their mana deficit behind. As he watched Jason fully restore himself using the ruined carcasses that had only minutes ago been his team, Thanh's will broke.

Jason felt the moment his opponent's morale crumpled as the man's aura turned to glass. Jason slammed his own aura down like a hammer, shattering that glass to pieces as Thanh had been activating a movement power, trying to flee. His aura, now a paper tiger, collapsed under Jason's assault.

Thanh felt a sensation unlike any he had experienced, like a knife pressed against the throat of his soul. He could sense that it would dig in if he moved even the tiniest bit in the wrong direction, flooding him with fear.

Thanh froze on the spot, hearing footsteps slowly approach from behind on the gravel road. The light from his aura was gone but motes of light flew out from Jason's cloak to bathe the road in starlight.

"I think we need to return to our previous conversation," Jason said, his voice a glacial inexorability. "You need to tell me why you violated the International Committee's edict."

"I don't know," Thanh said. "They just told me to capture you."

Jason only scraped a pinprick against Thanh's soul but it was the most violating thing the man had ever experienced. He shrieked in fear and pain, even though the sensation lasted but a fraction of a second.

"I really don't know!" Thanh begged. "They tracked your boat, that's how they knew you were coming. That's all I know, I swear!"

Thanh still couldn't see Jason standing behind him and his aura senses were clamped down by Jason's aura suppression. As for his magic senses, with the absence of the light, Shade was once again masking Jason's presence. This left Thanh's nerves rising toward panic, as all he could sense was the razor claw gripping his soul.

"I'm not going to kill you," Jason said finally. "You should be doing your real job, which is not trying to hunt me down. It's protecting people from the dangers they don't even know are there and your power is too valuable to lose from that fight. I suggest you go back to your job and be very, very diligent about carrying it out."

The pressure suddenly vanished from Thanh, who immediately shot off like a rocket. A path of light spread out under his feet as he fled with all the speed he could muster.

"Shade," Jason said. "Have Farrah tell the Network what happened. Make sure they buy up the recordings of all these people. Tell them to be generous about it, too. They could use the money."

"I imagine the Network will want to speak to you."

"I don't want to speak to them. Remind them that part of the agreement was that the Network would stop coming after me and let them know that if they are going to be sloppy about the terms, then so will I."

"I don't think they'll like that," Shade said.

"I'm done caring about what people like," Jason said. "If they want something from me, they can pay for it."

The stars from Jason's cloak that were floating around him returned to the cloak, then dimmed down to nothing. The street was once again plunged into darkness.

"...should be doing your real job, which is not trying to hunt me down. It's protecting people from the dangers they don't even know are there..."

Adrien Barbou closed the video file with a sigh, created a folder and moved the file into it. He pressed a button on his desk.

"Fiona, please arrange a meeting with Mrs. West at her earliest convenience."

Chapter 342

All I Can Do is My Best

Jason walked down the single street of the dilapidated, West African township. Buildings of clay brick and rusted, corrugated iron were silent and the streets empty. The only people he could see were amongst the tents set up at the far end of the town, where people in hazmat suits were bustling about. They had too much to do, too few people to do it and too little to do it with.

He made his way down the dusty street, the heat pounding down like a blacksmith's hammer. It wasn't until he drew close to the tan tents, set up in neat rows that the busy humanitarian workers noticed him. A hazmat-suited woman rapidly approached and started yelling at him in French.

"What the hell do you think you're..."

She trailed off as she met his eyes, seeing their silver colour.

"Are you him?" she asked.

"Yeah," Jason said. "Who are you?"

"Dr Chloe Baudrillard. What do I call you?"

"It's probably best I don't leave a name. It's one less thing when people come asking about me."

"People are going to come asking?"

"Once you see what I can do, that won't seem strange."

"I've heard the stories. From people I trust, but it doesn't seem possible."

"A place like this could use a little impossible, don't you think?" he asked.

"You're damn right it could. If you can do what they say..."

"I can. But only for as long as people don't come looking for me," Jason said.

"I was told that keeping quiet was your rule but I can't promise that we can stop people from talking," she said. "All I was told was to give you whatever you need and stay out of your way. But as I said, people talk, and I've heard about the man with the silver eyes."

"I'm not looking to build a legend," Jason said. "I'm just looking to help people. The goal is to do as much good as we can for as long as we can, right?" Jason asked.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, it is. So what do you need?"

"Some privacy and all the sick people you've got."

She led Jason forward, but after a short distance, he stopped.

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

"I need to see someone," he said. "Go to where I need to be and I'll find you."

She frowned, turned to look at the tents and then back to Jason but he was already gone.

"What the... does he think he's Batman?"

Elsewhere in the camp, Jason stood outside a tent and let a little of his aura show. Shortly thereafter, another hazmat suited woman appeared, this one with a bronze-rank aura.

"So you're here," she said.

"Yes."

"You realise that the Network isn't exactly slacking off on this, right? We are helping. We just aren't making a spectacle of it."

"I respect that," Jason said. "We're both working in secret, only at different points on the scale. The simple fact is, secrecy is costing lives."

"If the secret comes out, you think it will make things easier once the world descends on us?"

"This isn't a hospital full of camera phones and media saturation," Jason said. "We have leeway here and we should use it."

"You think we don't want to march through here, raising people up off their sickbeds? We have to look beyond today, to the next outbreak and the next one. Plus, there's only so much mana to go around."

Jason plucked a wooden box out of the air, sliding off the lid to reveal stacks of bronze-rank coins.

"Would this help?"

The woman didn't answer for a moment as she looked at the coins, then shook her head as if to clear it.

"You're willing to just hand these over?"

"You want some iron ones as well? Actually, give me a list of everywhere I can find Network personnel working on this and I'll make some drop-offs."

"That's very generous," she said. "It doesn't change the fact that what you're doing puts us all in jeopardy."

"You could look at it as a safety precaution," Jason said. "if anyone latches on to your activities, you can pass it off as the work of the magic healer roaming around."

"It's not as simple as you make out," she said.

"It never is. All I can do is my best, based on what I know and what I can do."

"Well," she said. "I don't like what you're up to but it's not like I can stop it. And I am going to take these coins."

Jason walked into the large tent, Chloe beside him in her hazmat suit. There were people laid out in rows, letting out a discord of feeble moans.

"Are you sure you want to see?" he asked. "Once you do, you'll never see the world in the same way again."

"You think I should choose ignorance?"

"As a rule, no, but it's not so easy to pick up your regular life after peeking behind the curtains of the universe."

"Just do what you came here to do."

"Alright," Jason said.

Jason moved to the first patient, who was agitated and delirious. The man's aura was in chaos and Jason used his own to guide it back to calm. After months of practising, his aura control had eclipsed his abilities of the past.

From Chloe's perspective, Jason's mere presence calmed the man, lulling him into sleep. Then it passed through the room like a wave, the pitiful moans dropping away. Then Jason raised his hand, speaking words in a language she didn't recognise.

Red light started glowing from within the patient and Chloe's attention was transfixed. Looking at the light felt like looking at the man's beating heart, although it was stained with black taint. As she watched, the taint seeped out of the light, streaming up into Jason's waiting hand. It only stopped once the red light was clean, at which point it retracted into the man's body. Still unconscious, the patient looked immediately better.

Chloe looked on in disbelief as Jason went through the patients, one by one. He didn't so much as glance at her until he had gone through every patient.

"You have more tents, right?"

Despite their misgivings, the aid workers had cleared out to let Jason loose on the patients after getting implausible but emphatic word from other camps. Now that he was gone, they were swarming over the patients, running tests multiple times out of raw disbelief. Chloe suspected that she herself was in some stage of shock, the unreality of it all being disorienting. She hadn't run tests to check the results of the strange man's actions but every instincts told her that the stories she heard were true.

"What you did in there, I can't explain," she told Jason at the edge of the camp. "It looked like you were healing people with a magic spell."

"It did, didn't it?"

"You were right," she said. "I'm not sure how to just move on after what I saw."

"I imagine you'll be busy in the next little while. By the time you have a chance to stop and think about it, you can just pass it off as some weird trick."

"I don't think that's going to work. Not if you really cured those people. Was that you in Sydney, last year? Healing all those kids at the hospital."

"I try to be more circumspect, now, but..."

They both turned to look at the frenzy of activity in the camp.

"Sometimes people just need helping," she said.

"Yeah," Jason agreed.

"Are you going to more camps?"

"Of course."

"I won't keep you, then," she said. "There's no shortage of people that need you."

He narrowed his eyes at her.

"You're really not going to ask, are you?" he said.

"Ask what?"

"You know what."

"You can tell?"

"I can feel it in your aura."

"Oh, my aura."

"You just watched me heal the sick by casting spells, but auras are where you draw the line? I'm not talking about the aura photographs you can get in a new age shop."

Jason let his aura gently brush against hers, another example of his new level of delicacy. He was unable to hide the intrinsic properties of his aura when projecting it in such a way, however. She felt the domineering nature of his aura power, Hegemony, along with the unyielding resolve that came from all that his soul had endured.

"So that's you," she said after recovering from the strange sensation.

"There are more jokes than my aura might imply."

"I think it's time for you to go," she said.

"Why didn't you ask me to heal you?"

"You've given us miracles enough. What's a little cancer next to what these people are going through? I can go home and do all the chemo I like. All they can do is lay there and hope not to die. You should be moving on to more of them."

Jason gave her a warm smile and held up a hand, repeating the chant in the language she didn't understand.

As with the patients before her, her red life force was brought out, cleansed and returned to her. She felt like a fresh breeze had just passed through her whole body.

“You’re a good egg, Chloe Baudrillard.”

He plucked a pen and notebook from thin air, scribbling a note and tearing out the page before handing it to her.

“You’ll be busy with this for a while, but when you’re done, come find me. I’ll show you how to heal in ways you never imagined. You do want to do what I just did, right?”

“You’re saying I could...”

“Some variation on it, yes. If I show you how.”

She looked down at the paper in her hand.

“Jason Asano,” she read.

“That’s my name,” he said. “I’d appreciate you keeping it under your hat.”

She looked up from the paper, her eyes searching his face for answers.

“Why me?”

“Because you didn’t ask,” he said.

A black UTV, something between a quad bike and a car, was moving along a road of red dirt, between vibrantly green bushes and trees. The man in the driver seat was not driving but instead narrating to the recording crystal floating over his head.

Losing power due to low levels of ambient magic was a problem for magic items, especially weaker and cheaper ones like recording crystals. Fortunately, Jason’s inventory was able to replenish the depleted magic of objects, so long as Jason himself wasn’t mana-starved. Since his transfiguration, Jason’s more spiritual nature meant that he no longer needed spirit coins to keep his magic levels up, or even consume them for food, so that was not an issue. The steady trickle of power from the astral he now enjoyed sustained him both physically and magically.

“You could use a non-magical recording solution,” Shade suggested as Jason put the recording crystal away.

“Recording crystals adjust to the movement of the vehicle so there isn’t a jiggled image,” Jason said.

“Are you suggesting my suspension system is insufficient?” Shade asked.

“Not in the least,” Jason said. “This is as comfortable a ride as I could hope. As always, Shade, you excel.”

As they continued on, a magic item on the passenger seat began glowing with silver light and made a low hum. It looked something like an oversized compass.

“It’s not even two o’clock and this is the second one today,” Jason said, picking up the device. The grid compass was something Farrah had devised after digging into the nature of the Network’s detection grid. There was some resistance to giving her access from certain elements of the Network, but that changed as sections of the grid started experiencing failures. At that point, Farrah became a valued part of a multi-branch investigative task force.

When it started happening, Jason had offered to return immediately.

“Not wanting to seem rude,” Farrah said, “but you won’t actually be able to help. This is an array magic thing and you just don’t have the expertise.”

“The grid involves astral magic too, right?”

“Yes, but the astral magic part works fine. It’s the bones that need looking at. Not everything is about you, Jason.”

The grid compass alerted Jason to proto-space formations in the vicinity by tapping into the grid. At the pivot-point of the needle was a crystal that glowed different colours, according to the strength. Smaller crystals gave a rough indication of distance by how many lit up.

“Seventy clicks,” Jason said. “Silver rank, too.”

The UTV pulled to a stop and Jason got out, returning the charging plate to his inventory. The vehicle transformed into a cloud of darkness, most of which disappeared into Jason’s shadow. The remainder took the form of Shade.

“My supply of coins is getting low,” Shade said. “I’ll need more if we’re going to fly.”

“Ask and ye shall receive, my friend,” Jason said, producing a box of coins.

Neither Shade nor Jason needed coins due to the low-magic conditions, although Jason still needed coins if he wasn’t consuming large amounts of food. He had no shortage since he was interceding in proto-spaces at least once and often two or even three times daily. What Shade did need coins for was to supplement high-energy forms like flying vehicles. Only once he was silver-rank would Shade be able to fly in an energy-efficient manner.

When he jumped in on proto-spaces, Jason was leaving behind the bulk of the silver-rank loot for the locals and satisfying himself with bronze-rank spoils. Leaving behind the best goodies with no work required for the Network made for exasperated responses from the local branches, but no actual complaints. Not since leaving China, anyway.

“Actually,” Jason said, pulling a completed recording crystal from his inventory, “take this too, please.”

Shade put the coins and the crystal in his own dimensional space. It was significantly smaller than Jason's but could be accessed through any of his bodies. This meant that Jason could send his recording to his niece via Shade. She sent him back gifts in return, like biscuits she made with her mother.

Shade then took the form of a new vehicle, an ultralight trike. Basically a seat with a motor behind it, with glider wings over the top, it was also black with a few white embellishments.

"I'm not sure black is especially safety-conscious," Jason said.

"I could transform into a regular tricycle instead," Shade said.

"No, this is good," Jason said.

Using the road as a runway, they were soon soaring over the landscape. Seventy kilometres would be roughly a half-hour trip.

"I know its probably time to be looking towards heading home," Jason said, enjoying the wind flowing over him. "I'm having an absolute blast, though. I would love to bring Erika's family on a trip like this. Minus the monster-slaying and horrifying misery of the plague camps, obviously."

"You have responsibilities, as vaguely defined as they are, right now," Shade said. "I believe that Dawn will eventually contact you again for further explanation, and the failures in the grid are an increasing concern. The two factors may not be unrelated."

"I was thinking the same thing. I don't want to leave while this outbreak is still ongoing, though. It's nice to use what I can do to help solve a non-magical problem that affects so many people. It's exactly what I imagined back in Greenstone."

Chapter 343

A Modern Myth

“...spokespersons from Médecins Sans Frontières and the World Health Organisation have both dismissed claims of miracle healing, stating that the success in containing the outbreak is due to experience and the protocols established during the 2013-2016 outbreak. Evangelical aid group Samaritan’s Purse has officially echoed these statements, but unnamed sources within the organisation have made reference to what they describe as divine visitations...”

