

## Chapter 381

### Collateral Damage

Dawn, Erika, Yumi and Asya were on the sandy beach of the lagoon, waiting for the others to emerge from the sea cave. Jason and the others emerged on black jet skis that dissolved into darkness as they beached themselves on the sand. Erika snatched her daughter into a worried hug and Farrah slapped Jason on the arm.

“Got it done?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said.

Dawn had been staring at Jason even before they left the cave, her gaze unerringly locked onto his aura through the stone.

“What did you do?” Dawn asked him. “The transcendent strain in your aura has been strengthened. It may only offer flavour, rather than power, but it is a startling thing to detect in an aura at your rank. It might be intimidating but it will also draw attention.”

“Probably for the best that he can hide his aura so well, then,” Farrah said.

“Yes, it is,” Dawn said. “What does have power is the force inside your aura antithetical to the Builder. Most people wouldn’t recognise it, but I’m familiar enough with the Builder to know what it is. It was there the first time we met, but now the glowing ember is a burning flame.”

“The Builder and his freaky cyborg army killed a lot of people in the other world, including both Farrah and myself,” Jason said. “I am antithetical to the Builder.”

“You’ll be lucky if any of the Builder’s adherents don’t attack you on sight after sensing that aura,” Dawn said.

“I’ll consider myself lucky if they do,” Jason said. “Rooting out those infiltrating pricks is something I’ve done before and I’ll be more than happy to do again.”

“So, this is it,” said Denji. “Our clan has fulfilled its purpose. Now I am unsure of what course to chart.”

As Tiwari clan patriarch, it was Denji’s duty to lead a clan now riddled with fissures. Large portions of the clan had treated their long-held purpose as mythological, so Jason’s arrival had left many uncertain or angry. Denji would be required to lead his clan to a new purpose.

“The first thing is to consolidate the clan in the wake of our new reality,” Denji’s brother, Koya, said. “Things will be uncertain as we choose our own destiny, but we must move forward together.”

“Father is right, Uncle Denji,” Itsuki said. “We will all be together.”

“We are far from a unified force, son,” Koya said, “I think it might be a good time to broaden your horizons. Mr Asano, I was hoping that you might take Itsuki under your wing for a time.”

Itsuki’s eyes went wide at the idea.

“You might not want to do that,” Emi said. “He may learn more about the A-Team than magic powers.”

“The old Liam Neeson movie?” Itsuki asked.

“Oh, holy, crap,” Jason said. “What have you been teaching this boy? He definitely needs to have his education expanded upon.”

“Did I miss something?” Koya asked.

“Clearly,” Erika said. “Does your son even know who George Peppard is?”

“The male lead from Breakfast at Tiffany’s?” Koya asked. “What is going on?”

“You can just ignore them,” Yumi said. “My grandchildren have skewed views on certain cultural properties. You should also ignore Breakfast at Tiffany’s. Mickey Rooney as a Japanese man? Excruciating.”

“You know what’s worse?” Jason asked. “That movie where Obi-Wan Kenobi plays a man named Koichi Asano.”

“That movie,” Denji growled. “I can only imagine how aggravating it must be to have your name being used like that.”

Asya wrapped her arm inside Jason’s.

“If I had a bingo card for you,” she told him, “I’d have just crossed off ‘get the patriarch of an ancient Japanese clan to complain about old movies during a treasure hunt on a deserted tropical island.’”

“That’s a very specific bingo card.”

“Yours would be,” she said. “There really is no one quite like you.”

“Yeah, I’m not like the other girls,” Jason said.

“If you two are going to make out,” Emi said, “could you save it for the plane? Also, can we get a plane?”

“Shade is my familiar, Moppet. You can’t just tell him to...”

Darkness streamed out of Jason’s shadow to take the form of a plane, blasting down air as it hovered in place. One of Shade’s bodies emerged from Jason and stood next to Emi.

“Would you like to come aboard, Miss Emi?” Shade said loudly, over the rush of air.

“Traitor,” Jason accused.

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The Tiwari men were returned to Japan and Itsuki went off with his father to pack his things. Souta Tiwari, who had been looking into Jason's poisoning, met them on arrival. He offered to report to Jason, who said that he was uninterested in Tiwari clan affairs. Jason already knew everything from the Shade dwelling in Souta's shadow and it truly was internal Tiwari affairs. Jason had bigger things to deal with than some disgruntled clansmen, although if they'd gone after his family, instead, it would be a different story.

"Mr Asano," Souta said as they waited for Itsuki to return. "The Japanese authorities came to find you during your absence. We truthfully told them that you had already departed, but it might be time for you to bring this trip to Japan to an end."

"Well, I did set off a bunch of car bombs, so I can hardly blame them. Good thing you tried to murder me or I'd feel bad about bringing that to your door."

Souta gave Jason an awkward smile.

"Don't worry, mate. We'll be off and away promptly."

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Koya looked at his son, madly shoving things into the dark, floating orb that was the aperture to Itsuki's storage space.

"This is an important opportunity, son, but while I know you admire Mr Asano, do not lose sight of how dangerous he is."

"We are all dangerous, Father. We've both killed many monsters."

"That's not what I mean. You need not fear the man who kills, for all you need to do is be better. Fear the man who kills, then smiles and laughs like it is any other day. That man has no lines, whatever he might tell you. Or tell himself."

"I don't think he's like that," Itsuki said. "Look at the things he's done. It's clear how hard he's trying to be a good man."

"Exactly," Koya said. "Good men don't have to try."

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On the way back to Australia, Jason, Farrah and Dawn sequestered themselves in a cabin to discuss the next move.

"If you absorbed the door, you should have some idea of how it operates," Dawn said to Jason.

"Yes," he agreed, "although how to operate it properly is another matter. I'm going to need to advance my knowledge of astral magic or I'll just fumble around, accomplishing nothing."

“I can continue to help you with that,” Dawn said. “In the meantime, Miss Hurin can work on our own system to tap into the grid, now that you have lost access to Network resources.”

“We’re going to need access?” Farrah asked.

“As best I can understand,” Jason said, “the underlying makeup of reality is made of nodes, of which just this planet has an incalculable number. Fuelling those nodes are what you might call reality cores. Batteries for the universe. These are the things that everyone is going to be fighting over.”

“These events you described taking place after the grid goes back up,” Farrah said to Dawn. “They’re going to reveal these reality cores?”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “As best as I can determine, each event will reveal one, which you can expect the magical factions to be fighting over.”

“What about the proto-spaces?” Farrah asked.

“They will continue, and we need to use them,” Dawn said. “They represent the points at which the dimensional membrane around this reality is most strained. There, rituals to find the altered nodes will be more effective, allowing us to detect them over a wider area.”

“As best we can tell, the Network founder used the door to create the imbalance in the link and then founded the Network to slow down the damage once it escalated,” Jason explained. “The whole reason the link between worlds is out of whack is that the door was used to modify specific nodes. That’s what we need to track down: the nodes the founder modified, so we can restore them to what amounts to factory default.”

“It will be quite hit and miss at first,” Dawn said. “As more of the link is normalised, the rest will start to stand out and our successes will accelerate at the end.”

“Which will stop it siphoning magic from my world,” Farrah said. “That will finally trigger the oversized monster surge, giving the Builder’s forces a chance to invade.”

“Yes,” Jason said. “This world is just collateral damage. Unfortunately, the only way out is through. Someone like me coming along to fix the link was part of the plan. I’m going to be the trigger that starts the invasion.”

“There is no other option,” Dawn said.

“I know,” Jason said. “The only way out is through. We need to identify the nodes and fix the link, hopefully before the magical factions plunder too many of the nodes and the whole system is thrown off.”

“What if one of the nodes we need is affected by these events?” Farrah asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said.

“We will need to figure that out as we go,” Dawn said. “Even I can’t know that until I see it for myself. I suspect, though, that we will have an amount of leeway.”

“Meaning we don’t have to hit every node?” Jason asked. “That’s some welcome breathing room.”

“These are just educated guesses,” Dawn said. “It could well be that I am wrong and every affected node must be restored.”

“I guess we have a plan, then,” Farrah said. “If we’re going to be running around in proto-spaces, though, won’t the Network get grouchy?”

“Let them,” Jason said.

“A support team might be useful,” Farrah said. “Silvers would be best, but we have bronze-rankers we can trust. They can help keep the monsters and the Network off our backs while we’re operating in proto-spaces.”

“We can talk about it after we get back to Australia and take stock,” Jason said. “There are a lot of things up in the air right now.”

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Jason sat alone in his cloud house, in a dome beneath the water offshore of Asano Village. Emi was giving Itsuki a tour while Jason meditated, feeling completely safe for the first time since his second battle in Makassar. Some of his abilities even ranked up, although he knew that speed to be an illusion.

Early in a rank, abilities always went up faster, but with every rank, the later thresholds become harder and harder to pass. His powers might go up two or three ranks quickly now, but it would be a decade or more before they started reaching gold. He could only hope that the challenges ahead were enough to accelerate the timeline a little.

He had a monitor manifest out of a cloud wall and started watching the news. It was story after story on the changes currently rocking the world as everyday life and magic continued to collide.

“...it has been almost twenty-four hours since the last new monster wave, with waves that appeared before that point continuing to be dealt with across the globe. A Global Defense Network spokesperson claimed that under normal conditions, monster waves would no longer appear, although she did stress that regions that have ejected the GDN presence are not operating under normal conditions.”

A picture of the League of Heroes logo appeared on the screen.

“Questions continued to be asked about the League of Heroes that have taken over in the wake of GDN departures, specifically about the organisation behind them, the Engineers of Ascension. There is also the enigmatic and reclusive Cabal, although they

are yet to make any visible attempts to seize political power. The EOA, as they are commonly known, was first revealed by Jason Asano, who himself is coming under fire amid accusations of a series of car bombings in Japan...”

Jason flicked off the screen with a mental command and it sank into the cloud wall. He got up, walked through the cloud house, following the tunnel linked to the central underwater dome. He then took the tunnel to the airlock, leaving the cloud house for the tunnel system running under Asano Village. He took out the cloud flask, removed the stopper and placed the end into the physical aperture next to the airlock. The cloud house started breaking down and flowing into the flask.

Jason hadn't yet used the new form of his cloud flask, the palace, which became available when he had raised the flask to silver rank. He didn't expect the palace form to be as grand as Emir's, since Emir had already taken his flask to gold rank. The cloud house form had become more impressive at bronze-rank and Jason imagined the palace form would operate on the same principle. Even so, he did not anticipate being disappointed to only get a small palace.

He did not test the palace form after the cloud house had returned to the flask. Instead, he placed the flask in his inventory and sat in the small, underground tram cart that would carry him through the tunnels to Asano Village.

As he neared the village, he sensed Annabeth Tilden arrive at the main gate. The serene bushland of Asano Village allowed Jason's senses to be quite alert to distant events, compared to a crowded city where stimulus was so much heavier. His silver-rank spirit attribute helped him filter it all, but only at higher rank would he be able to actively monitor a whole city when he blanketed it with his senses.

Leaving the secret tunnels in the basement of the main residence, Jason hunted up Farrah and they went outside. Shade took the form of a car and drove them out to the main gate, where Annabeth was waiting in her own car. The Network Sydney branch committeewoman was accompanied by Nigel, the man in charge of the branch's tactical training, along with a pair of other silver-rankers.

Nigel had worked closely with Farrah as they revamped the Network's training program, with Nigel himself, a rare non-core user, soaring up to silver rank after using Farrah's training methods. Nigel had reached his rank in almost as little time as Jason.

Jason and Farrah stepped out of the cloud of darkness that their car turned into, while Anna and Nigel got out of their own car. Nigel conspicuously placed himself in a position to intervene if Jason or Farrah made a move on Anna. The other silver-rankers

stayed close to her person. Looking on were some lingering fringe types, religious zealots and conspiracy theorists still camped outside the main gate, although most had moved on.

“Really, Nige?” Jason asked, looking at Nigel in between himself and Anna.

“I hate it when people call me Nige.”

“I hate it when people betray me, so I guess we’re both out of luck. Hello, Anna.”

## Chapter 382

### I Intend to Do Damage

Annabeth Tilden and three silver-rankers were standing outside the main gate of Asano Village, facing Jason and Farrah.

"We didn't betray you, Mr Asano," Anna said.

"No?" Jason asked. "Then I guess the GDN spokesperson on the news stating that our association had been ended due to my increasingly dangerous and radicalised behaviour was a terrible mix up. I'm surprised Terrance made that kind of slip."

"You set off car bombs in traffic," Anna said.

"I'll do worse before I'm done," Jason said. "The thing is, Anna, I am dangerous and radicalised. I have been from the beginning. Remember when I first came back? Faith healing my way through a hospital and rolling a rolling gunfight in the streets? Since I started working with the Network I've been holding back but now you've cut those fetters. You opened the floodgates, Anna. You don't get to complain when the water comes through."

"It doesn't have to be like this, Asano."

"As long as I eat the fact that you're attacking me in the news, stay quiet and do as I'm told? Why are you here, Anna?"

"Can we talk where there aren't a bunch of hungry loons filming us on camera phones?" she asked. Just as she said, the fringe elements camping outside Asano Village had no short of people filming them as they spoke.

"The village is for guests, friends and allies, Anna. I'm not saying the village's defences are impregnable, but if you want in, it'll take more than the four of you."

"We aren't your enemy, Jason. I'm here to try and stop us from reaching that point. There are forces larger than either of us who see you as an antagonistic force, but if you're willing to make some concessions, we can stop this from escalating into conflict."

"Concessions?" he growled, taking a step forward that prompted her bodyguard, Nigel to step between them. Jason stopped, closed his eyes and after a moment, the tense rage passed out of his shoulders.

"This is you, genuinely trying to help me," Jason said softly. "You want to mend fences; I understand that. I respect it. I'm sorry, Anna, but they haven't told you why they turned on me in the first place, did they? It wasn't about car bombs."

"Then what?"

“Those greater forces you mentioned? I’m not sure how much they know, yet, but it’s only a matter of time before they realise that I have something they want. Something everyone will want. People are going to make some bad choices trying to get it and they will reap the consequences.”

“Is that a threat?” Anna asked.

Jason smiled.

“Since I came to this world,” he said, “I’ve been playing the essence user. It made sense to affiliate myself with the Network, given that their first priority was protecting the world from magic. That’s already changing. What’s coming will be a gold rush and an arms race, all in one. The old priorities will be gone.”

“So you say,” Anna said.

“Believe me or not, I don’t care,” Jason said. “I don’t need the Network or anyone but the people already standing with me. I’m done playing essence user and following the rules of this world. I’m an adventurer again.”

“What does that mean?” Anna asked.

“Adventurers get the job done,” Farrah said stepping up next to Jason. “We don’t have oversight or chains of command or public relations departments. We do what it takes, whoever or whatever gets in our way. The Adventure Society sees the job that needs doing and finds the people to do it. Right here, right now, the Adventure Society is us, and we’re the people for the job. We’re going to do what needs to be done and we’ll go through anyone or anything in our path, without hesitation, remorse or mercy. I like you, Anna, so I’m hoping that’s not you.”

“That’s what a threat sounds like, Anna,” Jason said. “This world needs saving. I don’t know if the people behind you understand the true threat or not and I don’t care anymore. Just don’t get in our way.”

“And what exactly does the world need saving from?” Anna asked.

“The dimensional incursions are getting worse,” Farrah said, “and the rate at which they’re getting worse is increasing. When we first arrived here, category three incursions were moving from the exception to the norm. Now we’re starting to see category four incursions. Do you really think they’re going to stop?”

“Are you claiming you’re going to stop the monsters from coming at all?” Anna asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “It could just be that we stop them from getting worse.”

“Then why not work with us?”

“Anna, I’ve worked with a lot of good people at the Network. You’re one of them. But not a lot of the good ones end up in charge. Think about the other members on the

steering committee. Do you trust them to do the right thing? Someone knows that when I do what I have to do, the power you're about to start fighting over will no longer appear. Anna, tell me that the people in charge will choose to address a looming threat over immediate gain."

"You know I can't."