Mr North paused the recording playing on the wall monitor. The Four Cardinals of the EOA, Mr North, Mrs South, Mr East and Mrs West were seated around a square table. Lined up on the opposite wall to the large monitor were their various subordinates.

“Preparations are taking longer than expected,” Mr North said. “We need to reassess our response to Asano’s activities.”

“Before we start looking towards action, we need a revised time frame for our agenda,” Mrs South said. “When will we be ready to act?”

“Disabling the grid is proving more difficult than anticipated,” Mr East said. “To date, we have been successful in shutting off only localised areas.”

He glanced at Adrien Barbou, standing against the wall with Mrs West’s other flunkies.

“The information provided by Mrs West’s new subordinate has been useful in accelerating our progress in that regard. Our problems have come in enacting a wide-scale loss of grid functionality.”

“Surmountable problems, I assume, or you would have reported your inability to complete your task to us,” Mrs West said.

“Our original estimates were based on the scale of the grid,” Mr East explained. “Only once we attempted to scale up did we discover the key issue. The grid appears to have some manner of self-repair function. Whoever originally devised it apparently anticipated localised failures and developed a system by which surrounding areas compensate and restore the damaged areas. The Lyon branch had to repeatedly disable the grid to hide the astral space that formed in Saint-Étienne.”

“And the solution?” Mr North asked.

“The same thing that is impeding us will also enable us to achieve our goal with less direct intervention than originally anticipated. We have been making attacks on grid infrastructure, disabling various sectors around the world as we mapped out the nodes

critical to the self-repair function. Once we've identified them, then simultaneous strikes on these critical nodes will cause the entire infrastructure to fail."

"What about the risks of this mapping process?" Mrs South asked.

"Obviously," Mr East said, "this has come at the risk of exposing our activities to the Network. Their response teams are active but our contacts within the Network have kept them from intercepting our activities. Mrs West's new associate maintains a number of Network contacts and has been useful in this regard."

The cardinals glanced at Barbou, standing against the wall with the others.

"If the Network traces your activities back to us before we act, they will intervene," Mrs South said. "Again, I ask for a timeline. Our original intention was to have made our move by now. How much longer do we have to risk discovery?"

"I anticipate two more months," Mr East said.

"Very well," Mr North said. "Mrs West, will you add your resources to Mr East's efforts, in order to keep the Network from drawing too close while he completes his work?"

"I will," Mrs West acceded.

"Then that leads us back to the issue of Jason Asano. Now that our time estimates have been extended, we need to revisit the impact of his activities on our intentions. He is far more brazen than the Network about employing his capabilities and that is entering the public consciousness. Thus far, the attention had been minimal and contained but we need to formulate a response before that impacts our own goals negatively. I know you have each had your people analysing the issue, so I suggest we listen to the potential responses they have devised."

The other cardinals nodded their assent.

"Very well," Mr North said, turning to one of his own subordinates. "Keenan, we'll begin with you. What is your proposed response?"

One of Mr North's subordinates stepped forward.

"The mistake that every person to antagonise Asano has made," he said confidently, glancing at Barbou, "is that they have always employed half-measures. Asano needs to be dealt with using direct and overwhelming force. I have developed a proposal by which we incite the Network branches here in the US to eliminate Asano using their own category threes. We already know that the US elite operatives have superior capabilities, commensurate with Asano. Unlike the category threes of the French and Vietnamese, Asano will be unable to overcome one of them, let alone multiples."

"You advocate elimination," Mr North said.

"I do, sir. If you'll allow, I can elaborate on my plans to spur the US branches into action, predicated on Asano's known anti-American prejudice."

"Perhaps before that," Mrs West interjected, "we might hear from an alternative perspective."

"Agreed," Mrs South said.

"Very well," Mr North said.

"Adrien," Mrs West said. "Please share your proposal."

Barbou stepped forward, throwing Keenan a glance as Mr North's subordinate stepped back.

"To contextualise my proposal," Barbou said, "I feel I should first respond to the idea of employing direct force against Asano. Frankly, that is the most idiotic path we could conceivably pursue. Every man, woman or force that has been pitted against Asano has fallen short, myself included. He's been outranked, outnumbered, ambushed, suppressed and blown up. The last category three we know to have confronted him not only stood above him in rank but possessed specific counters to Asano's key abilities. That man did not suffer so much as a scratch at Asano's hands, yet to this day, he remains terrified at the idea of ever encountering him again."

Barbou threw another look at Keenan.

"I'm not saying that I believe Asano could defeat a team of category three elites from the US Network."

He turned his gaze back to the cardinals.

"The point is that I neither over nor underestimate Asano. Putting him down might work. Might. But that is not a reliable basis on which to move forward. Assuming nothing goes wrong in my associate's plan to push the Network into mobilising some of their most powerful assets, Asano would definitely not defeat them. But does he need to? Victory may not be possible, but escape might be. We already know that he is highly elusive, even from category three senses."

Barbou panned his gaze across the cardinals.

"Asano can demonstrably poach from any dimensional incursion at will and seems to be doing so for the purpose of growing stronger. Right now he's remaining relatively predictable, but if he wanted to be more evasive about it, he certainly could be. I can't speak for you, but I don't want that man out there going hardcore guerrilla warfare, building up his strength in the darkness, waiting for the moment to hit back."

He once more looked to Keenan.

"What do we do if we strike out and miss, only for him to come back stronger than ever? Right now, his power is limited but incredibly strong for his rank. Do you want to take that man on at category three? I don't. What do we do if it reaches that point? Convince the US networks to bring one of their category fours out of stasis?"

"You know about those?" Mr North asked. "The Americans were only participating in the debate over resources to create category fours to hide that they already have them and that they're useless without gold spirit coins. I didn't realise the international branches were aware of that."

"It's not widely known," Barbou said. "There have always been rumours within the Network. I just happen to know that they are true."

Keenan snorted derision.

"You're so well informed about the US branches?" he asked. "You French are a bunch of second-raters compared to the Network branches here. Why would we believe that you knew anything?"

Barbou gave Keenan the smile he would give an obnoxious child he was trying to indulge so they wouldn't throw a tantrum.

"As a whole," Barbou explained, "Americans dislike the French. Individually, however, American women like French men and American men like French women. When chosen well, of course. Their operational security is far less stringent than the United States branches like to tell themselves."

A smile played across Mr North's lips.

"An issue the Americans have had with multiple countries," he said. "Their field operatives are solid, but their management has had... issues."

"My proposal," Barbou said finally, "is the exact opposite of bringing the hammer down. We help Asano."

Aside from Mrs West, that earned raised eyebrows from the cardinals.

"I'm intrigued," Mrs South said. "Please expand on that."

"We don't need to stop what Asano is doing," Barbou said. "We need to change the way we look at the situation. We're worried about him stealing our thunder, but there's plenty of thunder to go around. So long as he isn't forced to go public before we're ready, he's laying the groundwork for everything we need to do."

"You're saying we use him," Mr North said.

"Exactly. When the time comes, we reap the benefits of every child he rescues from earthquake damage and camp full of sick people he cures. All we have to do is make sure that he stays a rumour, while still working his way into the public consciousness."

“A modern myth,” Mr North said.

“Precisely. The Network has all the government influence but we have the media power, which is exactly what we need. We spin Asano, let him prime the pump for when we draw the water. And if he needs to be dealt with then, we let the public do it. We have footage of Asano killing people in nicely graphic ways.”

Mrs South narrowed her eyes at Barbou.

“You were the one who prompted the Vietnamese to go after him, aren’t you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Barbou said with a smile. “I was just fortunate enough to get a hold of the footage before the Network eliminated it all.”

Flying through the sky on Shade, the ultralight trike, Jason felt it as he approached the region coterminous to the proto-space and put away the grid compass.

“Alright, Shade,” he said as his cloak manifested around him. Shade’s vehicle form turned into darkness and returned to Jason’s body as the starlight cloak swept out like wings of night and Jason started gliding. Shade could not transition into the astral space, even hidden in Jason’s shadow as he normally was. Only when fully unmanifested could Jason carry his familiars across.

Gliding through the air, Jason let his aura bleed into the ambient magic. Spending time around proto-spaces had actually been excellent for his aura control, with his aura being the means he used to insinuate himself through the dimensional membrane. He felt out the dimensional barrier separating Earth’s physical reality and the proto-space, then passed through it like a curtain of water.

Gliding through the air, the African landscape sprawled out below him blurred and was replaced with an entirely different vista. The terrain below him was now a snow-strewn taiga, looking more like Russia than Africa, although one feature was native to neither. Odd, alien ziggurats dotted the landscape, dusted white with snow.

Shade re-emerged, retaking the form of the ultralight trike, already in flight. Settling back into the seat, Jason pulled out a computer tablet. This was the standard issue magitech tracker that the Network used to track the anchor dimensional entities that were the key to containing proto-spaces. Shade did the flying as Jason navigated them in the direction of their targets.

Shelia was the Director of Tactical Operations for the network’s Monrovia branch and was first through the aperture once the ritual team cracked it open. The taiga terrain was

fairly hospitable, albeit cold after arriving from an African late summer. She immediately started organising the teams that followed.

After the sweeper teams secured the area around the aperture on the inside of the proto-space, the support teams were brought in and started setting up camp. Assessments were quickly made.

“Director,” one of Shelia’s subordinates said as he approached. “The detectors aren’t registering an anchor entity. We can move straight on to farming the rest of the monsters. Also, the stability readings say the space will hold for more than sixty hours.”

“He’s still here,” Shelia said. “Was there any indication that anyone else had opened the aperture?”

“None. I would go as far as to say that there was definitively no prior use of the aperture.”

Shelia sighed.

“How is he getting in and out?” she mused.

“I could just leave through the aperture you’ve conveniently opened up there,” Jason said, emerging from the shadow of an awning set up by the support teams. A dozen guns were instantaneously pointed at him.

“Harsh,” he said. “Lovely to see you again, Shelia.”

“I take it that you have dealt with the anchor dimensional entity, Mr Asano?”

“Actually, it was a triple, so I snagged a few silver spirit coins for myself. I still left most of them for you, of course. They were all on top of those weird ziggurats, so you shouldn’t have any trouble finding the loot. I did take an essence for myself, though. I didn’t realise that a hair essence was a thing, so I couldn’t help myself. I did leave you that sun essence the other day, so I don’t feel super bad. Do you think I could do a Medusa confluence with this hair essence? Probably add in snake and earth, is what I’m thinking.”

Shelia plastered on a transparently false smile.

“We’ve been instructed to extend you every courtesy, Mr Asano. By all means, feel free to immediately depart via the aperture.”

“Well, gee, Shelia. You almost make a guy feel unwanted.”

“I’ve been specifically directed not to express that sentiment.”

“Oh, you have?”

“Yes.”

“Someone felt the need to go out of their way to tell you to not tell me that my presence was unwanted?”

“They did.”

“They mustn’t be aware of our great dynamic.”

“They are. The aperture is right there, Mr Asano.”

Chapter 344

Breakneck Pace

"Do have any idea of the disarray you've thrown my life into?" Chloe asked.

Outside of her hazmat suit, she had plain, blockish features and light clothes for the Moroccan heat. She was sitting with Jason at a teahouse in Marrakech.

"Oh, I'm well aware of how magical revelations in the middle of a crisis can throw you off. Whether you sink or swim teaches you a lot about yourself."

"Well, thank you," Chloe said. "While I may have felt like I was going insane for a while, I can't begin to express our gratitude for what you've done. For me, obviously, but the outbreak went from potentially years to months."

"I'm just a man who happened to have a useful gift," Jason said. "It's the people who don't have my advantages yet throw everything into helping others that truly warrant praise. The ones working day in and day out, putting themselves at risk. You and your colleagues can't just magic away sickness. Not to mention that there are others like me, working on less self-aggrandising and more long-term efforts."

"I was surprised that you found me here," she said. "I intended to go find you in Australia, once I'd been home."

"I just happened to be in Marrakech and sensed your presence."

"You sensed my presence? One person in a whole city?"

Ability: [Midnight Eyes] (Dark)

- Special ability (perception).
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): See through darkness.
- Effect (bronze): Sense magic.
- Effect (silver): Enhanced aura senses.

- Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached silver rank.

Perception powers were always the first to rank up and Jason's ongoing aura control practise had caused his perception power to even further outpace his other abilities. The effect of a silver-rank perception power enhancing his aura senses was far more impactful

than he realised. Combined with the raw strength of his soul and his semi-spiritual nature both enhancing those senses already, the effect was a level of sensory overload that left him almost debilitated for the better part of a week.

The attribute that governed perception was spirit, and while Jason's was in the upper echelons of bronze, it wasn't enough for him to handle the explosion of sensory input when his power crossed the threshold into silver. Fortunately, it took place as he meditated in a random patch of African wilderness, far from prying eyes and ill intentions.

It was like going from black and white to colour as he realised that the aura senses he already had were crude and oblivious. He could now sense the auras of everything around him. He had thought that only living things with souls had auras, with some magic-based exceptions, but the trees, grass, even the wind had echoes of aura.

It wasn't the true auras he was already aware of but some kind of intrinsic nature related to the interplay of physical reality and the astral that lay hidden beyond it. He suspected that his own nature gave him some unique insight that perhaps others might not share.

His familiars had stood guard as he spent days acclimatising to his new senses. After so long working on aura control, he found his senses to be powerful enough that he now required sensory control. The advancement of his perception ability did more than enhance sensitivity. He now had much more control of how all his senses operated. This only added to the disorientation as he grew used to it.

While he needed to be more conscious of his senses, as he got used to the changes he realised just how much of a difference it would be. His hearing could filter out sounds and focus on distant noises. His vision could adjust to see or ignore different light spectrums. His smell and taste could block out specific sensations, which was critically useful given his new sensitivity.

The most overwhelming aspect of his new aura sense was the sheer range. His unique advantages and the raw soul power he possessed allowed his senses to spread over a huge distance. If he had been in a city instead of the empty wilderness, he would have half-expected a brain aneurysm.

After the initial onslaught of sensation, he spent hour after hour, day after day in meditation as he brought his senses under control. The initial experience was like being in a kaleidoscope at a heavy metal concert held in a compost silo. Over the course of a week, he learned to draw back and filter the raw sensations and started to explore the potential of his newly enhanced senses.

Auras, he discovered, were far more sophisticated and nuanced than he previously realised. He had become satisfied with his aura control after months of practise, only to realise that he was only beginning to master control. His new awareness revealed how far he had yet to go.

In the week he spent in the wilderness, working on his sensory control, he had dropped off the radar of those tracking his activities. He stopped poaching proto-spaces and appearing at humanitarian aid stations. He decided it was for the best, at least regarding the outbreak.