"Then you need to look at your own loyalties and priorities. When you go home to Susan and look her in the eye, I bet you feel proud at the work you've done each day. You should. If you want to keep feeling that way, maybe start thinking about how much you let the International Committee dictate your choices."

"You're not my conscience, Jason. I make my own choices."

"Yet you came here to convince me to let you make mine?"

"There are people following you who will be caught up in your mess. Asya Karadeniz is throwing away her future by quitting the Network. Don't take her down with you."

"I actually hope you're right, Anna. I hope the Network doesn't lose its way. But the fact is, the Network and the monsters they fight were both inceptioned by the same person. Your house was always built on sand."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Network was never intended to protect the world from monsters. It was a regulatory measure so the dimensional incursions didn't destroy the world too quickly. A stop-gap until either someone like me came along to turn things back or the world was destroyed. Either result gets what the founder wanted, which is to open the gates of an entirely different world to invasion."

"Even if all that were true, and I'm not acknowledging that it is, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what someone centuries ago intended when it's the people of today that control the Network's destiny."

Jason smiled.

"I like that," he said. "I hope you have ambition, Anna. With people like you at the helm, the Network really could be what I think we both want it to be."

"Then instead of moving away from it, move closer. With what you have to offer, you could be a positive influence. Help me to make the Network everything it should be."

"That's not going to work, Anna. We both know that I chafe under restriction. I'm self-aware enough to know that I'm more trouble than I'm worth in an organisation. As soon as the group's ideals and mine come into conflict, we both know what I'll do. Call it independence or arrogance, but I work better from the outside."

"It's arrogance," Farrah said.

“Whose side are you on?” Jason asked her.

“Justice.”

Jason chuckled and stepped towards Anna, only for her silver-rank bodyguard, Nigel, to move into his way.

“If I wanted her dead, Nigel,” Jason said, “You wouldn’t see it coming, let alone have a chance to stop me.”

“It’s fine, Nigel,” Anna said and he begrudgingly let Jason past. Jason held out his hand and Anna shook it.

“I hope that we can work together again, someday, Anna. You’ll soon be learning why it can’t be today, though.”

“If you really do need to save the world, you can’t do it alone.”

“He’s not alone,” Farrah said.

“I suppose not,” Anna said. “But I know you feel isolated right now, Asano, and perhaps inclined to lash out. Just give your actions some consideration before you do anything drastic...”

She looked around at the people filming them with their phones.

“...like having a conversation like this in front of people who are probably live-streaming it. But I guess that was the point of having it here, wasn’t it?”

“If you play by your opponent’s rules, Anna, they get to decide who wins.”

“The idea is for all of us to win, Jason. There doesn’t have to be sides. I know you like playing chaos bringer but that will lash back on you to. And the people around you.”

Jason nodded.

“A lesson I never seem to learn properly,” he acknowledged. “I’m not your enemy, Anna. But if your organisation comes for me, it will be, and this is not the time for half-measures.”

Anna frowned.

“I hope things go well for both of us,” she said.

“So do I.”

“Why are you so certain the network will be at odds with you?”

“Dawn briefed you on the events about to take place. There’s no preventing them, only managing them, at least until I put a stop to them for good. What she didn’t tell you is that each event will contain a treasure that offers a path forward to those bottlenecked at the upper reaches of power. We’ve started calling them reality cores.”

“You’re saying that there’s a way beyond category three?”

“I’m sure you understand the ramifications,” Jason said. “The Network will be fighting the Cabal, the EOA and each other over the reality cores but they also won’t want me to turn off the spigot. Saving the world will stop it from getting fresh wounds for them to dig through for power.”

Anna looked around at the people filming them again.

“Jason, do you have any idea what you’ve done by releasing this information? Even if you’re lying, you’ve done incredible damage.”

“The Network, the Cabal and the EOA are about to start strip mining this planet for the things holding it together, even as forces threaten to tear it apart. I intend to do damage.”

“It’s time for me to leave,” Anna said. “After this conversation, I have to go get demoted.”

“I hope that isn’t true,” Jason said. “We need people like you.”

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Jason had called a family meeting in the sitting room of the main residence, with Erika, her husband, Ian, Emi, Jason and Erika’s father, Ken, their uncle, Hiro and grandmother, Yumi. They were all sat in armchairs and on couches while Jason and Farrah stood before them.

“I have something to tell you about how you’re going to spend the next few months,” Jason said, “and I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

“You’re going to stash us away somewhere,” Yumi said.

“Yes,” Jason said.

“What if we say no?” Erika asked.

“Then things will be awkward when I do it anyway.”

“Why?” Ken asked.

“Because I have something that people will want me to give them. Once they realise I can’t, they’ll want me to use it for them. If they take hostages to try and make me, I have to be able to say no. If you all are the hostages, I don’t trust that I can.”

“We built Asano Village to keep us safe,” Hiro said.

“And when the Network was at our backs, that was enough,” Farrah said. “Now that they’re at our gates, it isn’t.”

“Where is this deep, dark hole you want to throw us in?” Erika asked.

“The safest place I have access to. You can spend the time preparing for what comes after, if you still intend to travel with us to the other world. Emi can prepare for her chosen essences, since the ones I picked out were apparently not good enough.”

“Uncle Jason, you only picked those out to keep me safe,” Emi said.

“Good,” Erika said. “Emi, you’re taking those.”

Ian placed a hand on his wife’s shoulder.

“Eri, we need to let her be what she wants to be, not what we want her to be.”

“You’ll have plenty of time for discussion on that topic,” Jason said. “Emi won’t be ready for essences for about another year. As for you, Ian, I suggest you get ready to introduce some medical knowledge to a population that relies largely on magic and faith.”

“I don’t think that matters,” Ian said. “Working with essence users, I’ve learned that their bodies defy my medical understanding.”

“Do you remember my friend Jory, from my recordings of the other world?” Jason asked. “He is all about helping regular people, who do fall under your expertise. I think you’ll be the most exciting person he’s ever met in his life.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. Just before I last saw him, the church of the Healer gave him a mandate and funding to spread his methods around the world. You’re going to be a busy man. What all of you need to do is start learning some languages. Fortunately, you’re all essence users, except for Emi, who’s already been learning for months. I’m not sure I ever explained what a spirit attribute is, but you have one and it will positively affect your memory. You’ve probably already noticed.”

“So that’s it?” Erika asked. “You’re locking us away and we don’t get a say in it?”

“Yep.”

“And what if something happens to you?” she asked.

“Actually I’m pretty safe,” Jason said. “Word will soon be getting around about the magic door I have inside me. Not only will people want me alive to use it, but they will, eventually, want me to save the world with it. They’ll just want me to hold off until they’ve harvested as many reality cores as they can.”

“So, they’ll lock you up in a deep, dark hole, too,” Erika said.

“Probably, yeah. That’s why I need you safe.”

“What about Mum? Kaito?”

“They’ll be safe here,” Jason said. “It won’t be long before anyone who would go after my family realises that the people I would potentially compromise myself over aren’t here anymore.”

“And until they figure that out?”

“We’ll be operating a team out of the village in the short term,” Farrah said. “By the time we move on, anyone who would try will have investigated enough to know.”

“And what if they decide to try anyway?”

“Then things will get ugly,” Jason said.

“Why can’t you take everyone?” Emi asked. “You’re putting us in the cloud palace, right? Won’t there be room?”

“I’m not putting you in the cloud palace,” Jason said. “I considered it. Taking the whole family and stashing you at the bottom of the sea. But if the whole family vanishes, people are going to wonder why and go looking. If they find you while I’m on the other side of the planet, I can’t protect you.”

“Where do you want to put us, then?” Erika asked.

“There’s another reason I chose all of you and not any of the others,” Jason said. “All of you have been able to enter my spirit vault.”

## Chapter 383

### A Chance to Control the Narrative

Amy and Kaito had taken over the main residence of Asano Village when Erika's family was stashed away, cementing Amy's position as de facto mayor. Jason had claimed the bushland house previously occupied by his grandmother, where he delved into the study of astral magic. He wanted to be closer than where he had kept the cloud house underwater, so he could respond to threats rapidly without using his portal. He missed the cloud bed but had hung a hammock as a makeshift replacement

Jason put one of his many theory texts back into his inventory with the others. It was an evolving collection, starting with what Knowledge gave him and then adding in notes first from Clive and then Dawn. After studying for most of the day, he was mentally exhausted enough that he felt low on mana. A glance at the mana bar at the periphery of his vision told him otherwise. He contemplated the interface elements that were so familiar now that he would only really notice their absence.

The mana bar, the stamina bar and the little human shape that indicated his bodily health. He had come so far from when those elements had first appeared. Jason was still human-shaped, just like the health indicator, but he was so far from human anymore.

Dawn walked in and saw that he wasn't reading. She had also been staying in the house, to the slight chagrin of Asya. Asya had left her position with the Network but Jason did not want her living with him. Not only was it far too early in the relationship but Jason didn't want the distraction. He considered himself a disciplined man, but given the choice between dry magical theory and the soft lips of a beautiful woman, he knew he wasn't that disciplined.

"Need a break?" Dawn asked.

"Yeah," he said.

"Your ability to concentrate at your rank is much improved over baseline but even if you don't really have a brain anymore, keeping the mind fresh is important for learning. Taking regular breaks is sensible."

Jason nodded wearily and stumbled out on to the balcony to take in the scent of the bush. Dawn had been living with him for weeks, forcibly dragging his understanding of astral magic upward. Before they could use the magic door to start modifying nodes, they had to find the right nodes by conducting astral magic rituals in proto-spaces, where the dimensional walls were stretched thin.

Sending Dawn's avatar through proto-space apertures would be a questionable proposition so Jason would be required to carry out the necessary rituals. Farrah would obviously assist, being the superior ritualist, but astral magic was Jason's field, not hers, and his understanding of it had surpassed her basic knowledge.

Jason appreciated the education, knowing exactly how valuable Dawn's tutelage was. Jason chuckled to himself in anticipation of telling Clive about it. That did not make it any easier to slog through text after text as his understanding of astral magic grew.

It had been weeks since Jason has entered a proto-space to fight a monster while he awaited Farrah devising their own means of monitoring the grid. She knew the system the Network used well enough to replicate it easily, having used her own time on earth to explore magitech. The delay came from the need for additional functionality, over and above the Network's base system.

The most important additional feature was the ability to differentiate proto-spaces, not just by rank but by certain requirements determined by Dawn. Only some spaces would help them find the reality nodes Jason needed to modify using the magic door.

Another source of delay, but one both Jason and Dawn approved of, was an idea Farrah came up with while working on the grid detection system. The original plan was to turn the former Network liaison office in the village into a tracking station, until Farrah struck on the idea of incorporating the system into the cloud flask. Once she had a viable design, they needed to find the right components and feed them into the cloud flask. The incredibly sophisticated item would then be able to reproduce the functionality.

Jason was uncertain of the idea at first, but Farrah told him about the many times that Emir had done similar things with his own cloud flask, giving Jason a sense of assurance. If his cloud constructs were able to track events on the grid, they would have the flexibility to operate from the road.

While Jason and Farrah were engaged in their various tasks, a combat team was being put together. Asya, Jason's old friend Greg and Kaito had all worked together while working for the Network, and now they had left, formed the core of the new team. To their number was added Itsuki and Taika, leaving them with a lot of versatile attack options but lacking defensive and healing specialists.

The healing was resolved with an arrival from Japan. In the wake of Jason's visit, Shiro and his mother had entered a leadership battle for control of the clan and Shiro was concerned for the safety of his daughters, despite their silver-rank strength. He had contacted Jason, asking him to once again take in his daughter Akari, this time

accompanied by her sister, Mei. Not only were the sisters both silver-rank, but Mei was a healer.

Jason had warned Shiro, in no uncertain terms, that placing his daughters in Jason's company could be placing them in even greater danger. Shiro requested that Jason accept them anyway, sparking suspicion that Shiro was attempting to plant spies in Jason's camp. After the two women arrived, Jason rudely and forcibly scrutinised their auras as he questioned them, only after which was he finally satisfied they were not spies for their grandmother.

The arrival of Akari made the depth of Itsuki's crush on her painfully apparent, but Jason noted that for all of Akari's eye-rolling, he frequently spotted the pair together. Jason discussed the inclusion of Itsuki, Akari and Mei at length, both with the people themselves and their fathers, who had placed them all in his care. All three had lost their mothers young and were subsequently raised by stern, warrior men.

To Jason's surprise, both Shiro and Koya strongly advocated their children's inclusion in Jason's team. This was the point where Jason discovered that Network families shared the trait with adventurer families of pushing their little birds out of the nest.

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Itsuki was becoming antsy as days and weeks passed without his entering a proto-space. He was used to plunging into one after the other, which is how he had reached bronze-rank at an almost unheard-of pace. For this reason, Jason had Itsuki work extensively on meditation, consolidating the powers he had rushed to rank up.

"Something is troubling you," Jason said to Itsuki one day as they sat on the balcony of Jason's house. He had invited Itsuki to his house to discuss affliction specialist tactics but decided to ask the young man about the strain of uncertainty in his aura.

"It's more than just Akari being here or it being so long since you did any monster hunting," Jason clarified, and Itsuki nodded.

"It's something my father said before I left Japan."

"Oh?"

"He said that I should be careful of you."

"Sound advice," Jason said with a chuckle.

"I told him that you obviously work hard to be a good person."

"Thank you for noticing," Jason said. "I have my slip-ups but I do make a conscious effort."

"He told me that a good person doesn't have to try to be good."

“I see,” Jason said with a frown. “I’ll have to respectfully disagree with your father on that; what you just described tells me a lot about your father’s life. He was born into money and influence. When everything comes easy, it’s easy to be good. It costs you nothing, or so little as not to matter. I learned this for myself in the other world.”

Jason gave Itsuki a smile tinged with sadness.

“I would probably have said something similar, a few years ago. It was only when things got hard and I was truly put to the test that I discovered how fragile what I thought of as my bedrock principles really were. It was profoundly disappointing. Do you know what the opposite of good is, Itsuki?”

“Evil would be the obvious answer, but that’s not the answer you’re looking for.”

“You’re right. The opposite of good is easy. That may have been the moral of the last Harry Potter book, now that I think about it. Anyway, people don’t do bad things because there is some antagonistic force driving them to sin. They do them because when the right thing is hard, making little compromises doesn’t seem so bad. A shortcut here, a little selfishness when no one will ever know. Every step makes the next one a little easier.”

“That happened to you?”

“Yes, which is why I try hard to be diligent, now. I’ve learned enough about myself to know that I’m better off avoiding slippery slopes. I have arrogance and pride enough I could slide very low. I don’t want to speak poorly of your father, but claiming that there is some inherently good person out there who never has trouble making the right choice is naïve. But don’t take my word for it either. If you want to do things that are truly important, you’ll learn for yourself when the time comes and you have to make the hard choices.”

Itsuki looked conflicted.

“I’m not sure I feel better.”

“Good,” Jason said. “Be wary of anyone who is completely certain of the right path. I have been, from time to time, which has done some damage along the way.”

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Erika, her family and the others remained sequestered away in Jason’s spirit vault. Jason wanted to give the impression to the world that they had been stashed in some quiet corner of the earth, rather than being carried with him, and he did not doubt that amongst the residents of Asano Village were people acting as eyes for external powers.

Jason and Farrah regularly visited them in the spirit vault, both to help with the sense of isolation and to bring supplies. Jason’s silver-rank soul garden, inside his spirit vault, was larger and more elaborate than previous iterations. He had even found that he could manipulate it to a degree, adding living quarters to the multi-level central pavilion.

Jason's spirit vault could only be entered by those who trusted him completely. Erika and Emi had been able to enter from the beginning, as had Jason's father, Ken. Ken's brother Hiro turned out to be able to as well, having come to trust Jason, who had taken him from his old life and help restore him to the bosom of his family. Jason had hidden his secret delight when his grandmother, Yumi, had been able to enter.

Only three people not amongst Jason's blood relatives had managed to make their way into the spirit vault. Farrah was one and Asya was another, having finally made her way inside as her relationship with Jason deepened. The third person was Ian, Erika's husband. Farrah had been surprised at how easily Ian had entered the vault and asked him about it.

"I've known Jason since he was twelve years old," Ian had told her. "I've seen him at his highest and his lowest points. At the end of the day, what matters is that I know he would do anything for my little girl. We're here right now because Jason doesn't trust himself to choose the entire world over my wife and daughter. What matters next to that?"

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Even Dawn was uncertain as to exactly what form the next magical events would take. All she knew was that the underlying patterns on which the world was built, taken from other, older realities, would start to make themselves known. As weeks passed since the last monster waves were suppressed, some started to believe that the promised events would not come to pass.

That hope was first dashed in the historic Russian city of Kostroma. In a single moment, late in the morning, the entire city was sealed off in a dome. Investigation over the subsequent hours revealed that the dome was actually a sphere completely encapsulating the city. Forty-three hours after the sphere moved into place, it vanished revealing an interior vastly changed. Buildings had been remade, similar to their original forms but with new architectural styles and entirely new materials, rendering them alien in nature.

Like the Network, Cabal and EOA, Jason, Farrah and Dawn had travelled to Kostroma to investigate while the sphere was in place, keeping themselves low-profile. When the sphere dropped, they made their way inside.

"I've seen this kind of construction before," Farrah said as they rode into the affected area on black motorcycles, using Jason's party interface to communicate. "Not the architecture, but magical construction methods were used to create these buildings."

"They don't look new," Jason observed. "There's weathering. Years of it."

"That would appear to be the nature of the events," Dawn said. "They remake the affected area in the image of worlds used as patterns when the original Builder created this universe."

"What about the people?" Jason asked.

It didn't take long to find out, for them or the other people streaming into the city. Russian authorities had sealed off the area around the sphere but had chosen not to obstruct any of the magical factions. As for Jason and his companions, they had no trouble circumventing the restrictions. What they found as they immediately encountered people was that the residents were no longer human. People were getting up from where they had apparently fallen unconscious, out on the street or in their cars. It had apparently happened quickly enough to cause traffic accidents.

"Is that a leonid?" Jason asked, looking at a huge, hairy, lion-like woman.

As they saw more and more people, Jason realised they had been transformed from human to entirely different humanoid species. They spotted elves and the dark-skinned runic people, with their tattoo-like rune markings that faintly glowed. They saw most of the species from Farrah's world and more besides, although most of the people had turned into leonids. As the recovering residents realised what had happened to them, they started to panic.

"I had been uncertain as to what would happen to the people," Dawn said. "I had feared they would die if caught up in the changes. This is drastic but better than death."

"Is there any way to undo this?" Jason asked. "Maybe with the magic door?"

"I'm sorry," Dawn said. "You could no more undo this than unscramble an egg."

"Then it's time to go," Jason said. "If we run into anyone from the magic factions it will just cause problems. If we can't help these people, we can at least avoid making it worse."

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Flying back toward Australia, Jason rubbed his forehead as he sat, his expression dark.

"This is a disaster," he said. "I can't even begin to parse the ramifications. We already treat other ethnicities so poorly and now this? It's going to be a horror show."

"They were all essence-capable species, like humans," Dawn said. "None have high levels of inherent magic. I suspect any magical entities in the city were unaffected, be they essence-users, Cabal or modified EOA members. They were likely rendered unconscious with the rest, though."

"I recognised some of those races from my world," Farrah said. "Not all of them, though."

“It looked like the pattern expressed by the event was taken from a leonid-dominant area,” Dawn said.

“What about animals?” Jason asked. “I didn’t spot any but there has to have been cats and dogs and birds. How many rats are in a city?”

“It is likely that some, if not all of the animals were also affected,” Dawn said. “They will be unlikely to pose a threat, however. They will likely be transmogrified into creatures of similar ecological niche and magical power.”

“I even saw draconians,” Farrah said. “They’re pretty rare on my world. I didn’t see any celestines, though.”

“Probably due to the unusual origin of the celestine species,” Dawn said.

“Unusual origin?” Jason asked. “I’ve never heard of that.”

“Me either,” Farrah said.

“A little ironic, given that should the two of you were to breed, a celestine would be the result. An outworlder breeding with another species will produce offspring of that species. Should two outworlders have a child, the result is a celestine. Of course, celestines can have more children with their own kind, which is how celestines propagate. I, myself am a product of two outworlder parents.”

“It’s kind of a shame people aren’t turning into celestines,” Jason said. “If everyone was turning into elves and celestines, there’d be a lot less trouble. Not none, but people would be less prejudicial to a bunch of attractive people.”

“It will make an interesting change to the magical landscape if they start getting essences,” Farrah said. “Other races mean other abilities.”

Jason lifted his head, wide-eyed.

“Shade,” he said, “Can you please make a video call to Anna Tilden?”

Moments later, Jason was looking at Anna’s face on a wall monitor.

“I didn’t expect to hear from you anytime soon, Mr Asano.”

“I know you’re a long way from Russia, Anna,” Jason said, “but I assume you’re being kept in the loop.”

“People turning into some kind of monsters,” Anna said. “Information is sporadic, this early. Are you there?”

“We were. They aren’t turning into monsters, Anna. They’re turning into other species. Species that can use essences to awaken powers; usually different from those that humans do.”

Anna sat up straight behind her desk.

"I thought that might get your attention," Jason said. "Those people will be incredibly valuable to the Network."

"Why would you tell me this?"

"So you have a chance to control the narrative. If the Network sees their value, those people are less likely to be rounded up into camps. If the Network gives enough of them power, it'll be harder to persecute the rest."

"I don't have the influence to make that kind of thing happen."

"But you have the voice to make yourself heard. If it works out, maybe that influence will come."

Anna nodded.

"I can try. Thank you, Asano."

## Chapter 384

### You Shouldn't Lie to Your Wife

With the monster waves gone, recovery efforts were underway. The death toll continued to grow as the full depth of the monster wave catastrophe was assessed, blowing past early estimates to cross the two million mark as abandoned rural areas were once more made accessible.

Stalled distribution lines for food and other necessities were opening up again, complicated by a global economy more ravaged than the global populace. Calls for unprecedented social welfare programs were being enacted immediately in some areas and determinedly opposed in others. In the United States, such proposals were the latest battle line in a growing culture war, with claims of socialist takeovers driving massive protests against proposed aid programs.

There was no shortage of people calling for such programs to be enacted, though, leading to open clashes between protesters. While the cities had been relatively safe, they had all suffered some level of overcrowding and food shortage.

In the midst of recovering from an unprecedented global disaster came the events in Kostroma, with more locations following after. Although the magical factions between them did a solid job of controlling the media, once footage started spilling onto the internet, the media companies started jumping in with both feet, airing constant footage of people and places transformed.

In the weeks following Kostroma, none of the handful of subsequently affected sites around the world were as large. A small town in the United States; an almost uninhabited stretch of land in Africa. A section of Alaska that was uninhabited except for wildlife. These places were much easier to contain, the magical factions doing a much better job of keeping the media out and their response hidden.

There was no warning of a transformation event and no escape once the sphere locked in. Once people realised that there was no way to protect themselves from the transformation, new waves of unrest began. Reactions to the transformed, as they quickly became known, varied widely, from the accepting to the violent. A staging site outside of Kostroma processing the affected residents was attacked by a violent mob, with the Russian government denying involvement, despite a failure to crack down on the activity.

In the midst of this came the first footage of the magical factions in open conflict. As Dawn had predicted, a single reality core appeared in each of the affected zones and the factions immediately scrambled after it.

Part of this was Jason's doing. His conversation with Anna, as predicted, had proliferated wildly. What was a closely-held secret about the spoils of the transformation events became open knowledge to every EOA cell, Network branch and Cabal group. With category four power on the table and the competition fierce, all pretence was dropped in pursuit of the reality cores.

Reality cores were roughly the size and shape of an ostrich egg, glowing with transcendent light. The Cabal claimed the ones in Kostroma and Africa, the Network the one in the USA.

As fifth, sixth and seventh locations became affected, it was harder to keep track of who was claiming what from the outside. Despite Jason and his companions never participating, Jason and Asya followed events closely. Itsuki, arriving at Jason's house in the village, found them watching yet another news report.

"If we aren't getting involved," Itsuki asked them, "then why is all this so important?"

"It's about the balance of power," Asya explained. "One faction gaining too much strength could easily lead it either dominating or being allied against by the others. Skirmishes over specific objectives could deteriorate into outright magical war."

The second major population centre to be affected was Pudong, China. It was transformed into a crystal city filled with people who mostly turned into an earth-affinity species with gemstone-like scales covering their bodies. Neither Jason nor Farrah had seen the species before, although Dawn was familiar with them. Much larger than Kostroma, millions of people were affected in Pudong and international groups were already voicing concerns about the Chinese response.

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While the Network leadership caught up in competing for reality cores, the rank and file were refocused on their long-held duty of intercepting dimensional incursions before they became monster waves. This duty, however, came with some unexpected changes.

Rebooting the dimensional detection grid had apparently activated previously unknown elements, namely, grid coverage of the oceans. As if the systems had been there, waiting and dormant all along, suddenly underwater dimensional incursions were detectable.

Given the surface area of the Earth, the Network had always estimated that two-thirds of dimensional incursions went unchecked, with monster waves appearing in the unseen depths. When the monsters had been category two, living and dying in the ocean depths, the Network had only ever dealt with the occasional category three that lasted much longer and sometimes became a threat to shipping. Now that category three monsters were

emerging more frequently as category four incursions increasingly took place, the network was forced to respond.

In the short term, monster surges were often being allowed to take place. This was not a change from before the underwater grid activated and getting the resources to fight category-four monsters underwater was tricky. When it wasn't possible, the monsters were allowed to emerge so the low magic would choke the category fours and the rest could be cleaned up by difficult but manageable operations.

Stockpiled essences that offered any help were broken out and assigned to new trainees in a recruitment storm made possible by the network's now public operations. Water essences had always been useful and were in short supply but there was a large stock of aquatic essences that were previously unvalued. More promising recruits were given more desirable essences like shark, turtle and octopus, while less appealing ones like coral and manatee went to those filling out the numbers in a crisis.

New recruits could only help down the line, though, even being rushed through accelerated training programs. The Network needed new infrastructure, logistics and protocols, but most of all, more warm bodies to cover what was suddenly a tripled number of incidents. Part of this was supplied by Network personnel ousted from countries like Iran and Venezuela.

Thus far, the EOA had managed to keep up with the challenge, now that they had claimed the Network's role in those regions, although how long that would last was an open question. Surprisingly, they were much more prepared than the Network for underwater operations, as if somehow they had known what was coming beforehand.

The open nature of the magical threat and the fresh memory of the monster waves also made it much easier for nations to fund and mobilise support, be it for the Network, the EOA or the Cabal, who were still working with the Network in many areas. In Africa, especially, the Network and the Cabal were in defiance of the conflict between their organisations as they continued to work together in relative harmony. Only the appearance of reality cores brought about any discord, although, for the moment, the cooperation was holding.

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Although it required more tweaking than Farrah had wanted, she finally completed a design for a grid detection system that Jason's cloud constructs were able to replicate. Jason decided that was a good time to leave Asano Village behind, protecting it by having no high-value targets present.

He considered taking his mother, concerned someone might see her as a potential hostage, but anyone who went to the trouble would certainly know beforehand of their estrangement. There were definitely spies amongst the residents, including Kaito and Amy. Both had been approached to spy on Jason by people who understood their fraught history. Both had the presence of mind to accept the generous offers, while immediately telling Jason so he could feed disinformation.

Kaito was coming with Jason as part of his support team, while Amy was remaining behind to administer the village and watch over their children. They said their goodbyes to one another away from Jason, although they knew that his senses picked up everything in the village.

“It’s creepy knowing that he’s kind of watching us right now,” Amy said to her husband as they embraced outside their eldest daughter’s bedroom. “He told me that he wasn’t the person I knew anymore and he was right. He’s almost alien.”

“He can only sense our auras, and only if he’s paying attention,” Kaito assured her.

“So he says,” Amy countered. “The truth is that we don’t know what he’s capable of. You and I both have magic, now, but can you do anything like the things he does? He turned into a bird made of outer space. He used those butterflies to wipe out whole sections of a city. Yes, they were those awful undead things, but what if they weren’t? What if he starts doing that to regular people?”

“People have had power like that long before Jason came along. The whole Cold War was a bunch of people playing chicken with nuclear annihilation.”

“But it’s Jason, Kai. I still know him well enough to realise how wrong it could go. He’s rash and impulsive. He gets caught up in ideas and stops looking at the consequences, without generals or launch codes or anything else to stop him.”

“We have to trust him, Ames.”

“Do we?”

“I’ve learned enough about all this to know that yes, we do.”

“There was a time I relied on him more than anyone,” Amy said. “I don’t think I can go back to that.”

“Let me do that. You just concentrate on looking after the people here.”

“You just make sure you come back to me. You have two little princesses that will be waiting for you.”

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In the city of Bregenz, Austria, a Network team had sealed off the road running up past Sacred Heart Church, along with the church itself and the surrounding area. The

Commander of Tactical Operations was named Franz, who watched as the ritualist team worked on opening the aperture that had appeared. The tactical teams were ready to move in; one nine-person section of category threes and two sections of category-twos, each led by a category three. There was also a military contingent, armed with magical firearms.

Franz was glad not to have been assigned to the response teams put together for the transformation events. Working for the Network gave him a sense of purpose and he was much more interested in protecting people by fighting monsters than chasing after power by fighting people. Despite having plateaued at category three, he had no ambitions to rise higher.

Few people could even dream of the lifespan and power that Franz already enjoyed. Since magic had come out in the open and his status was no longer a secret, even his mother-in-law had stopped telling his wife she could do better.

Franz knew that many of the Network's tactical members were annoyed at being left out of the hot new action, but he knew them to be fools. It wasn't like participating meant anyone involved would get a taste of whatever power the higher-ups deigned to let trickle down. More likely was that even if one of the events did take place in Austria, what waited for them was death.

It wasn't monsters they would be facing at they fought over reality cores. The so-called superheroes of the EOA weren't a grave threat but he had heard strange stories about the Cabal. Even worse, he'd heard about Network branches fighting one another, although any talk like that was quickly hushed up.

Franz was leading a team about to enter a dimensional incursion space, work he was more than happy to get back to after being sent to a series of little mountain towns littered with dead. One of his people pointed up and Franz used the telescopic vision of his perception power to spot a helicopter, high in the air. It rapidly descended but made oddly little noise. Franz's magical senses told him it was a category two conjured object.

The helicopter was large but sleek, with tinted glass making up a large portion of the fuselage. It dropped down to hover above the street, where more than two dozen guns were pointed at it. A side door opened, revealing a figure they all recognised.

With his blood-red robes and dark cloak, Jason Asano was a red lightsaber away from being the next disappointing Star Wars villain. He dropped lightly from the helicopter and walked over to Franz, somehow knowing that he was in charge.

Franz looked at the bright silver eyes in the otherwise impenetrable darkness of the hood. Jason then pushed the hood back off his head to reveal a face with sleek black hair

and the too-polished handsomeness of a category three. The man gave him a friendly smile.

"Hello, Franz. Can I call you Franz? I know there are standing orders not to let me into any dimensional spaces, but you know that's just the Network wanting me to haul off on one of their teams so I look bad in the press."

"You don't know what I think," Franz said.

"I don't? It's what you told Maria. You shouldn't lie to your wife, Franz."

"Are you threatening my family?"

"No, Franz. I just want you to know that I came here knowing exactly what I was walking into. If I have to go through someone, it'll be you, straight up."

"I appreciate that."

Franz looked at the others leaving the helicopter.

"You have four category threes, including yourself," Franz said. "I have twelve, including me. Are you confident with three-to-one odds, Mr Asano?"

"Actually, it'll just be me, so twelve-to-one odds. Also, yes. And call me Jason."