The outbreak was being brought under control to the point that his contributions would no longer be worth the attention they brought, especially as there was an increasing movement on the internet connecting his various activities. Despite not using his cloak, the connection was being made between his camp visits and the Starlight Angel persona that had dominated the Australian media nine months earlier.

Jason refocused on developing his abilities, starting with his new sensory power. He made quiet appearances in larger and larger population centres, learning to balance the sensitivity so he wouldn't get overwhelmed. He worked his way up to Marrakech and was getting ready to meet people when he recognised Chloe's aura and decided to say hello.

"No one is sure what to make of you," Chloe said. "None of the testing we've done in the wake of your activities makes any kind of sense. If we tried writing papers on it, they would never pass peer review. On myself, included. It's like the cancer was never there. I keep waiting to wake up and realise that it really is impossible and I was dreaming the whole thing."

"I was semi-convinced it was all me going insane until my friend died and brought me down to Earth," Jason said. "You'll actually meet her soon; she's on her way here now."

"Didn't you just say she died?"

"Yeah, but she got better. Eventually. I come back much quicker every time I die."

"What?"

Jason had pulsed his aura like a beacon as he sensed the plane arrive carrying Farrah and the others, along with sending enough bodies that Shade could take the form of a car large enough to carry them comfortably.

As they arrived outside the teahouse, Jason assessed their auras. Farrah was still in the early stages of silver rank, although her progression would largely stall until they found their way back to her homeworld. Erika and Ian were both midway through iron, having taken cores regularly in the time he'd been away. Emi's aura was still normal rank but he could sense some lingering magic attached to it.

Emi had frequently talked with Uncle Jason via Shade. She was especially excited about her ritual magic lessons with Farrah, which had taken the sting out of not being old enough for essences. She had recently moved onto some very basic practical elements, the residual effect of which Jason realised he was sensing.

Prior to his aura senses being enhanced, that wouldn't have been possible. He was even able to recognise that elements of her aura were still in flux. He suspected that once they stabilised, she would be ready for essences. He would need to examine her aura further to get a sense of how long that would be. He knew a simple ritual that could check, but he wanted to ask Farrah if high-rankers could just tell through their aura senses.

Farrah and Erika's family came in and spotted them, Jason and Chloe getting up to greet them. Emi lunged forward to trap Jason in a hug. As he wrapped his arms around his niece, he gave the others a bright smile.

"Dr Baudrillard, let me introduce you to my family," Jason said in French. "This is my sister, Erika, her husband, Ian and their daughter, um..."

Jason took on an absent-minded expression, then his face lit up with recollection.

"...Ellie," he said. "This is my niece Ellie."

"Bête comme ses pieds," Emi said to him.

"What do you mean, dumb as my feet?" Jason asked.

"It's a French insult," Chloe said after snorting a laugh.

Jason turned to Ian.

"Sorry, I didn't ask," he said. "How's your French, Ian?"

"It's fine, isn't it dear?" Erika said in French.

"Er... oui," Ian said.

"I'm fine with English," Chloe said, using the language by way of demonstration. She had only a slight accent.

"This is actually our daughter *Emi*," Erika correctly introduced. Emi was glaring at her uncle but had to lean back to do so, unwilling to relinquish her grip on him.

"And this is Farrah," Jason said, "who is my friend from an alternate reality."

"What?" Chloe asked.

"You know, Jason," Farrah said, "I think I'm coming around on not letting you introduce people to magic. You just love throwing the wildest stuff at them and watching them get confused."

"You should probably leave it to the professionals and just satisfy yourself watching reaction videos online," Emi said.

“Hey,” Jason said, mock-hurt. “Oh, and family, this is Dr Chloe Baudrillard, of Doctors Without Borders.”

“Lovely to meet you,” Erika said, shaking her hand, then moving over to hug Jason over the top of her daughter.

“You know, Jason,” Farrah said, “the Network doesn’t like you just arbitrarily offering magic to people.”

“Tell them that I don’t like that they occasionally try to kill and/or kidnap me,” Jason said.

“She told them to stick it up their—”

“Emi!” Erika scolded.

“They’re happy you told them at all,” Farrah said. “I think Anna sees you as a puppy resistant to toilet training.”

They settled in and arranged for drinks, Emi boxing Jason against the wall like she was afraid he’d run off. They had remained in contact via Shade, But it wasn’t the same as meeting up in person. Since Farrah had been heading to Greece to investigate a grid failure, she had brought along her new apprentice, knowing that Jason was only a hop across the Mediterranean. Since Emi’s parents were not going to just let their daughter traipse off to Europe, they decided to make a family reunion of it, after which they would return to Australia together.

Jason was eager to discuss the grid failures with Farrah, who had largely shut him out of the investigation to let him focus on getting his head right. In the wake of her captivity, he had supported her as much as he could as she slowly opened up. She recognised that what he needed was space to settle himself.

He could have made an issue of inserting himself into the problems with the grid but he knew she was doing what was best for him. He trusted her to call on him if he was actually needed.

Chloe departed, having her own travel plans. Before they parted ways, Jason reassured her that there were secrets and wonders waiting for her in Australia.

“She seems nice,” Erika said.

“She’s been sick,” Farrah said. “Did you heal her of something?”

Farrah’s senses were also enhanced enough to notice the lingering turbulence in Chloe’s aura.

“She had cancer,” Jason explained. “She decided to use what time she had to help people, which is why I wanted to help her.”

"She's been vetted by the Network, now," Farrah said. "They didn't turn up any problems."

"Gladys is actually excited to work with her," Ian said. He himself had been working with Gladys at the clinic following Jason's departure.

"Let's forget about all that for now," Jason said. "I've planned a family trip to the Ouzoud Waterfall. No monsters, no Network. Just some quality family time. I've seen some beautiful things while I've been out and about, and it'll be nice to see some more together."

Alone in a sleeping cabin on the Network's private plane, Jason contemplated the journey now coming to an end. He had two goals starting out, the first of which was coming to terms with the feeling of being caught between two worlds. His need to reconcile the person he had become in the other world with who he needed to be in his original one was his main impetus for starting the journey.

Moving across Asia, through the Middle East and into Africa, it was fighting the outbreak where he finally felt things coming together. Bringing magic from one world to another in a way that wasn't about violence and death was exactly what he needed. It took him back to his early days in the other world, using his powers to heal people.

As his adventuring duties grew more pressing and the church of the Healer started living up to their responsibilities, that early motivation had fallen to the wayside. Now he had come back to that place, reclaiming some of the innocence he had drowned in blood. Not all the changes he went through in the other world were good ones.

It would take time and pressure to know if he'd really found the balance he sought when his journey started. For the moment he felt that he had, which was enough to be going on with. That left the secondary goal of advancing his abilities.

In the other world, whenever things got too much he would head out into the delta, clearing every adventure board he could find of monsters. It allowed him to channel all his negative feelings, venting them in a way that was at least a little productive. Those were the times he pushed himself the hardest, always rushing to the next monster.

This journey had not been exactly the same, but the ability to chase down proto-spaces instead of monster notices had the same side-benefit of grinding out the advancement of his abilities.

He had been back in his own world for nine months and bronze-rank for a year. Contrary to his expectations, his homeworld had not stalled out his advancement. The magically-saturated proto-spaces had even more monsters than the astral space in which he had reached bronze-rank. The problem was that, unlike the astral space, they weren't

disastrously escalating in power to match his growing strength. Few bronze-rank monsters posed a threat to his current skills and abilities.

Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: bronze
- Progression to silver rank: 72.5%

Attributes

- [Power] (Blood): [Bronze 7].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Bronze 8].
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Bronze 7].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Bronze 7].

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

- [Party Interface].
- [Defiant].
- [Spirit Vault].
- [Tactical Map].
- [Nirvanic Transfiguration].
- [Dark Rider].

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (5/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Silver 0] 00%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Bronze 8] 97%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Bronze 8] 42%.
- [Hand of the Reaper] (special ability): [Bronze 8] 76%.
- [Shadow of the Reaper] (familiar): [Bronze 9] 04%.

Blood [Power] (5/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Bronze 7] 68%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Bronze 8] 86%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Bronze 7] 37%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Bronze 7] 98%.
- [Haemorrhage] (spell): [Bronze 8] 84%.

Sin [Recovery] (5/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Bronze 8] 84%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Bronze 7] 66%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Bronze 7] 79%.
- [Hegemony] (aura): [Bronze 8] 24%.
- [Castigate] (spell): [Bronze 8] 83%.

Doom [Spirit] (5/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Bronze 8] 89%.
 - [Punition] (spell): [Bronze 8] 50%.
 - [Blade of Doom] (spell): [Bronze 8] 66%.
 - [Verdict] (spell): [Bronze 7] 11%.
 - [Avatar of Doom] (familiar): [Bronze 7] 91%.
-

Jason had spent about a year and a quarter going from iron to bronze, which was a completely normal timeframe. The standard progression from bronze to silver was three years, although that was a highly flexible number. The two most impactful factors were opportunity and dedication. Monster surges could shave months off that time and Jason had experienced a private monster surge that had lasted for months. If it had come at the end of his progression through bronze instead of the beginning, he probably could have broken some kind of speed record. He wondered if Farrah knew what the record was.

The latter stages of a rank were much harder to push through than the early ones. If he kept up the pace he had taken up during his journey then he could probably close out bronze-rank in half a year. A year and a half for the entire rank was already a breakneck pace to reach silver, which he would be extremely happy with.

His concern was the warning they had received from Dawn. He needed to solve an issue that, ironically, would give him exactly what he needed. If the magical density of the proto-spaces escalated he would have the monsters he needed to halve his time to silver.

The repercussions, however, were not worth it. It would take time before the Network was ready to handle more powerful monsters and failing to shutdown proto-spaces would only accelerate the problem. He was concerned enough with the grid blackouts, and now that his time away was over, it was time to involve himself. As if in answer to his ruminations, there was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Jason said, having sensed Farrah on the other side, and she stepped inside.

“Alright,” Jason said. “Time to catch me up.”

Chapter 345

Grand Tour

"It's definitely sabotage," Farrah said. "The Network is convinced that the EOA is behind it and I have no reason to doubt them. They know the local politics a lot better than me."

"As it was explained to me," Jason said, "the EOA's agenda is built around the knowledge of magic going public. Are they tired of waiting and trying to accelerate the process?"

"That's the prevailing assumption," Farrah said. "Our best guess is that they're trying to get lucky and have a proto-space go uncaught while the grid is down in an area. That happening at the bottom of the ocean is one thing; we have crazy sailor stories in my world and we know monsters are real."

"But if it happens in the middle of a city..."

"Exactly. The grid has a self-repair function, so the blackouts don't last more than three or four days. If we don't start intercepting these attacks, though, sooner or later a proto-space will appear in an area where the grid has gone dark and we won't know until it's too late."

"I'm curious about the actual infrastructure of the grid," Jason said. "How does that work, exactly? Are there a bunch of secret chambers buried all around the world?"

"It's quite fascinating," Farrah said. "At least to someone with my specialty. It's unlike anything I've seen before. The locals barely understand it and neither do I. The more I study it, the more I learn, and world-ending consequences aside, I'm loving it. The principles on which the grid is built are as revelatory to my understanding of formation magic as those books you have are to astral magic. Probably more so."

"That's quite a claim. What makes it so unique?"

"The grid infrastructure isn't like a normal formation array of permanent ritual circles. Each node is enormous and not made from a ritual circle at all. It's like the landscape is somehow operating as a series of ritual circles. We're talking about nodes the size of cities, with elements made up of mountains, hills and rivers to function as giant formation arrays."

"Like feng shui or leylines or something."

"Exactly," Farrah said. "I've been reading up on those since I started investigating the grid. That Li Li Mei who tried to rope you onto China's team sent me some materials on Chinese geomancy. She asked about you, you know."

"What I have can't be taught," Jason said.

"Nor should it be. What about Asya?"

"That's not so easy," Jason said. "I mean, yes, she's smart, gorgeous and I must have been blind back in school. But there's an unfair dynamic when I can constantly sense her emotions."

"That should be less of an issue," Farrah said. "I made her a bracelet that gold-rankers with no aura control use to keep their auras from popping regular people's heads. She can't use her aura and it tamps down her own aura senses, but if she wears it around you, you shouldn't be able to read her. Not unless you actively try, anyway. Your aura senses must be monstrous now."

"You've got no idea," Jason said, then went on to explain his troubles adapting to his new sensory strength. Afterwards, they got back onto topic as Farrah continued to explain about how the grid functioned.

"These giant nodes in the landscape have the nuance and flexibility to adapt as the landscape shifts over the centuries. I'm still only starting to get my head around it. The brilliance it would take to devise a system like this is staggering."

"How do you build something like that into existing landscape?" Jason asked.

"I suspect that whoever built the grid actually shifted the landscape to make it work."

"That's possible? I know earth shaping is a thing, but that kind of scale? Again and again, all across the world?"

"A gold-ranker with the right powers and enough time could manage it. Eventually. From what records the Network has of their founder, it was a process of many years."

"The grid is low-level magic, though, right?" Jason asked.

"Yes. The power level is low which allows it to operate continuously with your world's low magic. The principles behind it though, have a level of subtle sophistication that screams of whoever designed it being diamond rank. The way it blends into the ambient magic so undetectably. Even you can't sense it, right?"

"I can't," Jason said. "What your describing reminds me of the Mirror King's aura. That had the same property of blending in with the ambient magic. I drew inspiration for my new aura control techniques from that."

"You met the Mirror King?"

"Only briefly. If the grid really was designed by someone on his level, how does that work? Dawn said that a diamond-ranker here would be a huge problem."

"My guess would be that the designer was not the same person that put the grid in place. It's more likely that a diamond-ranker designed it and someone else brought it here

and adapted it. Even that much suggests an incredibly capable expert, and they would have to be gold rank to alter the landscape like that. It would still take years, probably decades and they would need a stockpile of gold spirit coins. When the magic is as low as it is in your world, substituting higher numbers of lower-ranked coins wouldn't be enough."

"What do you think happened when they ran out?" Jason wondered. "Leave the world again? It was hundreds of years ago, but a gold-ranker can live that long, right?"

"If they're still alive, they almost have to be gone," Farrah said. "An essence user needs three coins a day in the course of normal activity. A low-ranker can get away with lower-rank coins or lots of regular food, even in this world, but not a gold-ranker. That's over a thousand gold coins a year. If they're largely inactive they could probably cut it by a third but that's still hundreds of thousands of coins if they've been here since the grid was put in place."

"You think someone brought that many coins with them?" Jason asked.