Franz looked at Jason, whose expression and body language was completely relaxed, except for the silver eyes locked onto Franz like sharp, pointed icicles. Franz relied on his aura senses to guide him in uncertain situations but he couldn't sense Jason at all. He couldn't read the other category threes behind Asano either, the one he guessed was Farrah Hurin was even using her aura to prevent him from reading the category twos. It was a skilful demonstration of aura control.

With Asano, who wasn't just hard to detect but a ghost to his magical senses, invisible to all but his eyes.

"Mr Asano, how do you see this going if I tell you no?"

"Franz, I'm asserting right now that I'm going to go through that aperture and that you can't stop me. Either you assume that I'm right and let me through, or don't and you'll find out for certain."

Franz looked into Jason's unflinching eyes again and slowly nodded.

"Alright, let them through," he announced.

"Boss, the standing orders are—"

"I know what the standing orders are. If this guy wants to clear some of the monsters for us, I'm going to let him. You don't like that, Baumgartner, feel free to try and stop him."

The hood crawled back over Jason's head on its own and Jason slowly turned to look at Baumgartner, his silver eyes seeming disembodied in the darkness of the hood. Baumgartner looked back nervously, frozen on the spot.

“I’d say that’s a no,” Franz said. “Any chance you could leave a guy some loot in there?”

“I think I can manage that,” Jason said. “You made a wise choice, Franz.”

Shade’s bodies emerged from the shadows of every one of Franz’s silver-rankers, including Franz himself. As Jason strode toward the aperture, the bodies returned to his own shadow in a swarm.

## Chapter 385

### The Decision Has Been Made

At Jason's request, Kaito didn't conjure a new helicopter on entering the proto-space. Farrah carried a device that she and Jason had built together to find the optimal spot within the proto-space for Jason to conduct his ritual and they would inevitably encounter monsters along the way. They viewed it as a chance to put the bronze-rankers on the team through their paces.

The extradimensional realm diverged heavily from the physical reality outside, the Austrian city replaced with a primordial jungle in which ancient ziggurats poked out of the canopy. The environment was sweltering with both heat and humidity.

"This air is hard to breathe," Kaito said. "It's heavy."

"My clothes are getting sticky," Itsuki said. "It may impair my mobility."

"You still sweat because you ranked up so quickly," Farrah told him. "You clearly focused strictly on advancing your essence abilities. You need to take the time for exercises that will help your body become more magical. I gave you the basics in training but you've clearly neglected them."

"Sorry Miss Hurin," Itsuki said, looking every inch the chastised schoolboy. The Asano sisters, Akari and Mei, watched him with amusement.

It was a silver-rank proto-space, so only the anchor monsters holding the space together and possibly a few others would be silver-rank. For this reason, Jason and the other silvers didn't engage, letting Kaito, Asya, Greg and Itsuki do the sweeping.

They each had their own motifs in their power sets, but Itsuki was the odd man out in more ways than one. The others heavily featured conjured tech in their power sets, which was common for Earth essence-users even without the technology essence. Itsuki's powers were more fantastical in nature. Added to the fact that the others had worked together before and were comfortable with one another, Itsuki literally and figuratively stood apart.

Of the four bronze-rankers, Kaito was the least comfortable due to operating outside of his helicopter. He was very much in the support vein but Jason and Farrah wanted him to experience less than ideal conditions. His vehicle essence powers were not useless without it, however, allowing him to conjure surveillance drones to scout for threats and gun drones to handle them.

Although she was a sniping specialist who favoured strong, singular long shots, Asya conjured a carbine rifle more suited to the closer confines of the jungle. It was a futuristic weapon with glowing blue bits, which Jason strongly approved of.

The person with the actual technology essence, Greg, was ironically the one calling up the most outmoded technology. He conjured an entire outfit from a version of the nineteenth century that only ever existed in pulp novels and old film serials. He had a long brown coat, vest and bowler hat with a pair of goggles slung around the brim. He had a backpack covered in loose flaps and the whole ensemble had enough pouches and pockets that it looked hard to walk in.

Greg also conjured a gun that looked like a replica from a fifties sci-fi movie but made of brass. Greg reached back to rummage through his backpack, pulling out a cable and plugging it onto the base of the strange gun's grip, causing it to hum with power.

Itsuki's powers were more classically magical. Although they shared the dark essence, Itsuki didn't have a cloak like Jason. Instead, he transformed himself into a semi-translucent figure, like a statue made of smoked glass. It made him much harder to sense, allowed him to blend into shadows and, as of bronze rank, made him semi-tangible. This reduced the effect of many attacks on him while also allowing him to go places he otherwise couldn't. So long as he moved slowly, he could pass right through barriers like cages or thorny bushes.

Itsuki was used to playing stealthy scout, much like Jason, which was a poor fit with the others. They already had Asya's enhanced perception from her master confluence and Kaito's drones, making Itsuki's potential contribution limited.

Itsuki had been startled and delighted to experience Jason's party interface, which had given him a whole new perspective on his own abilities. Shade had identified Itsuki's summoned familiar as a darklight ogre, which was a defensive combat familiar whose abilities compelled enemies to attack it while inflicting debuffs on any that did.

Using Magic Society records, Jason had identified the ability that summoned Itsuki's familiar and discovered that the familiar would gain new forms as Itsuki ranked up, eventually becoming something called an eclipse titan.

Once they started encountering monsters, Greg's gun was revealed to fire arcs of electricity that chained from one monster to the next. It did minimal damage but delivered a paralysing jolt, setting up monsters for follow-up attacks. A well-aimed burst of gunfire from Asya or a stream of heavy bullets from Kaito's gun drones finished the job, their smooth teamwork showing off their experience working together.

Jason and Farrah assessed the bronze-rankers as the team progressed towards the location for the ritual.

“Itsuki will have to work a little to find his path,” Jason assessed. “This isn’t a great team composition for him.”

“That’s good,” Farrah said. “His family has clearly been feeding him ideal scenarios to rank him up quickly. A little hardship will knock some unwanted sensibilities out of him.”

Itsuki slowly learned to adapt to his teammates, using stealth to approach monsters detected by the others and lay on afflictions. He was more of a team player than Jason, whose afflictions were damage-focused. Itsuki softened the enemies up with more debilitation effects than damage, luring enemies into kill boxes for the others before he vanished as the damage poured in.

Once the team reached the site for the ritual, they needed to clear the space for the largest magic diagram Jason had ever worked with. Kaito and Greg’s experience setting up landing zones came into play. Kaito used an ability from his soaring essence to launch himself into the air, at which point he conjured his helicopter around him. He then flipped it, the blades reconfiguring to maintain its hovering while upside down and descended the helicopter into the jungle canopy. As the rotor blades dropped into the trees, they worked as a giant saw, rapidly clearing the area. Kaito even moved the helicopter around, still upside down, to clear a wider area.

“I was once shot off the side of a mountain by a waterfall experiencing intermittent service failure,” Jason said, watching the upside-down helicopter-turned-power-saw. “I’ve come back from the dead, fought interdimensional dinosaurs and met my evil magic clone. Somehow, this is still the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever seen.”

“He’s very precise,” Akari’s sister Mei said. “You don’t see a lot of that in upside-down helicopters.”

Rather than dismiss his helicopter, Kaito cleared a secondary space in which to land it. While he was doing that, Greg swapped the cable running from his backpack to his gun for a hose, turning it into a flamethrower to clear the ground now littered in shredded trees, leaving behind nothing but charcoal and ash.

Kaito brought his helicopter back to blow away the burnt debris while Greg moved on to the second cleared space. In short order, the pair had cleared out two spaces, one for the ritual and one for the helicopter.

“You’ve got the logistics down,” Jason told Greg as Farrah used an earth-shaping power to flatten out the cleared ground, ready for the ritual.

"This is what we were doing while you were bludging, taking a gap year despite only having completed one semester of university a half-dozen years ago," Greg told him.

"That does sound pretty slack," Kaito agreed.

"I was helping earthquake victims and healing people with Ebola," Jason said. "And it was only half a year."

"That's what you told us you were doing," Greg said. "I bet you actually spent most of the time in a resort in Bermuda."

"What I told you? It was on the news."

"Because the EOA put it there," Farrah contributed, continuing to flatten out the ground. "There's no reason to suspect anything they're behind, right?"

The three Japanese members of the team, Akari, Mei and Itsuki looked on as the others continued to rib Jason.

"Are they always like this?" Mei asked her sister. "It seems very disrespectful."

"I believe it's an Australian cultural practice," Akari said. "You get used to it."

"Do you really?" Itsuki asked.

"Not really," Akari admitted. "They're all very strange."

"I thought Miss Hurin was from another universe, not Australia."

"She seems quite proficient at assimilating."

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Carrying out the ritual went smoothly. While Jason did so, with Farrah's assistance, the rest of the team patrolled a wide perimeter to keep any wandering monsters away. If the ambient magic was too badly stirred up, they would need to start over.

Greg's abilities were especially useful, as his power set focused on control and area denial. As such, he was given the largest area of ground to cover. Given time to set up, he conjured iron rods that ended in spheres, which he planted at regular intervals. They would make paralyzing electricity attacks, while automated turrets he emplaced behind them would follow up. Looking like gatling coil guns from the nineteenth century, they could rapidly shoot electrified nails.

When a large pack of iron-rank monsters appeared in his patrol area, Greg deployed a shaft from the top of his backpack. It sprouted helicopter blades, allowing him to swoop over the pack and strafe them with his flamethrower. Only a trio of the toughest monsters survived and Greg landed, at which point the rotor blades were flung from the shaft. Two of the monsters were killed while the third was outright decapitated.

After the ritual was complete, the team climbed into the helicopter and headed back for the aperture.

"A couple more rituals and we should be able to triangulate the first node I need to modify," Jason said. "As for how many nodes it will take in total, I have no idea. That means a lot of proto-spaces."

"Are people just going to let you us in, the way they did here?" Itsuki asked.

"No," Jason said. "We went to the extra effort here to make a point that we will be peaceful in our operations. Sooner or later, though, someone is going to take a hard stance."

"What happens then?" Itsuki asked.

"We hurt as few people as we can but we don't stop. The Network rank and file are just doing their jobs and don't seem interested in impeding us, at least until the people at the top start paying attention to anything but the transformation events."

"You think they'll eventually try and stop us?"

"Yes. Even if they don't realise it now, what we are doing will turn off the reality core spigot. If we're lucky, they won't twig until we're close to the end and the transformation events start slowing down. At that point, someone will definitely put it together. My concern is that someone clearly knew more about what's going on than is good for us. We may start meeting real opposition much earlier."

"And then we fight?" Itsuki asked.

"Not if we can avoid it," Jason said. "We can't fight the whole Network."

Itsuki nodded.

"That task force we met outside the aperture," he said. "Are you really strong enough to take on twelve category threes alone?"

"Of course not; it was all bluff. Well, mostly bluff. I mean, I'd have to cheat, certainly. Probably."

"It's a matter of training," Farrah interjected. "Those men were traditional essence users from this world. Their training is all about group tactics for monster elimination, not intelligent, singular enemies with a wide variety of powers. They aren't ready for someone who fights like Jason."

"Basically, they're specced for PvE, not PvP," Jason said. "Once Farrah and I return to her world, I won't be able to swagger around like that. I'm making hay while the sun shines."

"I imagine he'll swagger about anyway," Farrah said. "He's just going to get slapped down when he does."

\*\*\*

Things were tense when Jason and his companions returned to the aperture but they were allowed to depart unchallenged. Soon after, Kaito's helicopter landed next to a tour bus on an isolated stretch of road near the Czech border. Kaito dismissed the helicopter and they piled into the tour bus, which was a luxurious, twin-level cloud coach on the inside.

"Were there problems with the Network?" Dawn asked by way of greeting as they arrived.

"No," Jason said, falling into a soft cloud chair. "The extra legwork seems to have done the trick. This time."

"Now that we are in the right region," Dawn said, "you can ideally utilise Kaito to beat the local branches to new apertures. Did you take notes?"

"I did," Jason said.

"Good. Hopefully, the results of these rituals help us refine exactly which nodes we are looking for. Until we get more data, we can't even be certain we're after the right nodes."

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An attention-getting supercar drove through the town of Conrad, Montana, making its way to an oilseed refinery on the outskirts. It parked in front of the administration building and a man in a sharp suit named Emerson Cleary stepped out, bringing a briefcase from the passenger seat with him. He took a small box that barely fit from the vehicle's meagre trunk space and carried it inside, holding it by the handle on top.

The office was a cheap but functional prefab affair, with a middle-aged receptionist talking on the phone. Cleary sat the box on the desk and pressed his finger on the phone cradle, hanging up the call.

"Excuse me?" the receptionist asked indignantly as she gave him an unfriendly look up and down, before looking out the window at his car. "Who exactly do you think you are?"

"Where can I find Mr Tallman?" Cleary asked.

"I'd asked if you checked the shop where they sell manners, but clearly not," she said.

The office manager hurried in from the back, his body language obsequious.

"I'm sorry, Sir, I'll take you to the special projects building at once."

"I haven't logged him in as a visitor, yet," the receptionist said and the manager turned on her.

"I swear to God, Janet, if I find a single record of this man ever having been here you will be unemployed by the end of the day. You are not to so much as breathe a word of this to anyone."

"If you look in the parking lot, Darren," she said, "You'll see thirty or so dusty trucks and one shiny, red mid-life crisis. I think people might notice."

"Shut up, Janet! Can I take your briefcase or your box, Sir?"

"Reach for that box, Darren," Cleary said, "and you and Janet will both be dead before your hand gets there."

Darren went pale.

"This way, please, Sir. May I ask your name?"

"Probably best that you didn't, Darren."

None of the employees ever went into the special projects building, which was a small brick hut in a corner of the industrial lot with no signage. Darren hovered curiously as Cleary stood at the door until Cleary glared at him and he skittered away. Cleary went inside, where he stepped into the silent elevator and descended deep into the Earth.

When the elevator reached the bottom floor, Cleary walked down a corridor with lights that lit up at his approach and dimmed once more behind him. Eventually, he reached a circular room with several doors. One of them opened and a pasty-faced man appeared.

"Deputy Director Cleary," he greeted, although his eyes were locked on the box. "That's it?"

"This is it," Cleary confirmed.

"I would have thought they would send more security."

"They did," Cleary said. "You just haven't seen them."

"I see. This way, please."

The man opened a door and led Cleary through. After walking down another hallway they reached a second door, beyond which was a large room, mostly empty. There was a table and chair, but what drew the eye was a pair of large cylinders, situated in the middle of elaborate magical circles. The cylinders were filled with milky liquid and what appeared to be human forms could just be made out through the white murk.

"So this is them," Cleary said.

"Yes. I need written confirmation of the orders before we can move forward."

Cleary set the box and his briefcase on the table and opened the briefcase. He took out a folder and handed it to the other man, who started looking through it. As he did, Cleary opened the box, revealing an object the size of an ostrich egg, shining with transcendent light.

“Are we waking up both?” the pasty man asked.

“Just one, until we secure a larger supply.”

“Very well. When do we start?”

“Immediately,” Cleary said. “The decision has been made to bring Jason Asano’s project under our control.”

## Chapter 386

### First Priority

In Switzerland, the resort town of Interlaken and the lakeshore villages around Lake Brienz had been evacuated during the monster waves. Determined an insufficiently populous area to warrant its own safe zone, the locals had been sent to the closest established safe zone, in the city of Thun.

A month after the last monster wave, people were cleared to return to their homes. Buses started shipping residents back to their villages, where they would be left to assess the damages. There was a lot of destruction, as the evacuations had been done promptly but the scent of people had been left behind. Monsters denied their prey had taken their frustrations out on the buildings.

The act of god claim made by insurance companies was currently under attack from around the world, on multiple fronts. In the wake of the monster waves and now the transformation events, many countries were already ramrodding legislation to render the claim invalid, along with a barrage of lawsuits. No few of them were attacking the act of god claim on the grounds that with magic at large in the world, although such grounds were not considered to have a high chance of success.

For the immediacy, none of these events helped the people on the buses moving around Lake Brienz. In one of them, a passenger pointed out an isolated building by the lakeshore that seemed untouched.

“Was that large chalet there before?” she asked her husband.

“Of course it was,” he said. “You think someone came here and built a chalet with monsters running around everywhere?”

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Inside what looked like a chalet in the Swiss alps, Jason languidly stretched out in a cloud bed, Asya moulding herself to his body almost as well as the cloud-stuff the bed was made of.

“If I didn’t have to go fight evil,” he said contentedly, “I could stay like this for a long, long time.”

“Lazy,” Asya teased, kissing his neck. “Since we will, eventually, have to get out of this bed, there’s something I’d like to talk to you about. Something important.”

“Is it the hot chocolate?” Jason asked. “Shade promised to stop letting Colin help anymore. He means well but doesn’t understand that not everyone needs that much protein in their diet.”

“No,” she giggled, a tinkling water sound. “I’m talking about when you leave. For the other world.”

“Oh?”

“I know you’re taking your sister and her family by stashing them in your spirit vault. I want to go with you.”

“Ah,” he said. “Please tell me I’m not the reason you’re asking.”

“I like you quite a lot, Asano, but not enough to leave my family and everything I’ve ever known. I want to go to the other world because it’s another world. A whole new universe, full of magic and miracles. Literal miracles.”

“That’s true,” Jason said thoughtfully. “You can just hang around in the local worship square for a bit and some god will show up and do something flashy.”

“I want to see things that aren’t possible here. To do things that almost no one from our world has ever done.”

“I see,” Jason said with a grin. “Magic and wonders. That is a good reason.”

“So you’ll take me with you?”

Jason could feel her anxiousness in both her body and aura as she waited for his reply.

“I’ll tell you what I told Erika,” he said. “There’s still time until I go back. Think it over. Ask me any questions that come up. We can talk about it again when the time comes and as many times as you like before that.”

“Is that a provisional yes?”

“It’s provisional yes,” he confirmed with a chuckle. He felt her body move next to his as her tension melted away and he pressed his lips to hers.

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The Los Angeles Network branch’s plane was no small private jet but a full-sized plane the size of a passenger jet. Based off a corporate jet variant of a passenger liner, it was build to include magic from the frame out and could serve as a mobile command post for Network operations. Amenities included the shower facility from which Jack Gerling emerged, rubbing his bushy beard unhappily.

“That gunk doesn’t come out easily,” he growled like a bear. With his towering bulk and hirsute body, he didn’t just sound like a bear but also looked like one.

The other Network members on the plane looked at the brutish man with trepidation. Even disregarding magic, he looked like he had shambled out of the woods in search of food. Once magic was taken into account, it became even worse.

The US branches of the Network had been pooling resources for years, giving up enough monster cores to raise countless essence users to category three. Finally, they managed to get two people across the threshold of category four. Jack Gerling was one of those chosen, due to his rare and powerful essences.

His might essence was common but no one would complain at its inclusion. His potent essence was extremely rare and the vast essence was so unheard of that they had to go through records hundreds of years old to identify it. The result was the onslaught essence and Gerling's powers turned him into a walking bomb. Now that he was category four, he could down the plane he was on and everyone in it with no more effort than it took to snap his fingers. This fact was not lost on the Network staffers currently onboard.

One of the network staffers approached Gerling.

"Sir, Deputy Director Cleary has asked that you join him for a meal."

Gerling scowled.

"What kind of meal?"

"His exact words were 'an ass-load of fried chicken and hot sauce,' sir."

"Yeah? I like the sound of that."

\*\*\*

Greg stepped onto the upper-floor balcony of the chalet. His hands were wrapped around a mug of hot chocolate, warming them against the crisp morning air. His bronze-rank body could easily endure the cold but he still enjoyed the comfort of its warmth. He moved next to Jason, standing at the balcony to take in the view of the lake.

"See the village across the lake?" Jason asked. "It's empty."

"Evacuated?" Greg asked.

"Yeah. They're coming back, though, even as we speak."

"Maybe that means the world had turned a corner from the monster waves."

"I hope so," Jason agreed. "If we can shut down these transformation events, it really will have. I'm so tired of dark days, but at least we have the power to do something about it. Most people are stuck hoping that people like us will get it done."

"Not a good time to feel powerless."

"No," Jason said. "My first night, in the other world, my friend Rufus told me that I had a choice. I could let other people protect me or take the power to control my own fate."

"Meaning essences."

"Yes. There's a responsibility that comes with that, though. When the bad things happen, we have to stand between them and everyone else."

"I'm not sure everyone sees it that way."

“Rufus does,” Jason said. “He carries it around like a weight. I try to follow that example.”

“I know. Farrah says you shouldn’t.”

“Farrah doesn’t lead,” Jason said. “She’s smarter than anyone on her own team and she’s smarter than me but she doesn’t lead. I’m responsible for all of you and she’s smart enough to avoid carrying that. She might tell us to let go of that burden but she knows we won’t. She just wants us to not carry so much of it that we break.”

They stood in silence for a long time, looking out through the pristine air. Greg didn’t drink from his mug, letting it sit on the railing, nestled warmly between his hands.

“Was it on the news?” he asked Jason.

“Was what on the news?”

“That people are bussing back into the local villages.”

“I can feel them. Buses full people, working their way around the lake. Auras full of hope and trepidation. Uncertain of what they’ll find but yearning for home.”

Greg panned his gaze around the lake, not spotting any movement. If there were busloads of people out there, he couldn’t see them.

“You can sense them from here?”

“Yes.”

Greg looked at Jason, frowning.

“You’re worried about me,” Jason said, smiling as he continued to look out over the lake.

“Sometimes I wonder if you’re getting a little too far from human, Jason.”

“I’m not human.”

“I don’t mean human as a species,” Greg said. “I mean the experience of being a human.”

“Same answer. I’m not a human. If I keep looking at the world as if I were, I’m not sure I can do the things I need to. I hope Makassar is the worst thing I ever experience but I have to assume it won’t be. I need to be able to handle the next thing, and the thing after that.”

“So you just become detached from everything?”

“No,” Jason said, turning to his friend with a smile. “I just pick my attachments carefully. I’ve seen what I’ll become if I don’t have them. As time goes by, I’ve been missing my friends in the other world more and more. I’m starting to realise that monsters aren’t the only things we’re meant to protect each other from.”

Greg looked down into his steaming mug.

“Stopping you from turning into a spooky murder machine is a lot of responsibility,” he said.

“You should try needing to save the world.”

“Oh, please,” Greg scoffed. “A drama queen like you? You’re loving it.”

Jason let out an affronted laugh.

“Is that how it is?”

“You know it is,” Greg said with a grin then sipped at his hot chocolate, before spitting it over the balcony and peering into his mug.

“What is in this? Is that beef stock?”

“I apologise,” Shade said, emerging from Jason’s shadow. “It seems I had not excised all the cocoa that Colin supplemented after all. I shall fetch you a fresh cup.”

“Thank you,” Greg said, still making a face as Shade floated away with the cup. “Am I imagining things, or is Shade getting quite butlery?”

“He’s become fascinated by the profession,” Jason said. “He likes the quiet, dignified competence of duty. It hasn’t made trying to get him to be more relaxed any easier.”

“You always try and turn everyone into you,” Greg said. “Maybe instead of trying to pull everyone into your pace, you should appreciate them for what they have to offer the way they are. If Shade wants to be Alfred to your Batman, let him.”

“I wish I had a secret cave lair. Behind a waterfall.”

“We’re standing in your magical, shape-changing, chalet that turns into a hovercraft tour bus. There was also mention of turning it into a palace?”

“Haven’t tried that, yet. I’ve never actually needed a palace for anything.”

“No one has ever needed a palace, Jason. They just wanted a lot of golden sconces more than they wanted poor people to have food.”

“Still a dirty socialist, then?”

“Aren’t you?”

“I’m not sure how many princes and wealthy aristocrats you can make friends with before it becomes hypocritical. It’s not really a hovercraft, by the way.”

“What?”

“The tour bus from the cloud flask makes. It’s not really a hovercraft. Now that it’s silver-rank, it could actually fly if the magic here wasn’t so thin. It’ll have to wait until I go back to Farrah’s world.”

Jason felt a nervous tremulation in Greg’s aura. Jason waited for his friend to speak.

“So, ah, has Asya talked to you yet?” Greg asked.

“About going to the other world?”

“Yeah.”

“She has. Have you both been working up to ask me?”

“We figured one of us should soften you up by sleeping with you first,” Greg said. “I won’t lie: I’m glad she volunteered.”

Jason burst out laughing.

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“And he’s president?” Gerling asked as he tossed the bone from a drumstick into the large bin Cleary had made sure was on hand.

“Yes,” Cleary said, then bit into a chicken wing. Cleary had replaced his suit with a more casual shirt and pants before joining Gerling in a fried chicken dinner, although Gerling was consuming the bulk of the piled tray.

“The TV guy?” Gerling asked, grabbing another piece.

“Yes.”

“That’s our country you’re talking about?”

“Yes.”

“And he beat Bill Clinton? I bet Hillary would find it weird being back in the White House without being president. I thought they’d get divorced after she was impeached over the intern sex thing.”

“The nineties were a simpler time,” Cleary said.

“You’re alright, Cleary,” Gerling said as Cleary tossed his own chicken bone into the bin. “I appreciate you sitting down and eating with me. My last handler would have thrown me the chicken like I was a monster in a pit. Most people are scared of me.”

“Oh, I’m definitely scared of you,” Cleary said. “I won’t lie to you, Mr Gerling: my job is to make you as amenable as possible to the requests of my superiors. What that means is if you want something, my job is to get it for you, as close to the way you want it as is practically possible. I think keeping things friendly between you and I will make it a better experience for both of us, and if that means eating some delicious fried chicken, I’m willing to take that hit.”

“Good to hear,” Gerling said with a bellowing laugh. “The last guy was a little too much stick and not enough carrot.”

After years of working to get a pair of category four essence users, the US Network branches discovered an unhappy reality: without a supply of gold spirit coins, they would be power-starved, rapidly weaken and possibly die. The Network researchers managed to place both men in magical stasis, itself quite resource hungry, forestalling their demise.

The supply of gold spirit coins was exceptionally small, meaning the category fours could only be temporarily revived for critical missions where overwhelming force was required. It also meant that, despite their world-beating power, the category fours were beholden to whoever could provide the coins to keep them alive. Gerling's previous handler had enthusiastically waved that sword of Damocles, forgetting that it was a lot easier to replace a handler than a category four essence user.

"Things are different, now," Cleary said. "These new reality cores not only mean that we can keep you out of stasis but that we should be able to add more category fours to the roster."

"And you pulled me out to fight for them?"

"Yes. The Cabal is slowly-but-surely gaining an advantage in these transformation spaces. They seem to have some kind of connection to them, which our researchers suspect is related to the origins of the cabal's various factions."

"Bunch of creepy weirdos," Gerling said. "I don't mind kicking their asses back and forth a little."

"We aren't actually certain how effective the reality cores will be in enhancing their power," Cleary said. "We have people looking into it, obviously. We estimate that our essence users will get stronger using cores faster than they will. Reality core power can be directly consumed with a simple ritual, like a supercharged monster core gobstopper. If the Cabal can leverage them effectively, though, we may need to initiate large scale interdiction before they become too powerful."

"Large scale interdiction?"

"War, Mr Gerling."

"Well, damn; count me in. I'm the most powerful thing on this whole goddamn planet, so let me loose."

"That's far from our ideal scenario and, for now, we aren't even pitting you against the Cabal."

"That's not the first priority?" Gerling asked. "If they're sending me, that usually means it's the first priority."

"There is, potentially, an additional source for the reality cores. One that will produce them faster, more reliably and, best of all, exclusively. It might even be possible to shut down the transformation events and leave us with the sole means to reach the highest levels of power in the world."

"That sounds just dandy," Gerling said.

“Yes it does,” Cleary agreed. “We can stop pretending the International Committee has any purpose other than doing what we say, that the governments of the world work with us instead of for us and that the other magical factions have any reason to exist at all.”

“Well, damn,” Gerling said. “We’re looking to take over the damn planet?”

“We already have, Mr Gerling. The goal is to reach the point where we can stop pretending we haven’t.”

## Chapter 387

### Node Space

The Network team from the Potsdam branch reached the aperture on Babelsberg Park and found it already open. The residue of the ritual used to open it was on the ground and in front of it was a Japanese woman with a category three aura, meditating with her eyes closed.

As trucks and helicopters arrived she gave no reaction, remaining cross-legged on the grass until the Operations Commander approached her and she opened her eyes, dexterously rising to her feet by uncrossing her legs.

“Who are you?” the commander asked.

“Asano Akari.”

“Asano? As in...?”

“Yes. He asked me to stay here to prevent children from wandering in. I’m sure you can take care of that, now.”

She turned to enter the aperture but the commander called out to her.

“Miss Asano.”

She turned back.

“Our people are tracking you by the proto-spaces you’re visiting. There are a lot of Americans and International Committee people around, talking to our high-ups. I don’t know what they have planned, but tell him.”

“Why tell me this?” she asked.

“There are people that don’t like the way the Network has treated him. A lot of people. I was sent to Makassar, both times. I saw him going places no one else could go, saving people we had all written off. Days of it. Never stopping, never resting. He drives himself like a workhorse and then we turn on him? A lot of us think that isn’t right.”

Akari stared at the man and then gave a slight nod.

“I will relay your words to him. I know they will mean a lot.”

Akari moved to the aperture and stepped through.

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Cleary and Jack Gerling were in a hospitality suite at the Network’s Berlin branch.

“You’ve reviewed the briefing materials on what we know of Asano’s abilities?” Cleary asked.

“Such as they are,” Gerling said. “Too many holes, damn stealth types. He’s got a lot of escape options. You have no idea what that power where he turns into a bird is about?”

"We don't. We anticipate that you will be able to handle most of his methods through simple power disparity."

"His aura is really as strong as all that?"

"We estimate its strength to be somewhere in the range of what would normally be the zenith of category three. Added to his superior control, we strongly recommend against aura conflict. You should focus on areas in which your superiority is clear. Power, speed, strength. Direct confrontation. The two largest threats to that are if he escapes through ordinary evasion or his portal ability."

"You have countermeasures?" Gerling asked.

"We do, and we plan to catch him coming out of a dimensional space. We've been tracking his patterns. He's been going into a series of incursion spaces, using his team to keep monsters clear of his location while he conducts a large ritual in each."

"What's he doing?"

"We think he is trying to stop the transformation events."

"I want to see one," Gerling said. "People turning into elves and rock people and whatever. Can you get me an elf?"

"Yes," Cleary said. "Just one?"

Gerling laughed.

"One will do for now. Can't get too distracted on the job."

"I appreciate that. Asano's pattern is to enter multiple incursion spaces, perform his ritual and then move on. First Austria, then Switzerland and now Germany," Cleary said. "He's been responding quickly, entering spaces before our people get there, in most cases."

"Why don't our people stop him?"

"He and his companion, Farrah Hurin, have a lot of goodwill amongst the rank and file. They're role models to our younger people. Asano has used interviews to characterise himself as a symbol and credit our personnel as the true protectors of the planet. Given the way that the upper echelons of the Network have been pushing the lower over the last year, it inclines them to give Asano leeway."

"Meaning they won't stop him unless we ride them."

"There have been some who diligently attempted to stop him. After a series of brief altercations with Farrah Hurin, no one else made the attempt."

"Not Asano himself?"

“Asano claims that he is unable to stop his powers once they affect a person. It could be a lie and he doesn’t attack our people to maintain it. It could be genuinely true and he wants to avoid killing our people to maintain their goodwill.”

“I have trouble believing that one woman could beat a whole section of category threes.”

“I believe it was more that she made some quick examples and the rest were reluctant, given that she was just one of four category-threes in their group. The Japanese sisters are largely unknown but all our people have seen what Jason Asano does to the things he fights. The news played the footage of him killing that category four monster in Makassar on a loop. The most powerful monster ever to set foot on Earth and it looked like he tossed it through a wood-chipper. No one wants to end up like that.”