"It's not totally inconceivable but I have to imagine even a diamond-ranker would have trouble collecting that much as a lump sum. At that rank they operate on more of a barter system for valuable items and materials. Only a fraction of what Emir gets paid is in spirit coins."

"They're probably not here anymore, then," Jason said.

"More likely they either left this world or got magic-starved and died. I've heard it's a rough way to go but it almost never happens in my world. There's usually magic enough and gold-rankers don't have trouble finding work. I've only heard stories of it happening to outcasts, like people with restricted essences."

"So, what is the Network doing about the sabotage?" Jason asked.

"The problem is that for all the adaptability of the grid that prevents incidental disruption, a concerted effort can shut things off fairly easily."

"And if the nodes are as big as you say," Jason said, "There's no way to guard them."

"Exactly," Farrah said. "What's worse is that we don't even know if we're even registering all the blackouts. The Lyon branch was able to mask their suppression of the local grid for years. The International Committee is still riding herd over the French branches but a lot of their members have mysteriously vanished."

"Has Adrien Barbou resurfaced?" Jason asked.

"No, but we think either him or others from the Lyon branch are helping whoever is behind this, based on their knowledge of the grid."

"He's worked with the EOA before," Jason said. "What's the Network doing about the EOA?"

“Piling on the pressure but it’s going nowhere. The EOA claim that they’re too cellular in nature to coordinate systemic attacks on the grid.”

“But you think they’re lying.”

“There’s a growing sense that the EOA might not be as fractious and scattered as they appear. We’ve seen indications of an underlying authority guiding their actions.”

“I really hope it’s not the Builder,” Jason said, shaking his head.

“You think it could be?”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I’ve seen some of the EOA’s modified people. The process seems to be entirely different, but I’ve seen the Builder modify people as well. Maybe Dawn knows more. Have you seen her since...?”

“Since you punched her so hard she died? No. I don’t think I’d want to see us after that, either. Once I found out that she hid where I was from you, I wanted to punch her too.”

“Maybe we should try and contact her,” Jason suggested. “If proto-spaces start dumping monsters into the world, not only does the world turn into chaos but the timeline for world collapse gets accelerated. Some more direction might help us onto the right path.”

“I suspect she’ll contact us when she feels like and not before,” Farrah said. “For now, leave investigating the EOA to the Network. You and I may have the edge in a fight but we’re out of our depth when it comes to the interplay between sprawling global organisations. I’ll keep studying the grid and you focus on hitting silver as quick as you can. You’ll also need to catch up with the Network and what your family has been up to.”

“Oh?”

“Your father and your uncle have been industrious.”

“This is incredible,” Jason said.

Although Ken and Hiro were his ostensible guides through the new family compound, it was Emi who was dragging him by the hand, pointing everything out. It was hard to believe that six months ago, this had been undeveloped bushland. Now there was what looked like a whole resort village nestled amongst the trees. The construction was all wood and tile, blending magnificently into the winding gardens and thick bushland. Given how all the plant life was thoroughly grown in, it looked like it had been in place for years.

There was a main village thoroughfare, with sprawling buildings of rustic wood. Their huge windows only seemed to reflect the gardens and never the other buildings. It added

to the feeling of being integrated with nature and Jason could sense the minor but effective magic responsible.

Making their way down the thoroughfare, Jason's guides pointed out multiple gathering halls, an administration building, a food court. Atop the food court was a restaurant, although it was as empty and unused as everything else, thus far.

"A food court and a restaurant?" Jason asked.

"Sometimes you want a communal experience and sometimes you want something fancier and intimate," Ken said.

"I see your lips moving, Dad," Jason said, "but I'm hearing Erika's voice come out."

"Of course we consulted the family chef on dining arrangements," Hiro said.

"Down there are the training facilities," Emi said, pointing out a side street off the main thoroughfare.

"There's also some magic facilities down there that Farrah said we probably won't need for a long time but are best incorporated into the core design of the compound.

"The Network office is down there, too," Emi pointed out.

"The Network office?"

"It's just Asya and Auntie Farrah," Emi explained.

"Oh, it's Auntie Farrah, now."

"She's reliable," Emi said. "She doesn't keep vanishing for months or years at a time."

"That's a little hurtful," Jason said. "Can you still call this a compound? You built an entire small town."

"Pretty much," Hiro said. "All this is just the communal facilities, branching out from the main thoroughfare."

He pointed out some of the streets leading off between the large main buildings.

"Sports facilities down that street, recreational facilities like the spa and gym down that one."

"The spa is huuuge," Emi said. "There's saunas and massage rooms and creepy old man balls bath houses."

"Emi!"

"What?" she asked. "Every time you see those bath houses in a movie it's full of saggy old men in the nude. It's gross."

"That one is Hiro's personal project," Ken said.

"I am not a saggy old man," Hiro said, and not without reason. Both Ken and Hiro had regained the healthiness of their youth after claiming essences. If they were able to rank up to bronze, the body transformation might even turn back the clock somewhat.

"The medical centre is down with the spa, too," Hiro said. "Ian is in charge of that one, although we had a lot of input from Gladys when we were putting it together."

"We've had a lot of useful input from various Network people," Hiro added. "They've got families who've been working with magic for generations, so they helped us avoid a lot of pitfalls. They tried to slip in some surveillance, too, but Farrah gave them a sharp slap on the wrist for that."

"All the buildings there behind admin are storage facilities," Ken said. "Farrah wanted to make sure we had plenty of storage for food, construction materials and magical supplies. All magically enhanced, not just warehouses and refrigerators. Once we've stocked up, we can hole up here by the hundreds for months, if need be."

"Here on the main thoroughfare we have a three-storey pub," Ken said. "It's directly connected to the cinema behind it so you can have a meal and a beer while you watch a movie."

"Once you get away from the central part of town," Hiro said, "you start getting to the residential areas. Only the main family house is here on the thoroughfare, which is that building there."

"That's a house? It's huge."

"The other residential areas have been built in clusters. There's three bushland pods, two beach pods and the clifftop pod. We ended up buying every scrap of land we could here. There were a few residences and holiday homes, but they were happy to sell at the prices we offered. We knocked them all down and worked from scratch."

"How did you afford all this?" Jason asked. "Even with my gold money on top of your original capital, this is way more than what you were talking about when I left. That's even without the magical infrastructure, which may not be visible but I can sense it. You must have forked over quite a bit to the Network for all this."

"Actually, a lot came from Craig Vermillion and his mysterious sources," Hiro said. "Farrah has been in charge of acquisitions and knows more about that side of things than I do. I do know that she traded off most of the magic coins you left behind. She didn't keep much more than a supply for those of us with essences."

"Using our abilities also saved us a lot of issues," Hiro said. "I've been pretty much doing as I'm told with the magic parts. Farrah has been teaching me but I still only understand part of what she's doing. As for the physical construction, buildings and landscape, Ken has been an absolute beast."

"The ability to move earth and facilitate plant growth is incredible," Ken said happily. "I'm like a one-man landscape and construction company with a time machine."

After taking Jason through the core section, they took him to see the residential areas. The homes there consisted of more wooden buildings that blended into the bushland, a series of small housing estates built in clusters. Each home was unique, rather than build to a template, giving each area a natural and eclectic feel.

There were beach homes in a row, fronting directly onto the sand, as well as multi-story houses surrounded by lush bushland. His favourites were the slightly more remote clifftop homes that had been dug into the rock, with balconies that emerged from the cliff face.

Farrah joined in to guide Jason through the magical aspects, replacing Ken and Hiro. Emi understood the magical elements better than her great uncle, despite only a passing instruction in array magic and accompanied Jason and Farrah.

Farrah explained the security features of the compound, with some of the design choices making more sense as they went. The nodal nature of the layout, for example, was a defensive measure. Rather than a singular area with traditional fortifications, the central area plus each of the residential hubs was an individual core of magical defences. If one of the nodes had its defences compromised, the others were able to reinstate and reinforce them.

Farrah also took him through the more secretive aspects that only Ken, Hiro, Emi and she were aware of. Neither the network nor any other members of the family knew that the clifftop excavations had been a front to establish a tunnel system. It linked the various compound nodes, as well as serving as secure service tunnels for the magical infrastructure.

Each of the subway-sized passages contained a two-way tramway combining magic and technology. The tramway was currently inactive, as were the lights. Emi was delighted as Jason used the floating motes of his star cloak to light their way as they travelled on foot.

"Seriously, how much did all this cost?" Jason asked.

"The Cabal was very interested in accessing some magical resources," Farrah said. "I brokered some three-way deals with the Cabal and the Network. You are going to have to do an awful lot of looting, now you're back, by the way."

"That's fine," Jason said. "I want to keep up the monster-hunting anyway."

"I really mean a lot," Farrah said. "I made some promises."

"It's okay. You did an amazing job with all this. I can't believe this was all done in six months."

“Don’t underestimate your uncle’s and father’s contributions,” Farrah said. “Your uncle found us a lot of very discrete construction workers who didn’t ask questions, which we needed them not to. Your father’s contacts with experts in your world’s construction and engineering fields were invaluable during the design stages. As for building it all, Ken’s talent for building with magic is every bit the equal of yours with aura control. Also, I’ve seen construction golems who don’t work as hard as him.”

The single biggest secret of the compound Farrah saved for last. Another secret tunnel, separate from the others, was a long passage that ran from the main residence out into the ocean. Like the other tunnels, it had a two-way tramway that was not yet active, leaving them to go on foot.

A few hundred metres out, the underground tunnel ascended into a glass one that ran along the seafloor. Like being at an aquarium, there were numerous sea creatures floating near the tunnel and Jason could sense the subtle magic attracting them.

“That’s a nice touch,” Jason said.

“That was my idea,” Emi said.

“It was?” Jason asked.

“It really was,” Farrah said. “I did a little neatening up of their design but that’s all. Emi and Hiro designed and implemented the fish attraction together.”

“Good job, Moppet,” Jason said to a beaming Emi.

Two kilometres out from shore, the glass tunnel ended not with any kind of sealed environment but simply stopped, terminating at a vertical sheet of water beyond which was open ocean.

“What is this?” Jason asked.

“A discrete place to put your cloud house,” Farrah said. “You can set it up right at the end of the tunnel. Air-sealing magic like this is very efficient when set up correctly. Even on your world, it can just run off the ambient magic.”

Jason walked up to the wall of water and poked it with his finger. It was rather cold.

“That’s pretty awesome,” he said. “I’ve wanted to test the cloud house out underwater since Emir told me it could work like that. I was half-tempted when I moved back to Casselton Beach.”

“Having it all the way out here will also stop your cloud house from disrupting the magic of the compound with its vortex accumulator.”

“I wanted to ask about that,” Jason said. “I could sense the magical defences and utility magic hidden throughout. Is there enough ambient magic to fuel all that?”

"No," Farrah said. "I actually used some of what I learned studying the grid to create a version of your cloud flask's vortex accumulator, except less potent and much larger. I set up several of them in empty areas and the power feeds into the compound."

"We should just be calling it a town," Jason said.

"Even with the magic we have feeding it, it still isn't enough, Farrah said. "I've made accommodations accordingly. For one thing, the town's entire magical infrastructure can operate at various levels. The town is uninhabited at the moment, so we're running at no magic. No ordinary power, either. We're still finalising the design on the magically-enhanced solar panels that will power it all. I'm working with a Network magitech expert, provided by Asya."

"Will the magic need spirit coins to run once it's all going?" Jason asked.

"At the lowest level of actual operation only specific functions will require spirit coin supplementation," Farrah explained. "I've also designed it from the onset to adapt as the magical density of the world goes up."

"So, the worse things get, the more ready we are to face them," Jason said.

"Exactly."

"What's going to get worse?" Emi asked.

"Don't worry about it, Moppet," Jason said, tussling her hair. "Uncle Jason and Auntie Farrah are going to save the world."

Chapter 346

New Groove

Jason, Farrah, Emi, Ken and Hiro were standing on the thoroughfare of what Jason had started thinking of as Asano Town. He was about to open a portal to Casselton Beach when Farrah's phone beeped.

"Category three incursion," she said after checking the message. "Ready to get back in the saddle?"

"Listen to you, category three," Jason said. "You've gone native."

"I've gone native? You were frying giant worm meat in a village stall on your second day in my world."

"So, how do we get to Sydney?" Jason asked. "I have the range to portal straight there, now, but I can't send a silver-ranker."

"Don't worry," Farrah said. "I have a guy."

"You can portal us, though, right?" Hiro asked. "You're our ride."

"Wait, this is your guy?" Jason asked as he sensed the approaching aura.

"He's here?" Farrah asked. "See how fast the helicopter is? His partner bought out his half of their helicopter charter and he's been working for the Network instead. They pay better."

"He has Greg and Asya with him," Jason said. "They're making their way toward bronze, but I'm not sensing cores from them."

"You can tell that from here?" Farrah asked. "I can barely hear it and I have silver rank perception. It's quiet for a helicopter, but it's still a helicopter."

Jason gave her an odd look.

"What?" she asked.

"I was just thinking about our time together in your world. The fact that you now have a basis for comparison on helicopter noise blows my mind. You're wearing jeans."

"I like jeans. I see you finally stopped wearing the clothes you picked up on the other side."

"I kept getting into fights. There's only so much damage that basic self-repair can do and I only have a couple of suits left. Why are Greg and Asya not using cores? Do you have Greg fighting monsters?"

"He wanted to fight monsters."

"Of course he wanted to fight monsters. He's a huge nerd."

“He’s actually pretty good. Not at, you know, stabbing, but he’s got a versatile flex-support power set. It’s more about timing and judgement.”

“I have one of those on my team,” Jason said. “I wonder how she’s doing. I’m not sure I approve of Greg going out in the field, though. What about Asya?”

“The Network has been gearing up for problems ever since the grid blackouts started. They’ve been putting anyone willing to do it up for training. We have three training streams, now. One core users looking to retrain, one for people going from scratch using our methods and one for core users focused on unconventional approaches.”

“Unconventional, how?”

“Like your brother. We’re using cores to raise his abilities while his training is being adapted from military pilot training. He’s doing great as utility and air support.”

“He’s going into proto-spaces?”

“It’s fine.”

“He has kids. Little kids. What if something happens to him?”

“What if something happens to you?” Farrah countered. “You think Emi is ready to lose Uncle Jason again? And look at everything going on here.”

She gestured around at the village that had been built in his absence.

“You are the pillar on which all this rests. With time, the Asano clan will be able to stand on their own, but they aren’t there, yet.”

“We’re not a clan.”

“Tell that to the Japanese.”

“What do the Japanese have to do with it?”

“You really need to talk to Keti.”

Kaito’s helicopter swooped over the village to settle on the helipad on the roof of the main residence.

“Should there really be just this one big residence in the middle of the village?” Jason asked. “It’s a little elitist, isn’t it?”