“That was when Asano used that power to turn into some kind of magic bird,” Gerling said. “The briefing notes had nothing about what that power was.”

“We don’t know,” Cleary said. “There are too many unknowns about him, which is why we brought you here. Nothing solves a problem as well as true power.”

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Having finally isolated what they hoped was the first node Jason needed to modify to repair the link, Jason and his team returned to Austria. Kaito’s helicopter set down in the Ziller Valley, in an isolated and open space close to the river. Accompanying Jason was the whole group; Dawn, Farrah and the Asano sisters, along with Greg, Asya, Itsuki and Kaito.

Kaito left his helicopter parked on the grass, ready for everyone to jump in at need. The others would remain while Jason entered alone, for the simple reason that only he could enter the space where the node could be modified. He had experimented with node spaces in preparation, opening the door to acclimatise to the conditions without making any changes.

Only Jason and Farrah were able to enter a node space once Jason opened the door. This was a result of their astral affinity, the mechanism preventing non-outworlders from using the door. Farrah could only withstand conditions within the node space for a limited time due to the corrosive aura it contained. Jason was able to withstand it but Farrah’s aura was ground down, after which the space started to have a deleterious effect on her body. For this reason, only Jason was going to go in, while the others would wait outside.

“It will take you time to understand what you are seeing in there,” Dawn advised Jason. “I have pushed as much theory into your head as I can but knowing the theory is

not the same as applying it. Take as long as you need to be certain of every change you make. What you are about to do is outside even my experience.”

Jason solemnly nodded and began opening the portal. He ran a hand over the ground and a line of silver light appeared running along it. From the line rose an arch of smoky glass with blue, silver and gold light twinkling within, the new material from which his portal arches were made. Instead of filling with the familiar dark void, though, it filled with a sheet of silver light. A powerful aura spilled from it and, except for Dawn and Farrah, Jason's companions all took an involuntary step back.

"See you soon," Jason said and then stepped through the door.

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“What kind of anomaly?” Cleary asked. He was in the Berlin branch’s grid monitoring station, hovering over the chair of an operator.

“At first I thought it was the start of a transformation event,” the operator explained nervously. “Then I realised it was too small. Much too small, as in, not much bigger than a person.”

“Where a normal transformation event is the size of a city,” Cleary said and patted the operator on the shoulder. “You did well to bring this to my attention quickly.”

Cleary left the monitoring centre, just one small part of the Berlin branch’s extensive complex. Waiting outside were Cleary’s functionaries, who trailed him as he strode away.

“Prep helicopters and a full operations team,” Cleary instructed.

“We’ll have to use the locals,” Cleary’s assistant said. “Our own forces are still being cleared.”

“They haven’t been cleared yet?”

“They’re a heavily armed contingent of non-governmental soldiers with magical abilities, sir. The German government, the Berlin steering committee and the International Committee are dragging their feet. They’re trying to dig up our objective and you said secrecy is paramount so I chose discretion over applying pressure.”

Cleary nodded.

“It was the right choice but now we have a window of unknown duration. Use the local teams and prep them for departure.”

“Destination?”

“The Ziller Valley.”

“Austria?” the assistant asked. “That will add complications.”

“Handle them. Speed over everything.”

“I’ll make sure any complications are dealt with by the time you’re in the air, sir.”

“Where is Gerling?”

“The spa facility, sir. Would you like me to send someone?”

“I’ll go,” Cleary said. “Get going; I want wheels up in ten.”

\*\*\*

The landscape Jason found himself in was an alien reimagining of the space by the river he had just left. Like the space in which he claimed the door, it was washed into monochrome by the light that shone with no apparent source. In this case, the light was silver instead of amber, giving everything a blank metallic sheen.

The surroundings looked vaguely natural at a distance, but up close it was clear that everything was composed of tiny cubes, as if the entire landscape had been built from tiny, silver Lego bricks.

Jason felt the aura of the place trying to suppress his own, giving him the unusual sensation of feeling feeble before an overwhelming power. It had only been a couple of years since Jason was freshly-arrived in the other world, feeling vulnerable and exposed every day. In this place, that feeling came back. It was as if he were standing before the full vastness of the cosmos and being shown his tiny, irrelevant place in it.

Shaking off the sensation, Jason extended his aura out, pushing back against the oppressive force to expand his senses. The first thing he detected was points of power, buried everywhere under the landscape. Unlike the transformation events that revealed only a single reality core with each event, the doorway gave Jason ready access to a treasure trove. He left them where they were as he started to move.

Exploring the space with his senses, he walked slowly, trying to understand the complexities of the world around him. He slowly began to marry what he was perceiving with the theory he had learned but it was slow going. He took his time, examining tiny aspects of the magic flowing through the place like duelling orchestras.

When he finally managed to truly grasp the nature of just one tiny aspect, fitting it to the theory Dawn had been stuffing into his head, it felt like a triumph. It was a first step, allowing him to move onto the next.

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Kaito’s drones were the first to detect the approaching helicopters and he warned the others. Farrah looked unhappily at the door standing out in the open. Jason’s party interface had terminated the moment he entered, leaving no way to communicate with him.

“We can’t let him walk out of there not knowing,” Farrah said.

“His freedom is paramount,” Dawn agreed. “The question is how powerful the forces approaching are. If they aren’t too...”

Farrah looked at Dawn, who had trailed off, wide-eyed.

"What is it?" Farrah asked.

"Gold ranker," Dawn whispered.

Farrah froze for a moment and then turned to the others.

"Everyone into the helicopter!" she yelled, shoving Dawn in the direction of the vehicle. "Get in it and go, all of you! As quick as you can!"

"What about you?" Kaito asked.

"I'll get Jason and we'll portal back to the cloud house," Farrah said. "Rendezvous there, no more questions. As fast as you can go, gods dammit!"

Without another word, Farrah plunged into the portal. Dawn hurried toward the helicopter.

"Move!" she ordered. "We may already be moving too late!"

They clambered into the side door of the helicopter and it lifted into the air, even before Kaito slid into the pilot seat. Using every power at his disposal, Kaito accelerated the vehicle, sending it firing through the air faster than any ordinary helicopter could match.

"What is happening?" Akari asked.

"There's a gold-rank essence user on one of those helicopters," Dawn said.

"A category-four?" Akari asked, her face turning pale. "Since when do they even exist?"

"China and the United States both had people reach gold-rank several years ago," Dawn explained. "They have been keeping them in magical stasis since then."

"It's true, then," Asya said. "They really do have them."

"Yes," Dawn said. "Now that they are operating openly, I am more free to speak on it."

"Why weren't you before?" Greg asked.

"There are rules by which I am required to operate," Dawn explained. "They are a frustrating but necessary restriction for someone like me to intervene in the affairs of your world."

"They must be using reality cores to sustain the category four," Asya reasoned.

"It seems likely," Dawn said.

"How many are we dealing with?" Itsuki asked.

"One," Dawn said. "One is all it takes."

She bowed her head, crestfallen.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For not telling us earlier?" Asya asked. "You told us what you could on the way to Makassar."

“No,” Dawn said. “I’m sorry for what is about to happen. The gold-ranker has left his helicopter. Everyone get out the gold spirit coins that Jason gave you and eat them when I say.”

\*\*\*

Gerling hurtled through the air, periodic explosions throwing him onward, faster and faster. For all its speed, Kaito’s bronze-rank helicopter, even with Kaito using every power at his disposal, could not match the crude explosion-flight of the gold ranker. The helicopter opened up with weapons and deployed drones to intercept but Gerling went through them as if they were a light pattering of rain. When Gerling struck the helicopter, it exploded in a burst of force and fire, tiny pieces scattering across the sky.

## Chapter 388

### Loaded For Battle

The alien landscape of the node space was an uncanny mix of familiar features washed out in metallic silver light. A close examination of the ground, rocks and plants did not help, being made up of tiny blocks that gave it the feel of a low-resolution image. Jason wandered over to the river, which he found looked like mercury under the monochrome light.

Jason was uncomfortably uncertain about how to identify if he had the right node, figure out how to alter it and finally repair it without making things worse. Even the terrifyingly knowledgeable Dawn had limited advice. She told him to trust his senses over his eyes and to take his time, matching the theory he had been taught to the reality he encountered. Once he understood one on terms of the other, he would be ready to intervene. To Jason, that sounded a lot like 'get in there and figure it out, idiot.'

He wandered in search of some core area; a big magical-looking thing he could interact with. Eventually, as his aura adapted to the harsh conditions of the space's own corrosive aura, he realised that the entire space was the core he was seeking out.

Despite all the magical theory he had studied, he was unprepared for the discovery that the very land he was walking through was the mechanism he had been searching for. The work of the original Builder was so vast and more nuanced than Jason could even begin to comprehend. For a moment, he despaired of ever understanding enough to begin his task, let alone complete it.

Schooling his negative thoughts he renewed his determination, once more probing the space around him with his magical and aura senses. He stopped looking for individual elements and started looking at everything as a collective whole. His more holistic approach swiftly reveal incongruities in the otherwise exquisite design.

The original artistry of the place, expanded over billions of years from the reality seed from which his universe had been created, was far too sophisticated for Jason to interfere with in any way beyond crude bumbling. Fortunately, this had also been true for whoever had made the changes Jason had come to correct.

The design of the space was so magnificent in its sophistication that it blurred the lines of what constituted the natural world.

"I hope the intelligent design people don't find out about this."

Jason was looking at the blueprints of reality. The underpinnings of matter and energy; the book in which the laws of physics were written. Incepted as a seed from which

the entire universe sprouted, it was like looking at the results of a self-learning program that had been running for eons. Jason was staggered at a mind that could accomplish all that, if such a thing could even be called a mind. Jason was filled with awe and – for the first time since learning of its existence – respect for what the Builder was.

Seeing the result of the Builder's core purpose, creating universes, it brought home to Jason the vast alien consciousness that even the newer, once-mortal builder must possess. It reinforced what Dawn had told him about great astral beings needing mortal vessels not just to interact with physical reality but even to think on a mortal scale. Jason had thought that the Builder he encountered had been using the bodies he inhabited as interchangeable puppets. Now he realised that Thadwick and the other body he used may have had much more of an effect on the Builder than he previously imagined.

"You picked a dud vessel there, mate," Jason muttered to himself. He had to wonder how much the cultists who prepared Thadwick to serve as a vessel understood the process. Then he remembered that this was done right after Rufus had wiped out the local leadership. It was likely that they had managed to dig out the mechanisms for creating vessels without grasping the ramifications of who they selected to be the raw material. Choosing the most expendable person had ramifications that were unfortunate for the Builder's cult but a blessing for Jason himself.

The inexpert alterations Jason sensed in the node space were marring the sublime intricacy of the original work. This made the crude flaws in what was otherwise a perfect system easy to pick out. Like a scratch in a record, they threw off the harmony of the pattern with a jolt.

Jason and his team had been unsure of how reliable their method of identifying the correct nodes was. They had been successful the first time out, but whether this would continue or if they just got lucky, he didn't yet know.

Dawn had advised Jason to take his time to comprehend the space properly and that was exactly what he did. The more he examined the perfection of the design, the more the changes he spotted seemed blasphemous. The door Jason had used to access this space was created by the second Builder, which made sense to Jason. He could not imagine the person who created the magnificence around him giving some idiot the tools to vandalise it.

Jason wasn't sure how long he spent working to understand the node space with what amounted to meditative examination. He had an eerie feeling that time flowed differently within it, although that was more likely to be his imagination than the reality. Sensing the space around him and trying to transpose that with his understanding of astral

magic theory was challenging. It was the difference between having an anatomy textbook open in front of him and a surgery patient open in front of him. Fortunately, his goal was not to make changes but undo the damage that had already been done.

Jason's examination finally helped him understand that if he could delicately undermine the changes that had been made, the space would heal itself. Rather than relying on Jason's ham-fisted fumbling, it would be more like plucking a splinter than stitching up a wound. The actual mechanism for making changes was ostensibly easy, just a little well-placed aura pressure, but Jason did not rush. Measure twice, cut once was good advice for the building blocks of a house, let alone the building blocks of the universe.

Finally, Jason made his first adjustment; a tiny, delicate and oh-so-careful change. He then watched and waited, hoping he hadn't made things worse. Straining his perception to the limit, he finally sensed signs that the affected area was returning to its natural state as the garish wound settled back into its pristine surroundings. He continued observing until he was certain that he wasn't just imagining the gradual shift change before moving on to do it again.

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In the space between Jason's magical archway and the operations camp rapidly established by the Network tactical support team, Gerling dropped the ragged, unconscious Asano sisters on the ground. Network personnel moved forward to clamp category-three suppression collars onto their necks, while someone brought Gerling a folding chair and a can of beer. Cleary came out of the command tent and walked over as Gerling sat down, unconcerned as he waited for Jason to emerge.

"We're looking at using reality cores to potentially develop category four suppression collars," Cleary said, looking at the unconscious sisters. "More category four essence users is obviously the priority but we're sure the Chinese have their own category fours already, which are most likely being woken up like you."

"You want to lock them down if we can, instead of killing them?" Gerling asked. "Seems like an unnecessary risk."

"Not my call," Cleary said. "A category-three collar is all we need for Asano, in any case. We didn't find any trace of Farrah Hurin, so we suspect she went in to warn him and he'll know what he's walking into. He could emerge at any moment."

"What about the others?" Gerling asked.

"The unknown entity, Dawn, appears to have been killed by the explosion. We're taking samples from what's left of her but it's not much. The category twos survived the

explosion, probably by consuming high-rank spirit coins, according to early examination of the bodies. Between the explosion and the subsequent weakening effect, though, only one survived the fall. It was the Tiwari boy, using a teleport power to escape the helicopter right before you hit it.

“He got away?”

“No. He’s stealthy but our category-threes tracked him down. He’s under interrogation now.”

“Bring him out,” Gerling said. “The bodies, too. You said you wanted Asano humbled, right? Let’s show him the extent of his failure.”

\*\*\*

Farrah was increasingly suffering as she forced herself onward through the alien silver landscape. Her excellent control over her aura prevented it from collapsing suddenly, eking out every scrap of strength before it finally gave way. She continued searching for Jason regardless, even as the mystical corrosion started impacting her body. She finally found Jason returning to the door, having rectified the node as best he could.

“What are you doing?” he asked her moving close and pushing his own aura out to protect her. The overextension meant that his own aura was being chewed away but he ignored it, leading Farrah back in the direction of the door.

“The Network will be waiting outside,” Farrah said. “They have a gold-ranker with them.”

“China?”

“I don’t know.”

“What about the others?”

“They fled in Kaito’s helicopter. I don’t know if they got away.”

“If they got caught, I’ll open a portal for you to get them out through while I distract the gold-ranker. I’m what he’s here for. If they go away, I’ll open a portal for us to get out through.”

“Don’t risk yourself. You’re the one who can fix the world, now.”

“They won’t kill me. They need me alive.”

“Do they need your arms and legs?”

“I’ve been through worse than anything they can do, and I still have tricks up my sleeve.”

\*\*\*

Jason and Farrah stepped out of the magic door, which descended into the ground and vanished. Farrah had her obsidian armour and sword already conjured, while Jason

had his blood robes, cloak and his dagger. He also had two orange and blue orbs with an eye pattern floating around him. Jason's familiar, Gordon, could surround himself with six orbs; three primarily blue with some orange and three primarily orange with some blue.

As of silver-rank, and while Gordon was subsumed into Jason, Jason was now able to call up one of each orb for his own use. Just like Gordon, he could make attacks with them or use the new functions available as of silver rank. One orb could trigger the butterfly effect that spread Jason's afflictions, while the other could turn into a floating shield.

There was a Network operations camp set up nearby, the layout familiar to Farrah and Jason both. It was some distance away, as the magic door had been given a lot of space. The only things nearby were the folding chair containing Gerling and the people around him, living and dead.

The Asano sisters were alive but much worse for wear, collared and sprawled on the ground. Itsuki was also collared and unconscious, his wound suggesting he went down fighting. Jason could sense their auras, suppressed though they were. He could not sense Kaito, Asya, Greg or Dawn. There were three corpses on the ground, too damaged to recognise, but he knew.

In the folding chair was a man sitting amongst Jason's beaten and killed companions with a can of beer in his hand, as if he were at a casual barbecue. He was a hairy behemoth, in plain fatigues who tossed aside the can as he rose slowly from the chair. The can landed on a body whose long dark hair hadn't all been burned away.

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Inside Jason's spirit Vault, Jason's family looked up at a sky filling with angry red clouds as thunder pealed. The floral scent of the gardens turned coppery as the flowers faded and the plants grew savage barbs.

A scared Emi hugged her father tightly. They all knew they were in Jason's soul.

"Daddy, what's happening to Uncle Jason?"

"I don't know, Sweetie," Ian said, placing a comforting hand on his daughter's head. "I don't know."

\*\*\*

Gerling was around ten metres away from Jason and Farrah and took a few steps forward.

"Look at you two, all loaded for battle. You think you can beat me?"

"Let the others go," Jason said. "I have what you want. They get you nothing, now."

"If it were up to me, I'd go for it," Gerling said. "Personally, I'd like for you and me to rumble. I want to see all this power you're meant to have for myself. But the big boys back home don't want you beaten. They want you broken. Humbled. You've been walking around, doing whatever you want for far too long. It's time for you to learn that you don't run this world, Asano. We do."

"You don't have to kill anyone else," Jason said.

"Yeah," Gerling acknowledged. "It's not exactly out of my way, though."

"Get them out," Jason told Farrah silently through the voice chat of his party interface and then burst into action, charging directly at Gerling as Shade bodies spread out beside him.

A wild grin erupted on Gerling's face and he threw a fist at Jason from which a bolt of force shot out. Jason moved to step into a Shade body and shadow-jump away, only for it to fail. He felt some oppressive magic shut him down the moment he tried and the force bolt exploded as it struck him, throwing him through the air.

Jason used his silver-rank agility to acrobatically adjust his trajectory, flipping in the air to land on his feet. The simple attack was not a high damage one but coming from a gold-ranker it still felt like being hit with a hammer. He resumed his charge, not seeming to dodge a second bolt but when it struck Jason it passed right through.

At silver rank, one of the effects of Jason's cloak was to give him some limited ability to manipulate space. It had taken him some time to get a handle on it, but now Jason could dodge attacks in such a way as they seemed to hit. It was an ability with limitations and restrictions that Jason expertly hid, making what was little more than a magically enhanced dodge appear as a mysterious defensive power.

Missing his attack didn't dismay Gerling, instead, delighting him as he launched himself forward to meet Jason in a rush. He tried to crash-tackle the smaller man but Jason managed to evade. Some strange magic was preventing his shadow jumps but that was not the extent of his evasive skills. Using Shade's bodies for pure obfuscation, Jason stepped through them, one of many dark figures for Gerling to pin down.

The gold-ranker's first approach was to swing with his fists as they shimmered with force. Jason had more skill, more combat experience and was devilishly elusive. It still wasn't enough in the face of the gold-ranker's raw speed and a fist soon landed in Jason's gut, sending him tumbling across the grass.

Gerling followed up quickly, punting Jason before he had a chance to get up. Once more, Jason rolled across the ground after suffering a savage blow. Gerling leapt into the air and used a special attack that drove him down like a hammer, Jason barely rolling

away as Gerling's boots hit the ground. The attack still caused a small crater, the secondary force shattering the shield Jason managed to interpose using one of the orbs floating around him. Jason was showered in earth and once more sent tumbling away.

Lying where he fell, Jason raised an arm in Gerling's direction but it wasn't aimed at the gold-ranker. While Gerling had been kicking Jason along the ground like a ball, Jason had been taking the blows, letting them knock him further and further from Itsuki and the Asano sisters. Farrah had made her way to the prisoners and Jason raised a portal arch right next to them.

Gerling turned and looked, not rushing after Jason or the portal as he stood and laughed. The arch rose up like normal, but instead of filling with a dark portal, it remained empty and inert.

"You didn't seriously think we'd try this without doing something about those portals, right?" Gerling mocked.

## Chapter 389

### Going For Gold

Jason and Farrah both extended their senses when the arch remained empty and the portal failed to open. If they hadn't been so shocked by their captured and dead companions they might have paid more attention to their surroundings but it was only now that they detected the magical devices set up in a wide circle around them. Farrah was familiar with the magic and knew it would be made up of a series of magic rods hammered into the ground, just out of sight.

"It's a dimensional condensation net," she told Jason through their party chat. "Keep him distracted while I take it out."

Jason cast a spell at Gerling.

*"Your fate is to suffer."*

Gerling glared at him.

"A category three actually affecting me with his crap?" Gerling said, and then looked down at his arm. While kicking Jason across the ground, he hadn't even noticed Jason getting in the two shallow cuts. Wounds that shallow should have already healed, demonstrating the noxiousness of Jason's abilities, something Gerling had been thoroughly warned about. Gerling looked back up at Jason even as Jason rapidly chanted more spells.

*"Bleed for me."*

*"Bear the mark of your transgressions."*

Fresh blood leaked from the two cuts and a symbol was branded onto the back of his hand by a small flash of transcendent damage.

Despite knowing full well the nature of Jason's power, Gerling didn't rush, staring down Jason.

"I don't like your aura," Gerling said. "I can feel it. Judging me. I'm not yours to judge, Asano."

Gerling projected his aura to suppress Jason's and was startled at the result. He had heard that Jason's aura was strong but he wasn't prepared for the degree to which that was true. Gerling's gold rank aura was stronger but far from overwhelming, despite the full rank of difference. Even that gap was made up by the difference in aura control. Gerling's aura control skills were adequate but Jason's were immaculate. Trying to suppress Jason's aura was like trying to grip a wet, frictionless ball that kept slipping through his fingers.

Jason gave no reaction to Gerling's attack, as if he hadn't even noticed. Instead, he looked at the conjured dagger in his hand as it started to transform. The sinister blade grew longer as it extended into a sword shape, also changing colour. It turning from obsidian black and blood red to pristine silver. The red embellishment remained but the barbed motif was smoothed into clean lines, as well as bright red runes set into the blade.

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Ability: [Blade of Doom] (Doom)

- Conjunction (holy, unholy, curse, disease, poison).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Silver 1 (19%).
  
- Effect (iron): Conjures [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation]. Attacks made with Ruin will inflict an instance of [Vulnerable] and refresh any wounding effects on the target. Wounding effects refreshed by Ruin require more healing than normal to negate. Ruin is an unholy object.
  
- Effect (bronze): Ruin inflicts one instance each of [Ruin of the Blood], [Ruin of the Flesh] and [Ruin of the Spirit].
  
- Effect (silver): Blade gains a second form: [Penitent, the Blade of Sacrifice]. Attacks made with Penitent will inflict an instance of [Price in Blood] and refresh any wounding effects on the target. Wounding effects refreshed by Penitent require more healing than normal to negate. Penitent is a holy object.
  
- [Vulnerable] (affliction, unholy, stacking): All resistances are reduced. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to cleanse instances of [Resistant] on a 1:1 basis.
  
- [Ruin of the Blood] (damage-over-time, poison, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  
- [Ruin of the Flesh] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  
- [Ruin of the Spirit] (damage-over-time, curse, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the curse is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
  
- [Price in Blood] (affliction, holy, blood, stacking): This affliction is applied equally to the person it is inflicted upon and the person who inflicts it. This affliction cannot be cleansed while a person who shares it is alive and is immediately negated if the person who shares it dies. Damage between people who share the affliction is increased, including damage sources in place prior to this effect. Damage from holy sources is further increased. Only damage actually inflicted is increased; damage

negated by damage reduction and protection abilities is not. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

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The second form of the Blade of Doom power was a double-edge sword with a double-edged power. The Price in Blood affliction caused both the deliverer and the recipient to hurt each other all the more, making avoiding damage a critical objective. It was a massive gamble against a gold-rank enemy but silver-rank attacks against such a foe were like digging through a brick wall with a spoon and Jason needed to hold Gerling's attention.

Jason stilled the storm of fury in his soul, tapping into his meditative techniques to push the rage and pain from his mind and let a calm settle over him. He knew that control was what he needed, while the illusory strength of passion would only hurt him. If he were alone he might have been consumed by it but he still had people he needed to get out alive and couldn't allow himself the indulgence. A calm came over him as his silver eyes locked onto Gerling and he started walking slowly forward. Gerling grinned, rushing at Jason to swing a fist at lightning speed.

Gold rankers were absurdly fast. Jason had seen Emir move at full speed a few times and, to iron-rank Jason, it had been indistinguishable from Sophie's movement powers. The speed attribute alone of a gold-ranker was almost a teleportation power. Even at bronze-rank, the speed of a gold-ranker would be little more than a blur. Only at silver could Jason's reflexes keep up at all, and even then it was like moving through molasses.

Jason had every other advantage. His skill, both in terms of fighting technique and the use of his abilities, was as far above Gerling's as Gerling's raw power was above Jason's. Jason's powers were also better suited to a close-quarters fight. His cloak hid his movements and manipulated space, while his weapon gave him the reach on the unarmed Gerling.

Gerling's powers, on the other hand, made him more of a siege weapon than a duellist. His explosive powers were better suited to assaulting an army than a person. Even so, he was simply so fast, so strong and so tough that it didn't matter. Jason landed half a dozen hits with his sword, massively accelerating his already locked-in suite of powers and Gerling was barely impaired.

It took Gerling time to hit Jason, whose skill and abilities made him frustratingly evasive. When the hit landed, however, the result was devastating. Gerling's strength, enhanced by an explosive fist power and Jason's own damage-accelerating power left Jason as little more than a bloody mess, bouncing along the ground like a skipping stone.

Instead of following up, Gerling dashed off to arrive in front of Farrah. She had been making her way to one of the buried rods restricting Jason's portal, using her lava cannon power to devastate the team of silver-rankers that moved to intercept her.

"Hello, hot stuff," Gerling said and swung his fist.

Farrah did not fight like Jason, as reflected by her equipment. Where Jason conjured sleek robes and a wispy cloak, she conjured heavy obsidian armour. Instead of a dagger, she conjured a huge sword that could extend out into a barbed lava whip. She did also have orbs floating around her, but instead of glowing eyes, they were searing flames.

Jason's style was elusive, deceptive and mobile. Farrah, by contrast, was all about power; not just using it but also dealing with it. For all the power at her command, she had won it fighting monsters that were stronger and tougher than she was, just like Gerling.

Gerling was surprised at his inability to land a solid hit as Farrah slight but efficient movement always managed to deflect his hits or shift her angle just the right way to negate the bulk of the damage. Only the explosive power shrouding his fists had a major effect, blasting off chunks of her armour.

Farrah drew on her vast combat experience and moved with the hits, letting it lead her into counterattacks. Like Jason, Farrah was much more adept with her powers than Gerling. Her whip sword made of lava and obsidian danced like a monstrous snake as it drew blood, while the burning orbs floating around her lunged in to burn his face, distracting him. The attacks had full effect, as well, the damage reduction from his superior rank not being a factor.

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#### Ability: [Limit Breaker] (Potent)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Silver 2 (07%).
- Effect (iron): Ignore rank disparity in resistances and damage reduction.
- Effect (bronze): Increase the effect of abilities by increasing their cost.
- Effect (silver): The enhanced state from consuming a spirit coin lasts for significantly longer and the after-effects are reduced.

---

Farrah attacks also left Gerling covered in burning flames. Momentarily being placed on the back foot enraged him and he clapped his hands together to create an explosion that swept out in front of him. At the same time, though, a wall of obsidian rose up between

him and Farrah. He sneered as the explosion blasted the wall to fragment, only to be startled when the fragments flew the wrong way. Even as the force of the explosion passed through the shattered wall and knocked Farrah off her feet, the fragments of wall blasted back into Gerling, digging into his flesh. Lying on the ground, Farrah quickly chanted a spell.

*“Children of the volcano, be reborn in fire.”*

The shards of obsidian buried in Gerling’s flesh melted into magma, inflicting a pain even the gold ranker couldn’t ignore. Farrah got to her feet as Gerling yelled in rage and pain, stumbling back, not even hearing the quiet chant behind him.

*“Your blood is not yours to keep but mine on which to feast.”*

At silver-rank, Jason recovery powers were terrifying to behold. Far from appearing near death, he now looked completely fresh, his conjured robes and cloak covering the blood coating his body underneath. The life force he drained from the gold-ranker brought his health back up to full and beyond, with his Sin Eater ability allowing his health to surpass its normal maximum.

Jason didn’t launch Colin into the fray, and not just because Gerling was covered in flames. Area attacks were a critical weakness for swarm-type enemies and Gerling seemed to be all about explosions. More importantly, Jason was going to need the healing his familiar provided by remaining subsumed. Knowing he would need to rely on himself, he used a damage spell that took advantage of the afflictions still accumulating on Gerling.

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#### Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell.
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.
  
- Current rank: Silver 1 (09%).
  
- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.
  
- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Penitence].
  
- Effect (silver): Damage per affliction can be increased by increasing the mana cost to high, very high, or extreme. This reduces the cooldown to 20 seconds, 10 seconds or none. Consecutive, extreme-cost uses have a shorter incantation.
  
- [Penitence] (affliction, holy): Gain an instance of [Penance] for each curse, disease, poison or unholy effect that is cleansed from you. This is a holy effect.

- [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
- 

*“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”*

Jason’s abilities were largely mana efficient, a trait shared by most affliction specialists. Punition stood out as his big, instantaneous damage spell, although it required set up to be effective. As of silver-rank, it became a mana sink giving him a large hammer to swing when he needed to go all out.

Against a silver-rank opponent, even a moderate time under Jason’s afflictions would have placed them in a bad position. Gerling, however, demonstrated the near-indestructibility of a gold-ranker, showing the marks of both Jason and Farrah’s attacks without yet being impeded by them. Even Jason’s newly-enhanced Punition spell failed to make a sizeable dent in the gold-ranker’s condition, although it was enough to surprise their powerful enemy.

Gerling was frustrated at how much he was being shown up by the two silver-rankers that should have been overwhelmed by his power to the point that he hadn’t treated them as real opponents. As he was filled with anger, that changed. He hammered his fists together and a powerful blast exploded out, sending Farrah and Jason flying.

The two silver-rankers scrambled to their feet as Gerling strode from the cloud of earth and dust thrown up by his power. He was still wreathed in fire from Farrah’s abilities but his disregard and iron glare made the flames seem more like his power than hers. He stomped his foot and the ground in a wide area around her exploded up, throwing her into the air and battering her with both force and magically-empowered rocks that exploded as they came near her.

At the same time, Gerling threw a fist in Jason’s direction and he was blasted with a broad wave of force. If he had not been denied shadow-jumping he could have avoided it but was instead battered and blasted back.

This was the signal of a change in the tenor of the fight as Gerling unleashed one area attack after another in an unrelenting assault that gave neither Jason nor Farrah time to recover and rally. It was a terrible strategy against enemies of a similar rank as such abilities were high cost and relatively low damage, which is how the silver-rankers survived the barrage. Jason’s stacked rapid healing effects kept him healing through the damage while Farrah’s armour and magically enhanced toughness allowed her to endure.

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Network personnel were watching from the nearby camp. The second in command of the Berlin forces threw an unhappy glance at Cleary, on the other side of the camp.

“Boss,” she told her commander, “this isn’t right. I’m pretty sure we’re working for the bad guys, here.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” he growled.

“Maybe we don’t have to?”

“What are you suggesting? That’s a category four over there and I have zero interest in having my head crushed in his fist like a soft fruit.”

“Those things stopping them from escaping. Maybe we could take one out.”

“How? By taking out our own people guarding them? Look, I’m not opposed to doing something. Just come up with an idea better than that.”

“Maybe we just need the right opportunity, Boss. If it doesn’t come, it doesn’t come, but if we’re ready and it does...”

“Alright,” the commander said. “Spread the word. Careful and quiet.”