“We’ve been calling it the Mayor’s House,” Farrah said.

“Who’s the mayor? Please don’t say Amy.”

“No, it’s Erika. She wrapped up her TV show and she’s kind of taken over family affairs.”

“Okay, that’s good,” Jason said.

The pair leapt up the several stories to the rooftop helipad, Jason with bronze-rank strength and his cloak and Farrah with raw muscle. The side of the helicopter slid open to reveal Greg and Asya inside.

"Aren't you worried about hitting the helicopter blades, jumping up like that?" Greg asked loudly over the spinning rotors.

"No," Jason yelled back. "If you're doing your mobility training properly, that should never be a danger. Farrah, have you been letting him skip out on mobility training?"

"Of course I haven't."

Jason and Farrah stepped into what seemed more like the passenger compartment of a private jet than a helicopter. Jason even focused his senses to check there wasn't any dimensional manipulation going on. The door slid shut behind them on its own, completely silencing the exterior noise. Greg and Asya were already seated, wearing the black fatigues standard for Network tactical response teams.

"You need to take that off," Farrah said to Asya, who glanced awkwardly at Jason before nodding and removing a black cloth bracelet. Jason had been able to sense the basic properties of her aura but with the bracelet's removal, Asya's emotions became plain. It was mostly nervousness.

"G'day," Jason greeted as he sat down opposite her. A smile played on the corners of his mouth.

"Hi," she said.

"Sure glad this isn't awkward," Greg said with a grin as he shifted into the seat next to Asya.

"Go away," she told him and he moved back out.

"I am never getting out of high school," he grumbled.

Emerging from the aperture into the proto-space, Jason looked around. Craggy cliffs of dark grey stone rose up to his left and right, while the line of sky between them roiled with storm clouds and rumbled with thunder. He immediately moved deeper into the gorge as more people streamed from the aperture. The bottom of the gorge was a trickling stream running over loose rocks.

-
- You have entered an unstable physical reality. Your presence will decrease the rate at which it will destabilise.
-

"Not a great spot for base camp," Jason observed. His cloak appeared around him and he jumped straight up. Shadow arms extended from his cloak to either side and he used them to grab the rock walls to fling himself higher. In the last six months, he had used them more and more independently of his real arms.

During his time away, Jason had done more than simply advance his abilities. Just as he had worked on his aura control, his proficiency with his other powers had improved. This wasn't just advancing his essence abilities but enhancing his skill in wielding them.

Shooting over the top of the gorge, he looked out over the landscape as he slowly drifted down to one side. It was a blasted land of dark soil and bare stone, with only a few blackened trees dotting the landscape. From what he could see, the gorge he was standing atop was part of a greater spiderweb of crevasses and gullies.

Farrah flew out of the gorge on fiery wings, flanked by a handful of Network scouts who shot away immediately. Farrah's flame wings were not great for flying, lacking strength, control and speed. She generally avoided flying with them once she armoured up, as they were barely able to lift her. The wings had other virtues, however, and Jason's power had given them a solid indication of who was responsible.

Ability: [Wings of the World-Phoenix]

- Transfigured from [Outworlder] ability [Wings of Fire].
- Conjure fiery wings that allow flight. While wings are active, add disruptive-force damage to all fire and heat damage inflicted. This effect consumes mana.
- The wings can be detonated to inflict fire and disruptive force damage on nearby enemies while subjecting self and allies to a powerful healing effect and a cleanse that affects magic and poison. The strength of the healing effect on yourself is significantly higher than on allies and highly effective on catastrophic damage and wounding effects.
- Subsequent conjurations of the wings will have diminished bonus, slowly recovering strength over 24 hours. Wings cannot be detonated again until ability strength is fully recovered.

The wings made Farrah's flames much more effective against incorporeal creatures and magical defences, although it further added to her mana-consumption issues.

"There's a lot of silver-rank monsters in this space," Jason said. "Are we sure this is a silver-rank space?"

"It is," a silver-ranker said, rising out of the gorge on a gust of wind. It was Koen Waters, the Sydney branch's Director of Tactical Operations. "Non ADE cat-threes started appearing in category three incursion spaces before you two came along. It's been escalating over the last year, though, especially while you were off playing David Carradine."

“Who?” Farrah asked. “I’ve been here a year and I still have no idea who you people are talking about.”

“You haven’t seen Kung Fu?” Koen asked.

“Is that another old TV show?” Farrah asked. “What is wrong with you people? Jason’s sister made me watch some Airwolf and it was terrible.”

“What makes you think there are a lot of cat-threes?” Koen asked Jason.

“I can sense them. And your people down in the gorge. You’re earth-shaping space for a base camp?”

“We’ll set up on top as well,” Koen said. “It’ll be a little bit before we secure the space and get to sweeping, but you being here means we don’t have to rush. The extra time you extend incursion space stability, plus the looting, makes it worth having you here even if you spend the whole time in a lounge chair.”

“I think I’ll skip the chair and go clean up some of those silvers,” Jason said and dashed away.

Koen sighed as he watched Jason zip over the ground at a fleeting pace.

“I see he didn’t work on his collaborative skills while he was away. Can he really sense monsters from here?”

“Did you just sigh?” Farrah asked.

“Er... no.”

“Are you still breathing?” Farrah asked. “You shouldn’t still need to breathe at silver rank. Have you not been doing those exercises I taught you?”

“I’m going to check on how the camp setup is going,” Koen said, gesturing with his thumb and then jumping back into the gorge.

Jason could have used Shade for transport but decided to set out on foot. During his time away he had worked on his ability use, but not everything was new. Back in the Mistrun Delta, Jason had developed a running technique that used his cloak to increase speed, conserve energy and navigate terrain. With his speed attribute at the top end of bronze, he revisited that technique with the enhanced agility, reflexes and straight-line speed that entailed.

The result was that he moved across the rough ground of the proto-space like a ghost, all but skimming through the air. The hopping, slightly uneven gait of the past was now smooth like a hovercraft on a cushion of air.

Approaching the first silver-rank monster, he sensed a gaggle of smaller, weaker iron-rank monsters around it, along with a few bronzes. The main monster turned out to be a

giant black lizard with silver-white glowing eyes, while the supplemental creatures were elementals. Wind and lightning elementals danced on the air like dandelion petals, while earth elementals swarmed around the creature's feet.

“Gordon,” Jason said, not slowing down and the familiar appeared next to him. Gordon’s ordinary floating speed could not match Jason’s so he kept pace by chaining his dash ability.

The monsters sensed their approach as soon as Gordon appeared, the elementals stirring into a frenzy. They rushed forward and Gordon gave up dashing as they entered his considerable range. Four bright beams of energy, two orange and two blue, swept through the iron-rank monsters with annihilative force.

The blue beams of disruptive-force were doom for the amorphous wind and lightning elementals, disposing of them with a crackle like insects hit with a bug zapper. The orange resonating-force beams dug into the earth elementals like they were drilling for oil. The few bronze-rank elementals lasted a little longer, but Gordon was at the high-end of bronze and the perfect weapon against such creatures.

Jason ignored the elementals, moving directly on the lizard that was the size of a school bus. Jason sensed the magic precursor of an attack and juked sideways, not slowing as lightning erupted from the lizard’s eyes and flashed past him. He arrived in front of the lizard as he conjured a dagger into his hand.

“Shade.”

Several of Shade’s bodies surrounded the creature. In the past, Jason would have used them to stage hit-and-run strikes, landing a couple of special attacks and then backing off to cast spells before moving on and letting his affliction suite do its work.

This was not what Jason did to the lizard. His dagger flashed out to make sewing-machine strikes; quick, shallow, in an unceasing staccato. Hit after hit, each one delivering the afflictions of a special attack plus the afflictions of the dagger. Instead of pre-emptively dodging with shadow jumps, he relied on his skill to avoid the lizard as he kept making attacks.

The oversized lizard thrashed with limbs and tried to bite at him but Jason used its size against it, staying tucked in close, his dagger never stopping. It repositioned to get a better angle on Jason and only then did he shadow jump to one of Shade’s bodies, the needlework of his dagger barely pausing.

Although Jason had seized the initiative, the lizard still posed a threat to Jason. It did not have the reflexes of a silver-rank essence user but was still devilishly quick for its size and its strength would have given even Farrah pause. When it caught Jason with a tail

lash, it shattered the accumulated shields from his amulet and hammered his torso like a speeding car.

He was sent careening through the air before the lightness of his cloak let him drift to a floating stop. The healing from Colin and the converted amulet shields went to work as Jason floated in the air where he'd been slapped. He extended his hand toward the monster.

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

Life force drained out of the lizard and into Jason. The lizard retaliated by opening its mouth and spitting out ball lightning that floated toward Jason, who was exposed as he drifted in the air. Jason used his cloak as a shadow to jump through, right before the ball lightning exploded in the space he had just occupied. He emerging from one of Shade's bodies as a new cloak manifested around him, immediately resuming his attacks.

The rapid-fire strikes from his dagger represented a fundamental change in Jason's approach to combat. He had long ago given up on rapid kills as impossible due to his lack of immediate damage attacks, consigning himself to the slow and steady path to victory. As he took the time to reassess his abilities, had reassessed that presumption as well and developed a new combat dynamic.

From the very beginning, Inexorable Doom had been Jason's signature ability, with only his familiars being more iconic. It had been critical to his combat style, allowing him to back off as it piled on more of every affliction he levied. He used it on the lizard, along with other affliction spells, chanting the incantations even as he dodged limbs and the lizard's bite while dishing out more attacks. This time, however, it was merely an addendum.

Jason didn't care if his sewing machine attacks were weak, so long as they riddled the lizard with afflictions. Faster than Inexorable Doom could match, the monster was staggering already as a tide of necrosis washed over it. Jason leapt lightly up and then kicked off the lizard with both feet, sailing back thanks to the lightness from his cloak and cast another spell.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

Punition dealt damage based on afflictions in place, which devastated the lizard, leaving it a stumbling wreck. Even so, silver-rank fortitude persisted. Sensing its demise, the lizard made a final play. Around a third of the elementals were yet to be swatted by Gordon and they suddenly drew closer to the lizard, like dinghies caught in a whirlpool. They struggled to escape but the force pulling them in didn't allow it and they were absorbed into the lizard's body.

Jason sensed the power building inside the monster and returned to his normal weight, dropping agilely to the ground and opening the portal arch to his spirit vault. He ducked inside, Gordon and Shade's bodies following quick behind. From inside his spirit vault, Jason sensed the destruction of the archway. The darkness inside the matching arch inside the vault vanished, leaving the archway empty.

➤ [You have defeated \[Lesser Stormchar Lizard\].](#)

Jason used his portal ability, Path of Shadows on the empty arch. On the battlefield Jason had just left, an archway rose up from the floor of a newly-formed crater. Jason stepped out and looked around. Extending his senses he found a scrap of blackened flesh and brushed his fingers over it.

➤ [Would you like to loot \[Lesser Stormchar Lizard\]?](#)

Striding out of the crater, Jason turned his eyes to the sky, looking at the distant drone Koen had sent to follow him. Behind him, rainbow smoke rose up from points around the crater like streamers, from every place an exploded piece of monster had scattered. Then he skimmed off over the ground in the direction of the next silver-rank monster.

At the base camp. Koen was rewinding the footage from the drone.

"What are you looking for?" Nigel asked him.

"The timestamp," Koen said, pausing the footage. "We just watched a solo category two wipe out a swarm of elementals and a cat-three the size of a train car in forty three-seconds."

Chapter 347

Get to the Chopper

Kaito had been supplied with a variety of awakening stones loaded towards producing useful complements to his main power. Koen Waters had seen potential in Kaito's abilities and had the Network recruit him and provide the stones to complete his power set. They started with common stones, like awakening stones of the gun and various elemental stones. Less common were the awakening stones of vision and reach.

The result was a comprehensive suite of abilities that turned Kaito and his helicopter into a high-utility asset for the Network. His helicopter was not well-suited to confronting powerful monsters but was highly effective at escaping pursuit and handling the kinds of weaker enemies that appeared in greater numbers than their more powerful counterparts.

The true value of Kaito's contribution was twofold, with neither factor being the hunting of monsters. One was that he could swiftly and safely deploy tactical units or supplies throughout an incursion space, while the other was the improvement it brought to the command and control capabilities of the incursion response team.

Kaito's vehicle was sized in between a military transport helicopter and a large commercial helicopter while being faster and more agile than both. He was able to modify the helicopter literally on the fly, reconfiguring the interior to meet his needs moment to moment. From luxuriously-spaced passenger transport to efficient troop seating to cargo space, complete with loading platform, the helicopter could perform whatever role was asked of it.

What really excited the Director of Tactical Operations was the helicopter's value as a mobile command relay. The helicopter had a communication system that was as useful, if not more so, than Jason's party interface. It was able to augment ordinary comms technology to operate reliably in magically saturated areas. It could also serve as a sensor platform, courtesy of Kaito's powers. His abilities were able to collect and relay video feed and sensor data from the helicopter itself, as well as remote auxiliary units.

Those auxiliary units were the two semi-autonomous drone variants Kaito could produce with abilities from his vehicle essence. One type was a trio of small attack units, mounted with infantry-grade guns. The more useful consisted of a half-dozen observation drones that had no weapons but could travel extended ranges at high speed. They carried high-grade video and audio systems, along with the sensor capacity to track magic and auras.

Kaito's observation drones were an improvement over the two varieties the Network used. The non-magical ones they employed had significant reliability issues in magical zones. The magical ones were much better but were fuelled by spirit coins, a limited and costly resource. Kaito's drones used his mana and could reliably transmit video, audio and sensor data to the helicopter, the base camp or both.

The sensor suites available to the drones and the helicopter itself came courtesy of Kaito's perception power that was akin to something many summoning specialists gained access to. Rather than enhance his own senses, at least at iron-rank, it bestowed the perception power on something else. Instead of a summon, as was typical, the subject was the sensors of his helicopter, providing magic and aura senses that outstripped a normal iron-ranker. More mundane sensor systems came as part of the helicopter conjuration power, although those systems were magically enhanced.

Drone control and secondary system management were all controlled from the cockpit. Rather than a physical dashboard of displays and screens, there was only a sleek and minimalist dashboard of controls. All systems were monitored through augmented reality glasses that could provide or eliminate any and all displays as needed, from drone feeds to helicopter systems.

Control of the secondary systems could be carried out by the pilot, but they were most effective when managed by a co-pilot, for which reason the network had supplied the helicopter with a crew. Kaito's three-person crew ended up being Asya and Greg, who had both known Kaito for years, along with a category three whose job was to step in when something big and nasty appeared.

Greg took the co-pilot slot. Kaito had been teaching him how to fly a helicopter but his true role was to manage the drones, sensors and comms. He had been chosen both for his existing connection to Kaito and what turned out to be a prodigious talent for multitasking.

Asya was combat support. She was somewhat superfluous, with the category three on board, but in addition to being groomed for higher rank, her power set gave her a useful niche. With her gun, gathering and adept essences forming the master confluence, she was rapidly becoming an expert sniper and general support gunner.

She had actually finalised her own repertoire of abilities with this role in mind, completing her power set only after being assigned to the helicopter. She had chosen some awakening stones specifically to add some heavier weapon options to her original, precision sniper approach.

The silver-ranker wasn't a ranged attacker like Asya. Ruth didn't look like a Russian bodybuilder so much as like she'd eaten a Russian bodybuilder and wanted to fist-fight an army transport to work off the carbs. It would have been a one-sided victory, given the silver-ranker's abilities. Her might, swift, and hand essences combined to form the onslaught confluence, making her a powerhouse of speed and strength with battering ram fists. She excelled in intercepting and putting down dangerous attackers, which was exactly her role on the helicopter's crew.

Despite having arms the thickness of Greg's head, Ruth was incongruously sweet and friendly, with unassailable confidence that her lower-rank companions found reassuring.

Kaito's helicopter moved high over the ground in the proto space, with a section of Network troops in the back. An occasional wind or lightning elemental would approach, at which point Kaito's supplemental abilities came into play. An expensive awakening stone of dimension had given Kaito a retractable gun for his helicopter that fired rapid streams of disruptive-force ammunition, which was effective at dissuading even the bronze-rank elemental variants from approaching. It wasn't enough to kill them but it convinced them to veer off in search of weaker prey.

"I've got a category two flier, coming in fast at 10 o'clock," Kaito said as a signal appeared on the cockpit sensors. The current cockpit configuration had four seats for the crew, with a bare-bones troop transport set up in the main compartment.

"Fast or tough?" Ruth asked.

"Fast," Kaito said. "You're up, Asya."

A small panel next to Asya opened up, letting in a rush of air. Asya conjured a sniper rifle and slid the barrel out through the panel, eyeing down the sight.

"Altering trajectory to give you a shot," Kaito said and soon after, a black lizard with huge wings fell into Asya's sights.

Asya had an ability to ignore rank disparity that was more like Farrah's than Jason's in that it was an essence ability, rather than an evolved racial gift. Even so, getting a one-shot kill on a bronze-rank monster was unlikely given the toughness of monsters.

Asya still could have gone for the kill, her power set allowing her to gather and condense ambient magic for a single, potent shot. If she could land the headshot, it should be enough to drop the creature, given that flying monsters weren't usually as tough as their land-bound counterparts.

Instead of risking a high-impact shot on the monsters relatively small head, she aimed for the broad wings. She used a special attack that erupted in a proximity burst, only needing to get close. The power didn't match a direct hit but it tagged one of the creature's wings, not crippling it but causing it to drop away, rapidly losing altitude.

"Nice," Kaito said, then noticed Greg staring into space.

"What is it?" Kaito asked.

"I just watched Jason through one of the drones," he said. "I'd only seen him fight in some patchy drone footage from before he left. It doesn't seem like him, all black-clad and ominous."

"That's exactly like him," Kaito said. "Such a melodramatist."

"I'd like to see that footage," Ruth said. "Can you send it to me?"

"Sure," Greg said.

Ruth put on the augmented reality goggles hanging on the back of Greg's seat in front of her.

"Cancel that," Kaito said. "We're coming up on the drop point."

Greg radioed the section of troops in the rear, telling them to prepare for deployment. Kaito dropped the helicopter to two-hundred metres and brought it into a hover. Normally he would go lower but there were a lot of flying monsters in this particular proto-space.

In the rear compartment, the side of the helicopter slid open as a panel on the floor slid away to reveal what looked like a small wind turbine pointing up. It started blasting air, which oddly collected in front of the open side panel, shimmering in place.

"Go!" the section leader called out and the first trooper dashed through the shimmering air and out of the helicopter, falling away. Some of the shimmering air attached itself to him as he passed through it. The whole section jumped out, one by one, plunging toward the ground.

Right before they landed, the shimmering air around them tightened into a cushion, depositing them softly onto the ground before dissipating in a rush of wind. Back on the helicopter, the side door closed itself and Kaito set course for the next objective.

"I have to say," Jason said from the rear of the cockpit, "I'm kind of annoyed at how well this worked out."

The helicopter crew all turned to look at him in surprise.

"I was going to give you the rat, snake and skunk essences," Jason continued. "I wish I had, now, to be honest."

"How did you get in here?" Kaito asked.

"I've got magic powers. How do you not know that at this point?"

"I have security abilities," Kaito said. "Sensor abilities."

Ruth chuckled, sharing an amused look with Jason.

"The tyranny of rank, little brother."

"You're the little brother," Kaito said.

"That may be true out in the world, Kai," Jason said, "but not here. This is my kingdom."

Jason and Asya were walking along the Castle Heads shorefront. Grass led down to white sand on one side of the street, while the other had cafés and storefronts. Asya and Jason were heading for the ice cream shop.

"This is my kingdom." Asya quoted. "Really?"

"A bit much?" Jason asked.

"A bit? That was cringeworthy. Not as sad as Greg constantly telling people to 'get to the chopper' in a sketchy accent, but not good."

"I thought it was cool," Jason said.

"It was not. It was also rather mean."

"Kaito deserves it."

"That's a boy's complaint. It's time for you to be a man."

"Ouch. Greg thought it was cool."

Asya gave him a flat look.

"I'm torpedoing my own point here, aren't I."

"Greg is great," Asya said. "But he's also a little bit twelve years old. The man wears Ninja Turtle shirts to briefings."

"To briefings about fighting monsters from another dimension using magic powers. Ninja Turtle shirts should be the uniform."

"I don't think Ketevan is going to like dealing with the both of you at once," she said with a laugh.

"What's going on with Greg's abilities, though?" Jason asked. "Wasn't that combination meant to give him the magitech confluence?"

"It did."

"Every magitech guy I've seen in the Network is all about high-tech gadgets and stuff. They're half James Bond and half Iron Man. How did Greg end up all steampunk Tesla?"

"You don't like his electrified nail turret?"

"No, it's awesome, I'm just saying."

"You know, we still need to talk about Network business. That is technically what we're meeting about."

"Are you sure I can't tell you another heroic story about my trip away?"

"Alright," Asya said with an accommodation Jason immediately found suspect. "Did you happen to run into Li Li Mei while you were passing through China?"

"Who?" Jason asked innocently. "Oh, the Network rep who came here that one time. I don't recall her being super-pretty at all."

"Is that right?"

"So," Jason said. "Time to dig into that Network business you say?"

"No," Asya said, pointing at the shop they were now standing in front of. "It's time for ice cream."

"Right, yes," Jason said, pushing open the door.

"How long were you in China for?" Asya asked as they went inside.

"You know, I might just go vanilla. People look down on it as a plain flavour, but a proper vanilla can be really delicious..."

On the roof deck of the houseboat, Asya and Jason were sitting next to one another at a table. Asya was taking him through the important things he had missed during his time away.

"...escalating rate of manifestation, which you've already seen for yourself. The new training programs are starting to pay off but it's going to take time in areas outside of Australia. The new training protocols we've developed with input from Farrah are showing their effects here, but the international partners now have to go back and work with their own people. Even then, we're talking about training programs that have been developed and implemented in a critically short time. The largest deficit is experience."

"There's only one solution to a lack of experience," Jason said, "and that's to go out and get it."

"We're projecting significant problems. In the short term, we're anticipating a sharp increase in casualties."

"That's realistic," Jason said. "The Network is never going to fight the way they do in the other world and they'd be foolish to try. They need to learn from what Farrah can teach them but find a way to use it that works for them. All Farrah was really trying to impart were principles, as well as things like improved meditation methodology. She can't turn the whole Network into adventurers in six months."

"No, it's on us, now. You know, the original idea was for you to do the teaching."

"You're better off, believe me. It's a matter of temperament."

"Oh, I believe you."

"Hey..."

"The last thing we need to discuss is the image you built up during your time away."

"I was trying to avoid building an image."

Asya opened a video depicting a man in starlight cloak fighting people in a Vietnamese slum.

"For the most part," Jason added. "If the Network doesn't want me showing off, you should stop trying to kidnap me."

"We came down on the Hanoi branch the same way we did Lyon. Disturbingly, we got the exact same result, once we started digging."

"Meaning what?"

"Adrien Barbou."

"You're kidding. I thought he hadn't resurfaced."

"We're keeping it quiet, for now. We believe he's working with the EOA, feeding them information from his old Network contacts. We're currently attempting to infiltrate those contacts to get something concrete we can slap the EOA with. We can't just accuse them of orchestrating the blackouts and go after them with no evidence because the Cabal won't stand for it. The Network is the strongest of the world's magical triad but we aren't stronger than the other two put together. If we start acting unilaterally against the EOA, the Cabal will side with them out of fear we'll go after them next."

"Why are you even telling me?"

"Our analysts think that Barbou has taken it upon himself to become your publicist."

"What?" Jason asked.

"We constantly monitor media for potential breaches," Asya explained. "When you went more overt after Hanoi we paid additional attention to any media attention related to your activities. We realised that someone was putting the pieces together and quietly dropping breadcrumbs for others to find."

"Why?"

"We don't know. We stumbled into the idea that Barbou might be the man behind the curtain because we've been looking into his old contacts. As for his motivations, the best we've come up with is that a magic man secretly running around the world doing good deeds fits the EOA agenda of bringing magic into the light. They might have seen us not clamping down on you and tried to run with it."

"He's making me look good?"

"That's arguable. We're seeing a lot of fringe chatter around the Starlight Angel/Starlight Rider persona, but conspiracy types don't tend to look at things in a positive light."

"I was healing the sick."

"But did you make them sick, as an excuse to implant tracking devices? Were you testing a bioweapon for use when your people start the invasion?"

"They think I'm an alien?"

"You are an alien."

"I am now, but they don't know that. I'm from the Mid North Coast, not the mid-north of Andromeda."

"You really don't know anything about astronomy, do you?"

"Because I'm not an alien!"

Chapter 348

What's Left of Your Principles

“Chloe, it’s good to hear from you,” Jason said as the video chat opened. “How’ve you been?”

“I’ve been staying with my sister,” she said. “It’s been nice but I am increasingly ready to go.”

Jason chuckled.

“As a guy who ran away from his family for six months, I completely understand.”

“Well, whatever your reasons, the entirety of West Africa benefited, even if they don’t know it. Which is actually why I called you?”

“The outbreak is flaring back up?”

“No, it’s about you. I’ve been talking to my colleagues and a lot of them have been contacted by an investigative journalist.”

“I didn’t think they had those anymore. Isn’t it all just ideologues and regurgitated press releases now?”

“It depends on who is willing to pay, and someone is putting up for some airline miles on this one. The people I’ve talked to haven’t been talking, but sooner or later, someone is going to.”

“I’m aware of someone pushing me into the spotlight from the shadows,” Jason said ominously. “He’s an enemy I picked up along the way.”

“I have to think that someone like you has a different kind of enemy to someone like me,” Chloe said. “My biggest enemy beat me out for the good parking space at the hospital where I used to work.”

“My enemy held my friend prisoner and... let’s just say yes, different kinds of enemy.”

The meeting room of the Four Cardinals of the EOA seemed cavernous, with high ceilings and wide walls while being almost entirely empty. There was a large monitor on one wall, a square table in the middle that seemed diminutive given the scope of the room and an exterior wall, made entirely of glass.

Mr North and the new Mr East stood in front of the wall, taking in the panoramic view of Los Angeles as they awaited their final two companions.

“You realise,” Mr North said, “that if we tie you or Mrs West to the demise of your predecessor, the consequences will have a resounding finality.”

“I do,” Adrien Barbou said.

"Then let me compliment you on your thoroughness, Mr East. My investigators rarely find themselves at such a loss."

"I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about, Mr North."

Mr North gave a saturnine smile.

"I do so hope there won't be any problems stemming from a leadership change at this critical time, Mr East."

"I think you will find, Mr North, that a change was exactly what was required. I called this meeting for a reason."

"I'm positively dripping with anticipation."

Mr North did not probe further, awaiting the remaining members of their collective. He had long ago schooled himself out of dangerous curiosity and exploitable impatience. When Mrs West and Mrs South arrived together, the four took their places around the square table. Their subordinates were not present at this meeting and the four were alone in the large room.

"The meeting is yours, Mr East," Mr North said. "The agenda is yours to set."

"In the process of auditing the activities of my predecessor," Barbou said, "I have come across a number of unfortunate irregularities."

"Oh?" Mrs South prompted. "What manner of irregularities?"

"It would appear," Barbou said, "that the previous Mr East had rather drastically overstated the problems in enacting the final stage of our plan. It seems that he was stalling the process to give certain factions within the Cabal time to prepare."

"What factions are those?" Mr North asked.

"Unknown. I have only just made these revelations and immediately moved to lock down all of the previous Mr East's subordinates for investigation and table this meeting. I felt it prudent to discuss these issues before launching an internal investigation and enacting inquiries into the Cabal."

"A choice wisely made," Mrs West said.

"You have evidence of these improprieties on the part of your predecessor?" Mrs South asked.

"I do," Barbou said. "As the materials are sensitive, rather than digital transmission I am having the full details hand-delivered to each of you on secure drives."

"Prudent," Mr North said. "If Mr East truly was stalling, then do you have a revised time frame in which we can enact the next stage?"

"We could begin immediately," Barbou said. "I would recommend, however, that we wait two weeks. This will give me time to root out any more surprises the previous Mr East

left behind and vet his people. It would also allow me to bring my project from before ascending to my new role to fruition."

"You're ready to move forward with that?" Mrs West asked.

"Yes, although I won't make the final move without consensus. This will go further than the Network is willing to tolerate."

"And will prime the world for our next move with a conversation of what is and is not possible," Mrs West said.

"There is another problem the late Mr East was either hiding or unaware of," Barbou said. "One that potentially means cancelling everything."

Eyebrows raised all around the table.

"Go on," Mr North said.

"I've been personally re-examining every aspect of the grid blackout program, now that I have control of it. Mr East's grasp of the magical mechanics involved was not as comprehensive as either we would like or he portrayed. In addition to the fact that we are ready to go, he failed to grasp the full ramifications of dropping the grid in its entirety."

"Which are?"

"My predecessor indicated that it would take the grid between one and two weeks to reactivate following a total shutdown. Enough time for dimension incursion spaces to deliver monsters across the world and definitively proving the existence of magic. We already know that the results of this will be damaging. The reality is that the grid will be down for months. At least two, most likely three or four. It could be longer, or even permanent. That's a low but real probability. This is all assuming that the Network fails to find a way to repair the damage and return the grid to functionality, which would alter our timelines, obviously."

"Months," Mrs South said. "That wouldn't be damage. Months of monster hordes being spewed into the world would be an apocalypse."

"That's a little dramatic," Mrs West said.

"No," Barbou disagreed. "Mrs South is right. I've seen the dimensional spaces, the armies of monsters. Months without the grid to intercept them will change civilisation forever. It could potentially end it."

"Assuming that the Network can't get the grid active again," Mrs West said.

"How likely is that?" Mr North asked.

"A year ago, I would have considered it highly likely," Barbou said. "The outworlders have changed that. My contacts tell me that the outworlder once in my custody has been advancing the Network's comprehension of the grid in leaps and bounds."

“Farrah Hurin,” Mrs West said.

“It doesn’t matter what her name is,” Barbou said. “Only what impact she has on our plans.”

The other three looked to Mr North, the first among equals. They waited as he sat in thoughtful silence, tapping a finger against his lips. Then the finger stopped.

“One week,” Mr North said. “If we can move now, then we go at the earliest reasonable opportunity. Is that sufficient to root out any further problems regarding your predecessor, Mr East?”

“If you are willing to loan me some of your excellent investigators, Mr North. I am still building my own cadre of reliable people.”

“Done,” Mr North said. “Mrs South, please coordinate with Mr East and take charge of looking into the Cabal’s activities.”

“Are we truly going to gloss over this?” Mrs South asked. “Our goal was to forge a place in a world turned to magic, not to burn that world down.”

“A wide-scale collapse of civic and social infrastructure does not obviate our objectives,” Mr North said.

“You would leave us ruling over a pile of ash?” Mrs South asked.

“So long as we rule,” Mr North said. “The complete collapse of the systems on which the Cabal and the Network have built their power bases will, at the last, bring us to parity. As the world rebuilds, we will finally stand as one of the tallest pillars.”

Mrs South took a long, slow breath, then stood up.

“We are not the people we set out to become,” she said. “In the beginning, our goal was to democratise magic. To take it from those who were hoarding it for themselves. Somewhere along the way, instead of defeating them, we became them. I have no illusions that I am good and I can live with that. I gave up on pulling down the tower for the chance to live on top of it, looking down at others like ants. But there is a difference between looking down on ants and using a glass to burn them. I may have given up on making the world better but I won’t be party to burning it down.”

In the wake of her tirade, the other three shared a look, then turned their gazes back to Mrs South.

“Are you certain?” Mr North asked. “You understand the consequences of standing on what’s left of your principles. You won’t affect change. You won’t make anything better for anyone but whoever we find to fill your seat. Someone who we will make sure does not share your compunctions. Only if you participate do you have any chance of steering

events in the direction you want them to go. You can't stop it, but perhaps you can ameliorate it. Only by standing with us will you have the chance."

"Mrs South," Mrs West said, her face filled with reluctance. "Audrey. If you go against us, you change nothing. You won't leave this room and you know that. I understand that staying the course might feel like a stain but do you want to die clean or actually make some kind of difference?"

Mrs South turned around, placing her back to the table.

"I'll die clean."

"...amateur footage of a figure that looks to be wrapped in an eerie garb made from the night itself. It doesn't move like a human and what it does to the people in this video is not something a human can do. Perhaps not even something any human would, given the horrific results. The Vietnamese government denies this incident took place, claiming the video is a hoax, but we have found what we believe to be the site of this altercation and spoke to local residents. As you're about to see, these people believe the impossible is not as impossible as most of us believe..."

Anna sighed, pausing the footage. She was in her office with Asya and Michael Aram, who was temporarily serving as Anna's assistant. Her normal assistant was not cleared for the information anticipated to pass over Anna's desk in the near future.

"How much traction is it getting?" Anna asked.

"It's getting a lot of promotion amongst susceptible demographics," Aram said. "The mainstreaming of conspiracy rhetoric in the US is helping this along, and with their cultural influence, it's spreading far and digging deep. Most outlets are dismissing it but they're all playing it because it's content that gets people talking. The footage from the rolling gunfight here in Sydney is getting more play than ever."

"How bad is this?" Anna asked Asya.

"The International Committee is throwing a fit," Asya said. "Not the local one in Canberra but Brussels, Berlin, Shanghai, New York, Johannesburg, Cairo..."

Asya shook her head in resignation.

"There's an emergency video conclave going on as we speak," she said. "It was decided that there wasn't time to convene in person. I'm not privy to what they're discussing, but the preliminary directions they're issuing speak volumes."

"Which are?" Anna asked.

"All branches are being instructed to prepare to enact breach protocols."

"This is it, then?" Aram asked. "The IC is ready to bite the bullet and go public?"

“The consensus is that the Engineers of Ascension will do it if we don’t. Expect direction soon, and in the meantime, get ready to start working with local government officials. Those channels are going to be critical, now.”

“I think I always knew,” Anna said, looking at the frozen image of a cloaked Jason on the screen. “From the moment that lunatic popped up, he was always going to be the one to bring it all down.”

“I don’t think that’s fair,” Asya said.

“Of course you don’t,” Anna said. “It’s hardly a secret that you’re looking to be the coulis on his panna cotta.”

Asya’s body language closed off.

“I’ll thank you to show some professionalism, Committeewoman Tilden. If I have any further directives from the International Committee, I’ll see you receive them.”

Anna winced as Asya stiffly left the office.

“Stress,” Anna said, pinching the bridge of her nose, “is not improving my work performance. Aram, sort out a car. I’m going to be spending a lot of the upcoming time in the office, so I’m going to see my wife while I still can.”

“Of course.”

Aram left, but shortly thereafter came running back, his feet pounding the tiled corridor.

“I take it this isn’t about the car,” Anna said.

“The grid went down,” Aram said, his face flushed.

“A blackout here in Sydney?”

Blackouts in major cities were always the most dangerous.

“Not a blackout,” Aram said. “The grid went down. The whole grid. Everywhere.”

Chapter 349

Contingencies

"I'm sure Uncle Jason will be here soon," Erika said to her sullen daughter.

"I don't see what the big deal is," Emi's friend Ruby said. "You're always talking about your uncle but he's never around."

The beach birthday party was going well, although the ongoing absence of her uncle was increasingly ruining the birthday girl's mood.

"Mrs Asano, Miss Emi," Shade said. "Mr Asano is on his way."

"Who said that?" Ruby asked, looking around. "Is there a British man hidden somewhere? Is it a birthday surprise, because that would be weird."

"Shade," Erika hissed. "What are you doing?"

"The time for secrecy is over, Mrs Asano," Shade said. "Mr Asano is coming to bring your family to the compound. Prepare them to go."

"What are you talking about?"

She looked up, hearing a commotion, her eyes following the startled gazes and pointed hands to the street that ran along the beachfront. A huge black motorcycle hurtled along at a pace definitely outside the speed limit, a cloak of stars trailing behind like a comet's tail.

The bike swerved off the road, over the grass and off the grassy embankment. Instead of dropping down to the sand, the bike erupted into a cloud of darkness. The rider glided through the air, his cloak swept out like wings of night, absorbing the cloud of shadows. The rider landed in front of Emi, the cloak draping around him. In the middle of the sunny day, surrounded by colourfully-clad children, it looked deeply incongruous.

"Sorry I'm late," Jason said. He ignored the crowd of people pulling out their phones to record.

"What are you doing?" Erika asked as her husband rushed up to join them. Ruby's parent likewise rushed over the sand, protectively standing in front of their daughter.

"Questions can wait," Jason said. "Right now, we go."

Erika opened her mouth to ask a question, processed what Jason had said and then paused.

"Alright," she said, nodding.

"What is going on?" Ruby's father asked. "You're that thing from the news. The one that kills people!"

A pair of silver eyes, shrouded in darkness turned on him and he felt a weight pressing down on his soul.

“Then you should probably watch your tone,” Jason said in the voice he normally saved for people about to die.

“Uncle Jason, that’s my friend’s Dad!”

He looked down at his niece, then pushed the hood back off his head.

“Sorry,” he said. “Happy birthday, Moppet, but we have to go. We’re all moving to the compound. Today.”

He opened a portal arch, which drew an audible reaction from the crowd.

“I need to round up the rest of the family,” Jason said. “I’ll explain later, but things are about to get very, very bad.”

Emi pushed past Ruby’s parents to grab her friend by the arms.

“They have to come too,” she insisted.

Jason looked at the fierce determination on the face of his niece and grinned.

“I have to get the rest of the family, so the portal closes in one minute,” he said. “You have until then to convince them to step through.”

“I am not letting my daughter step into whatever the hell this is!”

More of the Asano family were rushing up as Ian tried to calm down Ruby’s father and Erika spoke to her mother. Some of the Asano family knew what was going on, while others did not and were startled to see Jason clad in magical darkness.

“Son, what’s going on?” Ken asked as he ran onto the sand. Jason had rushed right past him earlier, up on the grassy embankment that bordered the beach. He had been with Hiro, who was following close behind his brother. Behind him was Taika, who had made an executive decision after seeing Jason in full regalia, as well as the portal he opened.

“I’ve got the cake!” he yelled out carrying the box containing the birthday cake Erika had made. He took it straight through the portal without bothering to wait for anyone else.

Jason turned to Ken and Hiro.

“Help me get the ones who don’t know about everything through the portal,” he said. He was struck by the family resemblance as the brothers both nodded and got to work, turning to the still-gathering family members.

Every Network facility on the planet was a frenzy of activity, and they were not alone. All around the world, military units that had worked with the Network were scrambling to expand their readiness for what was to come. Government bodies globally were enacting protocols developed with the Network, attempting to set logistics into place, rapidly

introduce emergency legislation and accelerate a program of public awareness that the world was about to face an unprecedented threat.

The public awareness component was the first to face a crucial impediment. As governments tried to broadcast public service announcements, media companies resisted, unleashing a barrage of legal challenges.

Those challenges didn't completely shut down the flow of information but it was inflicting critical gaps in the knowledge that was going out to the public. With genuine information patchy and inconsistent, those gaps were being filled with speculation, conspiracy theories and outright disinformation. The results in different parts of the world ranged from social media flame wars to panic on the streets.

The legal obstructionism of the media barons was clearly not going to hold up, with the first cases being struck down in hours. Every delay was costly, however, as proto-spaces appeared undetected around the globe. In less than three days, they would start spilling monsters directly into the world.

Farrah had been part of an international task force with hundreds of members from Network branches all around the world to investigate the blackouts. While they had considered a complete collapse of grid functionality a low-probability outcome, contingency plans had been put into place and were currently being carried out.

The core of the response was a program to actively search for proto-spaces by getting Network ritualists out into the field. Farrah's expertise and her studies of the grid had made her a lead in the contingency project, developing a ritual for just that purpose. It had to be simple enough to be employed by those with minimal ritualism skills, efficient enough that it wouldn't break the spirit coin bank yet wide-area enough to actually be worth using.

Farrah had given Jason an item for his trip that allowed him to track proto-spaces, but replicating that item was not a viable solution. On top of the cost to mass-produce it, it was only able to find proto-spaces and not the apertures into them. Only Jason had the power to enter the spaces directly.

Although it was only a side project to the investigation into the grid blackouts, Farrah had taken the contingency ritual through several iterative improvements before disseminating it. It was simple enough that a ritualist in every branch had been made proficient in its use, which was paying off as they taught it to others in turn.

The contingency plans being put into action were a poor substitute for the grid. In addition to tying up personnel and consuming resources, they could only monitor tiny slices of area compared to the coverage of the grid. As a result, the decision had been

made to focus on thorough scanning of population centres over maximising total coverage. The result was that Network ritualists would be deployed prioritising population centres. Major cities were critical both for population and infrastructure, which made preventing monster outbreaks critical.

The tradeoffs for this approach were not easy to swallow. The Network had the people to cover major cities in most of the developed world, but rural and isolated areas would be left unprotected. The impact on agricultural regions would be extreme once hordes of monsters were roaming the countryside but covering expansive regions with minimal population wasn't a viable option. The problem was the food shortages that this would eventually lead to.

Some areas of the world lacked the proper Network coverage to cover even the major population centres. The area most impacted by this was Russia, which was largely dominated by the Cabal. The Network branches there had always been operating in a borderline state of effectiveness and the new challenges would be something they were not equipped to meet. The International Committee was working to remedy this but there were already too many fires to put out.

The situation in Russia was part of the impetus for the Network to reach out to the Cabal. The places where the Network was weakest were often those where the Cabal was strongest and the idea of supplementing Network assets with cabal resources was being actively explored.

"Asano," Anna called out as she emerged through the rooftop door. Kaito turned from where he was directing people as they loaded crates onto his helicopter.

"Committeewoman," Kaito greeted after jogging from the helipad to meet her.

"I heard that some of my fellow committeepersons had conscripted you to take their scattered family members to their family compounds."

The members of the Steering Committee were all old family Network, including Anna herself. The kind of work the Asano family had done on their own compound, the old families had put in place decades ago. They didn't have the expertise of Farrah as a guiding hand, but the accumulated knowledge and resources of generations was not to be dismissed.

"You have your own family," Anna continued. "Things are going to get rough and you should make sure they're taken care of."

“Jason is dealing with that,” Kaito said. “He’ll see them right and then come here to help with logistics. Right now, I’m needed here. There’s a lot more people than just our families who are going to need help.”

“No kidding,” Anna said. “I can’t help but notice that you aren’t ferrying committee family members.”

“Farrah told them all to go jump,” Kaito said. “She scares them.”

“She should. You’re moving resources for the dimensional space detection contingency?”

“People, resources, whatever it takes.”

“I’ll let you get back to it, then,” Anna said.

“Jason said he’ll come here once our family has been rounded up,” Kaito said. “He can move a lot of people through those portals of his, you should get him ferrying people. Let him sort out those committee people’s families, if only to stop them throwing their weight around.”

“Can’t your brother only portal to places he’s been before?”

“Farrah had him scope out all the Network family compounds for reference before he went on his trip,” Kaito said. “He can portal right to them.”

Kaito turned and headed back for the helicopter. As he approached he snapped his fingers and it started spinning its rotors.

Anna returned to the chaos of the operations centre, where Ketevan was marshalling the chaos like a general in the midst of battle. As Director of Operations, she had a lot more to do than Anna, whose oversight role had been reduced to Asya looping her in on International Committee directives as she passed them onto Ketevan. It had always been the case the IC didn’t have actual authority over the branches but with a global crisis, any branch not getting with the program was dooming the people they should be protecting.

Anna waited for a rare lull and made her way into what used to be her own office.

“Keti,” Anna said. “I’m pretty much useless at this point. Do you have anywhere I can make myself useful?”

“Absolutely,” Ketevan said. “We’ve got a bunch of people coming in from the EOA looking to defect.”

“Defect?”

“The rank and file didn’t know what the people in charge were doing. Once the grid went down, orders started coming in and a lot of them didn’t like it when they realised what

was happening. They've started to approach Network branches all over looking to contribute."

"Isn't there a concern about infiltration?" Anna asked.

"Of course there is," Ketevan said. "Right now, though, we need warm bodies and information, and they have both. I'd love for you to take that whole mess off my hands."

"Alright," Anna said. "Point me in the right direction."

While the Network was in chaos, in a quiet, still and largely empty stretch of Arizona desert, an old shed sat a few miles from a town that wasn't much more than a gas station, a bar and a pervasive sense of having been left behind by life.

No one had gone to the old building in years and the gate lock on the chain-link fence had long ago rusted shut. None of the locals remembered it being anything but abandoned, with the only surprise being that it hadn't fallen down yet.

The building was largely empty, which made the two things that were present stand out. The more ordinary one was a 2002 Pontiac Firebird in pewter metallic, covered by a dusty car sheet.

The other object was significantly more extraordinary, and likewise covered in a sheet. It was a glass cylinder filled with a liquid that only looked like water, radiating cold despite not being connected to any kind of cooling device. The truly unusual part was the naked woman floating in the liquid, neither truly alive nor truly dead.

What the sheet did not cover was the magical diagram that had been cut into the concrete floor, seemingly with a saw, in a circle around the glass cylinder and its bizarre contents. It was covered in dirt and dust, as were the piles of spirit coins placed in locations around the circle.

The small town did not have anyone with magic, regardless of what old Raquel would claim about her psychic powers. There was no one to sense the disembodied soul approach from the west, enter the building and slip into the body in the tank.

After sitting dormant for many years, light started shining from the lines of the magical diagram on the floor. One by one, the spirit coins within it disappeared and the liquid within the tank started to glow. Finally, the now embodied soul, opened her eyes. The glass shattered sending icy liquid flooding across the floor and she staggered out, eyes blinking in confusion. She moved to the car, leaning heavily on it as she worked her lungs for the first time.

Eventually her mind and body came into sync as her soul imprinted her memories onto the still-pliable brain. She was disoriented, uncertain as to how long the process had

taken by the time she regained lucidity. She had never really expected it to work, but after what happened, she knew it was her only chance. If she had played along, they would have watched her every moment, ever ready to swing the axe. Better to take the risk and seize the initiative.

She pulled the cover off the car and peered into the side mirror, seeing a face fifteen years younger than it should be looking back. It was not the face of Mrs South, which was a name she had now surrendered. She was once again Audrey Blaine, and she was hungry.

Chapter 350

Humanity

"...brother of celebrity chef Erika Asano, shown here actually appeared on his sister's cooking program. He was declared legally dead for a year and a half after an explosion in his apartment building, which the Victoria Police at the time put down to a gas explosion. Subsequent enquiries have revealed that the building in question had no gas service, pointing to a quick and quiet cover-up. This in turn leads to questions about how long authorities have known about Asano and what appear to be his extraordinary abilities..."

"You're more famous than Eri now, little brother," Kaito said. "Why did you make a big display on the beach like that? It wouldn't have taken you that much longer to do it quietly. Hell, with the commotion, it probably would have gone faster. Then you show your face with all those people using camera phones."

Jason and Kaito were watching news footage with the augmented reality goggles provided by Kaito's helicopter as they rapidly flew over the Australian outback. A passive ability from his swift essence let Kaito's helicopter outpace any ordinary helicopter, even at iron-rank. He had several active abilities that could give it a further boost but he was holding off on those.

Endurance was the theme of the day as they used Kaito's helicopter to sweep the country for proto spaces. Even at Kaito's speed, they couldn't cover the whole country, but while Jason was busy shepherding the Steering Committee members' families around, Kaito and the operations team were plotting out a plan that maximised coverage. Instead of a grid sweep, they would hop from one population centre to the next through inland Australia.

The Network ritualists would stick to the coast, which required the least travel and had the most people. All in all, Australia had it quite lucky. Despite a landmass comparable to the contiguous United States, Australia had only a fraction of the population, almost all of which clung to the coast.

The logistics of sweeping for proto-spaces wasn't easy, but it was less troublesome than if the country wasn't mostly empty. The simplified search ritual Farrah developed was being deployed alongside anyone with even a rudimentary grasp of ritual magic. Even Emi had been roped in, with Taika, Greg and the silver-ranker, Ruth as her protection detail. The now thirteen-year-old, courtesy of Farrah's personal instruction, was a better ritualist than many in the Network.

Jason and Kaito weren't the only ones being sent inland to patrol the smaller centres, but they were the most efficient. Kaito's speed and Jason's ability to duck into a proto-space, assassinate the anchor monsters and leave again allowed them to cover more space than any other team in the country. Their schedule was to go inland across New South Wales, up through the Northern Territory, back east into Queensland and then loop back south through New South Wales to Sydney. They would be covering as much as a quarter of the country, or at least as much as they could before monsters started turning up.

The grid compass Farrah had given to Jason for his walkabout originally worked by tapping into the Network's grid, alerting him to nearby proto-spaces. She had modified it to directly sense proto-spaces itself, which diminished its effectiveness, but not so much as to make it useless. It continued to trade off range for the inability to detect apertures, making it mostly useful to Jason.

Other teams were roaming around, some of which had been given replica dimensional compasses. They were markedly less effective, however, lacking both Kaito's mobility and Jason's ability to enter a proto-space directly. This forced the other teams, on finding a proto-space, to take the time to hunt down the aperture and open it. Only then could strike teams move in to hunt the anchor monsters and negate the threat.

Fortunately, the strike teams had been retrained by Farrah and were able to act with speed and confidence. It wasn't a match for Jason entering the astral space directly and hunting the anchor monsters with Shade's vehicle forms, but it was better than what had been possible a year earlier.

"I don't understand why you let people film you with your hood down," Kaito said.

"What I can do is terrifying," Jason said. "Even in the other world, the way I fight had people comparing me to the monsters. In a very short amount of time, this world will start seeing monsters."

"You don't want to be lumped in with what's coming," Kaito realised. "You're using this time before the dimensional entities start arriving to have the media humanise you."

"Yes. For whatever reason, the EOA had been playing me up instead of shutting me down in terms of media coverage. I might as well use it."

Audrey Blaine felt very odd as she drove along an Arizona highway. Her new body had been in stasis for more than a dozen years, the last remnant of a secret program whose progenitors were all dead. That was something she had made very sure of, a long time ago.

Thirty years ago, a very secret collaboration of personnel from the Network, the Cabal and the Engineers of Ascension had been enacted, without their parent organisations being made aware. Researchers from each group came together in an attempt to take projects from each faction that had plateaued in their development and push them forward using the knowledge and the resources of the others.

The resulting advancements in EOA and Cabal projects benefited both groups without either realising the source of the breakthroughs. The comparatively limited advancement of the Network programs proved the group's downfall as disgruntled Network researchers leaked the group's existence.

The three factions proceeded to eliminate the group, with Audrey in charge of the EOA purge contingent. The EOA was delighted with what the group had delivered to them but were unwilling to allow the potential security risk should their long-term goals be compromised. The work done already was enough for the EOA to move forward on their own.

That assignment had been the start of her rise as she ruthlessly excised the researchers. Her ambitions were what led her to assemble her own team to poach what they could, even as she was praised for destroying everything. In the wake of the program's seeming destruction, Audrey's hand-picked people continued.

In the end, she became wary of her own researchers as her rising career brought increased scrutiny and their skeletons remained buried out in the desert. She purged everything except for one thing, the body she was now inhabiting.

The body in the tank was based on a research path the original team rejected due to the extreme incorporation of Cabal and Network materials and methods. As this meant it couldn't be introduced to the mainstream EOA, the research path was redirected, despite the promising results. Audrey's own team had no such compunctions.

The body in the tank was cloned from Audrey's own DNA by her team, who accepted means and methods that the original team had rejected. Biological material provided by the Cabal was heavily incorporated, its mystical properties maintained by processes learned from the Network.

The EOA's modern converted people were much more advanced than the early version developed by the original secret research collaboration. The ability to create stable, silver-rank converted was the impetus for finally putting their plans into motion. Plans that had originated back with the crude, early, iron-rank converted.

Even so, the converted remained relatively simple and almost synthetic in their powers and development. They were the result of external forces being applied to individuals, rather than building such individuals from the ground up.

The key to the EOA methods had been the soul modification methods developed by the original team. Once they discovered that the critical element to accessing the soul was consent, the secrets of the Cabal and the Network allowed them to unlock the path to change, transforming ordinary people into magical powerhouses.

Audrey's body was new to her but of an age with the early, iron-rank converted. Unlike the converted, though, her body's abilities were more holistic, inherent and exotic, courtesy of the biological material provided by the Cabal. She didn't know what had gone into the inception of her body, and even its creators had been unsure of what it would be capable of.

The reason Audrey had kept this one project hidden away after eliminating even her own team was the magical connection she had to it. Audrey was the basis for the bulk of the body's biomass. The magic matrix that governed it, something possessed by all living things, was based on Audrey but reinforced using Network methodology.

Audrey's team believed that the result was a latent bond that would allow Audrey herself to occupy the empty vessel should anything happen to her original body. This was similar to an ability some members of the Cabal enjoyed, creating empty vessel replicants of their bodies to be inhabited after death.

So long as their souls never made it to the astral, this did not draw the attention of the Reaper. Once a soul entered the astral it was the Reaper's to govern, but until then it was the affair of the local death god, if any. The Reaper's concern was not with cheating death but coming back from it once the soul passed on to the astral.

The bond served as a tether for the soul, guiding it to the new body. It was the reason she had refused the magical augmentations that her position in the EOA offered. Although the potential of the bond was untested, she did not want to risk severing it. It was the reason why she had looked the eldest of the Four Cardinals, despite Mr North and Mrs West both being her senior.

After all those years, Audrey had finally tested it out, with success that both surprised and relieved her. Her new body felt strong and potent, although it was possessed of an unnerving power that she was yet to understand. She felt like a child wearing new clothes that had been bought for her to grow into.

One thing about her body she was very aware of, was that it was hungry for power. The car had contained a small fortune in spirit coins taken from the Network years

previous; mostly bronze coins but even some precious silvers. The first thing she had done after steadying herself enough to move around properly was to shove bronze coins into her mouth, one after the other. Each left the electric tingle on her tongue of licking a battery but their power felt hollow, like diet soda of the soul. Ten of the coins vanished into her mouth before she was sated. She felt a craving for the silver coins but steeled herself to keep them in reserve.

Her senses were far more powerful than those she had had in her old body. More than once as she drove along the highway she had been forced to pull over with vertiginous sensory overload. Even the monochrome, empty desert was capable of overwhelming her. She saw things far in the distance; colours she didn't know existed. The dry air on her skin told a story of the weather and her location that she understood on an instinctive level. She had the concerning sensation of the instincts behind that sense not being entirely human.

Sitting the driver's seat by the side of the road as her dizzyingly overwhelming senses settled once more, she considered her options moving forward. The smart move would ordinarily be to stay dead, collect the resources she had hidden away and live quietly on a beach somewhere. With the complications likely to arise from her new body and a world facing a monster apocalypse, this was not a viable approach.

The EOA's plan was precipitously close to the next phase, the media interference preventing the Network from effectively seizing the initiative before the monsters started to appear. She couldn't go back the EOA, nor would she. There was the Cabal, with whom she had contacts, and they might even see her as one of their own, now. She had no idea what their response to the EOA's actions would be, though, and she would be tarred with the same brush, even after leaving them.

That meant the Network. She didn't have as strong connections there but she did have leverage. The information she possessed was exactly what they were going to need. Even so, she hesitated. They would likely be even more hostile than the Cabal and there was an outside chance some local goon might decide to torture what she knew out of her. It was unlikely anyone would take the risk with what was currently at stake, but it was something she was wary of.

She thought about what she had done, standing up to the other cardinals. She was not a decent human being. The decent part was long gone and now the human part was gone with it. But there had to be a line. She wasn't going to become a monster, which is why she could not tolerate letting civilisation crumble in a grasp for power.

She'd had to walk to the gas station to get the car running. The petrol in the can in the shed had long since degraded. Fortunately, the money stash had not. She'd bought a cheap burner phone while she was there but she didn't have any of her contacts saved. Like everyone else, she had given up memorising phone numbers years before. She did know where to find the Network branch in Phoenix though, so once her head cleared, she started up the car and continued on.

Jason and Kaito were flying over an Indigenous community in the Northern Territory that wasn't large enough to be spared a Network presence, which was true of most of the outback. Jason blurred and vanished from the passenger seat of the helicopter as he phased into the proto-space. It was something that continued to unnerve Kaito, even when he knew it was coming.

Kaito landed to rest and recover some mana, consuming an iron-rank coin for himself and feeding one to the helicopter through a slot on the outside of the helicopter. The slot had originally been in the cockpit but every person who saw him use a spirit coin on the helicopter made a coin-operated joke. Now, when he conjured the helicopter, the coin intake was located in a discreet spot on the exterior.

Twenty minutes later, his helicopter detected a strong aura burst a few kilometres away and he moved to pick Jason up. Jason had emerged from the proto-space after hunting the anchor monsters.

"Any problems?" Kaito asked as Jason stepped aboard.

"Nah, the anchor monsters were only bronze. No flyers, either, so Shade just flew me right over the trash. It would be nice if I could bring you into the spaces with me."

"We both know that won't be happening."

Jason could only transition into proto-spaces alone and there was no way Kaito trusted Jason enough to enter his spirit vault.

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "There is an issue that has arisen at the family compound."

"Didn't we decide to call it Asano Village?"

"That proposal was rejected," Shade said. "Discussions are ongoing, although the situation is generally too chaotic for such organisational concerns. There is still some contention as to the necessity of moving to the compound, despite your warnings and demonstrations."

"People have been watching the stories that say I'm either a hoax or a killer?"

“They have,” Shade said. “The latest family-related problem is quite different, however. A woman has arrived from Japan claiming that she wants to test your worthiness to carry the Asano name.”

“Bugger that,” Kaito said. “No one gets to tell us if we can carry our own damn name.” Jason glanced at his brother and they shared a nod.

“Damn right,” Jason said.

“What would you like me to do until you get back, Mr Asano?” Shade asked.

“Find that lady and tell her to park her worthiness where the sun doesn’t shine.”

“Very well,” Shade said. “If you do not mind, however, I would prefer to paraphrase.”