\*\*\*

Jason and Farrah’s superior skills were overwhelmed by the combination of power disparity and cheap tactics, Gerling having enough area abilities to almost stun lock them both. Their attempts to push back fell short, Jason barely managing to stay alive, throwing out Punition and his health drain spell every chance he could. He called out Gordon, who chained his shield orbs to protect himself and Jason, as well as inflict his butterfly effect on Gerling. After three attacks, each one destroying a shield orb, a disruptive force blast from the gold ranker left the incorporeal familiar ragged. Since it took a full minute to recover a destroyed orb, Jason called Gordon back into himself before the familiar’s vessel was destroyed.

The butterflies manifesting on Gerling did not impair the gold ranker; instead, they flew off in every direction. The Network forces had staged teams near the buried rods preventing Jason’s portal from working and the butterflies went in their direction. Some of the butterflies were caught up in Gerling’s area attacks and others were shot down by the Network troops using disruptive force attacks that caused the butterflies to detonate. As Jason’s powers kept multiplying the butterfly affliction, though, more and more butterflies went out, increasing the pressure.

Farrah burned through her mana re-conjuring armour over and over as the explosive attacks broke it apart. As the area attacks drew close to the Asano sisters and Itsuki, who had made their way to the inactive portal as they watched the conflict. Farrah knew she

had to push back before their collared companions were caught up and killed. After withstanding another attack, Farrah took out a gold spirit coin and slipped it into her mouth.

Farrah's body was immediately flooded with power, her Limit Breaker ability handling the gold-rank energy in a smooth flow, compared to the brutish force other essence users experienced when using a coin. She leapt through the air using a special attack, her sword lighting up with white-hot flames as Gerling's latest area attack failed to knock back the momentum of her enhanced attack and forcing him to take it head-on.

Unfortunately, he could. Even with her attributes raised to gold, Farrah was not a match for a true gold-ranker, although the boost was enough to push him with her greater mastery of both fighting technique and ability use. In the break, Jason made his way for the closest buried rod, hoping to disrupt the effect.

Gerling was not unaware of Jason's actions and used one of the long cooldown abilities from his vast essence. A void sphere appeared in the middle of the area they were fighting, creating a massive gravitational pull towards it. Gerling and Farrah both resisted, Gerling only partially affected by his own ability while Farrah dug her sword into the ground as an anchor. Itsuki and the Asano sisters braced themselves against Jason's inactive portal arch.

Jason and the Network troops around the perimeter of the battle zone suffered the full brunt, all being dragged to the sphere, which then exploded. Jason and the other silver-rankers survived, although all were savaged by the raw power of the blast that scattered them back around the battlefield. All the bronze-rankers in the Network teams sucked in were dead.

\*\*\*

At the camp, Cleary ordered new teams in to replace the one that had been guarding the buried rods. The commander stormed up to him, furious.

"Are you joking? Your guy just took out half my entire contingent, a lot of them dead. Now you want me to send more in there?"

"Unless you want to be the next on the list when my category-four friend comes back, yes."

The commander bared his teeth but finally turned away.

"Alright," he announced to his sections. "Everyone head to your assigned back-up points."

The commander glanced back at Cleary.

"And remember what you were just told," the commander said to his personnel.

"Move out."

Cleary frowned, uncertain of what the commander had been referencing but put it to the back of his mind as he returned his attention to the fight. The fact that there was a fight at all, rather than a one-sided hammering was not a part of his plans.

\*\*\*

Jason managed another draining spell on Gerling, instantaneously flooding Jason with healing. Despite the massive health drain, it barely seemed to affect Gerling. Despite Farrah's flames and Jason's afflictions, Gerling was still going strong, the absurd resilience of a gold-ranker proving dominant. If Jason had a whole team of silver-rankers to hold up Gerling, he could probably do the damage required to take him down but just himself and Farrah were not enough. Even with his afflictions running rampant, Gerling was still going strong.

Butterflies were landing on the silver rankers lying hurt on the ground, even as the freshly-healed Jason stood up, delivering affliction packages that would most likely kill them before they got help. Jason used his Feast of Absolution power, replenishing his mana and stamina as he drained the afflictions from them, making sure not to include Gerling. Gerling was not hurt to the point that switching from the sinister afflictions to holy ones would be effective.

Farrah was winding down, her gold-rank power fading away. Soon it would be gone and she would be weaker than before, so Jason made another run at the buried rods, even as reinforcements from the camp moved around the outside of the battlefield to guard them.

Farrah was sent hurtling off as her power faded and Gerling hit her square in the chest with a potent ability. Gerling then zipped to intercept Jason, grabbing his neck from behind and tossing him back, far from the buried rods. Gerling moved over Jason and planted a foot on his chest.

"You're done, Asano. You put up a good fight. If we were the same rank, you'd have won. But we're not. Power is always king."

"In the other world, they call it the tyranny of rank," Jason said.

"Tyranny of rank? I like that."

"I hope you like your flesh melting off. Good luck clearing those afflictions."

"What did I just tell you? Luck doesn't matter. Skill doesn't matter. Only power matters."

Jason face filled with anguish as he felt a familiar surge of power from within Gerling, the reason that Gerling had been chosen as the gold-ranker they awoke. Gerling, it turned out, shared a power with Humphrey, also gaining it from the might essence. That power

was called Immortality, which instigated an incredibly powerful healing effect. It was a power known by the Magic Society, so after Humphrey had looked it up, Jason learned that, at silver-rank, it gained the ability to purge all afflictions, ignoring any and all effects that prevented cleansing. Jason had encountered a similar effect used by the archbishop of the church of Purity.

“That power,” Jason said. “A friend of mine has it. I know that it can bring you back from the dead at gold rank.”

“Now you know that killing me wouldn’t have helped you.”

“That’s alright,” Jason said. “Now I get to kill you twice.”

Gerling chuckled as he took a battered and singed but still functioning suppression collar from a belt satchel. As he bent down to put it on, explosions erupted around the edge of the battlefield.

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Moments earlier, Cleary had been watching with satisfaction as Gerling ended the fight. Farrah was badly hurt, her collared companions rushing to check on her. Asano was seemingly immortal but Gerling now had him literally underfoot. Too late, Cleary spotted the new teams at the buried rods digging into the ground before they all started running.

“What are they...?”

Grenades the teams had just dropped into holes alongside the rods started going off. The empty space in Jason’s inactive portal was suddenly filled with darkness, the Asano sisters dragging Farrah through, Itsuki following after. Cleary watched in horror as Jason slipped out from under Gerling’s foot and flung himself at the portal.

Gerling was only startled for a moment and he still had gold-rank reflexes. He threw out a hand in Jason’s direction and fired a force bolt. It flew past Jason, exploding between Jason and the portal, flinging Jason back even as Gerling moved forward. Gerling grabbed Jason’s head in a huge, meaty hand, clamping the suppression collar into place with the other.

As soon as Jason’s powers were cut off, the portal descended into the ground and vanished. Furious, Gerling hammered his fist into Jason’s head until Jason fell unconscious, and then hammered it some more.

\*\*\*

Jason woke up in a transport container, reinforced with what looked like a roll-cage, to which Jason had been very thoroughly chained, hands and feet. Jason waited to recover some more before acting, his portal still being a couple of minutes from being

usable again and knowing that he would need to move fast. His powers were suppressed but Colin, inside him, was still healing him at a formidable rate.

The container was on the move, on a transport helicopter Jason guessed from the motion. Gerling was likely to be close by but Jason wasn't going to risk extending his senses until he was prepared to act.

It was hard to sense if his powers were off cooldown while they were suppressed but this was something Jason was used to, having long used suppression collars in his aura training. That was how he could be sure when his portal was ready and he could begin to act.

Jason plotted through his series of rapid actions, ready to execute them as quickly as possible. He started by pushing off the silver-rank suppression effect with his aura, then conjuring his cloak and using the space distortion ability to slip out of the manacles and leg chains, even as he called up a portal. He dove through it just in time as the container was ripped apart to reveal Gerling, who had sensed Jason's aura when he overcame the collar. All Gerling found was Jason's portal, descending into the floor.

"What the fu—"

## Chapter 390

### Prepare For The Rematch

The cloud house was in a vacant lot of an abandoned Austrian town. Inside, Farrah, Itsuki and the Asano sisters waited anxiously. The portal had closed right behind them and Jason's fate was unknown. Farrah had taken out some suppression collar skeleton keys she had made herself after seeing the crude ones Jason had made. She unlocked the collars around the necks of the others, then magically examined them for tracking magic. The cloud house should be more than capable of blocking it but she wanted to be careful.

Ten minutes after they arrived, the portal reappeared and Jason stumbled through, the portal sinking into the floor immediately after. Farrah immediately wrapped him in a fierce hug. Once she let him go, Jason opened his spirit vault, concerned about whether his mental state, the suppression collar or both had affected his family within.

Heading into the vault, he immediately spotted the differences. The colour seemed washed out of everything, from the drab flowers to the grey sky. Rain was falling, which was not something he had seen before in his spirit vault. As soon as he emerged from the portal in the central pavilion, his family rushed up to him from where they had been clustered together in a small sitting area, under the pavilion.

"Jason, what happened?" Erika asked.

"Come out into the cloud house," he said. "We need to talk."

\*\*\*

"What in the god damn hell?" Cleary asked angrily, sitting in the transport helicopter as it approached the Berlin Network headquarters. "Our own people betrayed us and let Asano get away."

"No, they didn't," Gerling said. "They let his companions get away but we got Asano. Him getting loose was on us. He clearly had some means to disable a suppression collar."

"He was searched," Cleary said. "Thoroughly. If he had a magic key jammed up his ass, our sensors would have found it when we checked him."

"Lack of intel, then," Gerling said. "It must be some ability."

"To ignore a suppression collar?"

"Who knows what abilities he learned in the other world? His aura was like nothing I've ever seen, both in power and control. Based on the aura surge I felt when he was escaping, it's probably related to that."

"How can you be calm?" Cleary asked. "He got away."

“My job was to catch him and I caught him,” Gerling said. “Containment was your area and I’m the talent, which means your head is the one on the block.”

“I’m going to kill those traitorous bastards,” Cleary spat.

“No you’re not,” Gerling said.

“Excuse me?”

“You shanghaied a bunch of the Berlin branch’s tac-teams, got half of them killed and sent the other half to die. Are you that surprised they screwed you? I would have. Now you want to what? Take them back to their branch and execute them in front of the rest? They will string you up.”

“Not with you there.”

“If you want to go after them, that’s all you,” Gerling said. “They’ve already demonstrated what they’ll do when you push them hard enough, even when I am right there. Frankly, I admire them for having the sack to go for it.”

Cleary scowled unhappily but fell silent, calming himself with deep breaths. Only once the helicopter was about to land did he speak again, the tense rage in his voice replaced with weariness.

“Did I hear you call yourself the talent?”

“I regretted it immediately,” Gerling admitted.

\*\*\*

In the cloud house, Jason’s family and other companions sat in morose silence. Emi was curled up against her uncle, clutching onto him.

“What about the bodies?” Ian asked.

“I’ll make sure they’re sent home, with respect,” Jason said.

In the frenzy of the moment, Jason had been moving too fast for the horror of what had happened to catch him. Now that he’d stopped still, it came on in force. The image of the dead bodies at the man’s feet was seared into his brain. He lost track of them in the fight, unsure even how intact they were after all the area attacks being thrown around.

“What about Dawn?” Akari asked.

“What was with us wasn’t really her,” Farrah said. “I don’t know how long it will take but she will be back.”

“Isn’t there something you can do?” Erika asked. “You came back from...”

She struggled to say the words.

“...Farrah came back. Isn’t there some way for Kai to come back too?”

“I’m sorry, Eri,” Jason said.

“The circumstances were very specific,” Farrah added and the group fell silent again.

“What do we do now?” Akari asked.

“First thing is we lay low,” Jason said. “That gold-ranker is still out there and the resources the Americans have at their disposal are not to be underestimated. We have to be extremely careful.”

He winced, his expression filled with sorrow and self-recrimination.

“The way we should have been already,” he said. “I should never have let you all participate.”

“It was our choice,” Akari said. “You think you are the only one with the right to fight for their world? That only you are doing this for the right reasons? Kaito, Asya and Greg weren’t just doing this to help you with a personal project, Asano. We all came into this understanding what was at stake and the price we might have to pay.”

Jason stared at her with a deer in headlights stare, then gave the faintest of acknowledging nods.

\*\*\*

Things had not gone well at the Berlin branch, forcing the American contingent to hurriedly board their transport plane and decamp for the Ramstein Air Base in Germany's south-west. Despite Gerling's warning, Cleary had been startled at the Berlin branch's fury. If not for the presence of the gold-ranker, he realised that they may not have been allowed to leave at all.

“It's time to regroup anyway,” Gerling told him. “Asano is not going to continue his current approach. We need to consolidate our resources here in Europe before we get the whole continent up in arms because of how we're riding roughshod over their branches.”

“They'll do what they're told,” Cleary said.

“I think that you're overestimating how much crap people are willing to eat,” Gerling said. “You think most of the Network cares about reality cores that the vast majority of them will never so much as lay eyes on? That's the obsession of the few who will actually get to reap that power. Maybe you can't see it because you've been living through it, but those monster waves and these transformation events are terrifying to the people who don't have the power to fight against them. That's what the actual people who make up the Network care about, not which branch has the most category-fours for some pissing match.”

“Are you questioning our purpose here?” Cleary asked him.

“No,” Gerling said. “I'm just pointing out that it's *our* purpose. I hate to break it to you, Cleary, but however we end up spinning it, we're the bad guys. I'm on board with that and you need to be as well.”

\*\*\*

In Sydney, the steering committee of the local Network branch ended their meeting. All but one of the members shuffled out of the conference room, leaving Annabeth Tilden alone to exhaustedly rub her temples. Her brother, Terrance, came in after the committee members had left.

“Well?” he asked.

“We confirmed Asano escaped,” Anna. “He’s probably going to go on some kind of rampage.”

“I hope not. He’ll die, and if what he’s doing is important as he claims...”

“Yeah,” Anna said. “Ketevan has already made a formal request to Berlin for the return of the bodies to Australia. The bastards killed Asya.”

“What is our stance going to be?”

“Our steering committee is adopting a wait-and-see approach.”

“Meaning they’re going to chicken out until they find a bandwagon to jump on,” Terrance said. “Our people aren’t going to like that. Do you know how many of them have fought alongside Jason? Worked with Farrah on restoring the grid? Flew with Kaito or got a medivac to the Asano compound? If we lay down on this, we may have a rebellion on our hands.”

“You think I don’t know this?” Anna asked. “What do you think I’ve been trying to hammer into the heads of the steering committee?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t bother,” Terrance said.

“What are you saying?”

“The Network is fracturing, Anna. Maybe it’s time for a management restructure.”

“I’m hearing similar talk out of Europe,” Anna said. “The Berlin branch is furious about the International Committee forcing them to help the Americans and getting a bunch of their people killed. A lot of other branches are up in arms over the allocation of resources to fighting over reality cores instead of monster wave recovery. Now that we can monitor the oceans with the grid, there’s a lot of call for shifting priorities back to our traditional role.”

“That’s not going to happen. We’re out in the open, now. The leadership has been hiding their power and now they’re looking to flex in front of the whole world. They don’t care about stopping monsters as much as accruing political power.”

“That’s what worries me,” Anna said. “There’s talk of pressuring the International Committee to censure the US and China and force them to go back to the old priorities. That would be great except that neither one is going to roll over and show their stomach.”

“No, they won't. From their perspective, the International Committee serves them, not the other way around. It's just always been easier for them not to make a point of it. If the IC actually pushes it, the Network will fracture back into factions.”

“That may be inevitable. There has always been a disconnect between the leadership and the bulk of the Network's personnel, but now the leadership is throwing its authority around like never before. This couldn't have come at a worse possible time.”

There was a hard knock on the door and Michael Aram opened it and came in before waiting for a response.

“Anna, I've been contacted by Craig Vermillion.”

“We aren't exactly on the best terms with the Cabal right now,” Terrance said.

“He knows,” Aram said. “He knew you would trust me and asked me to set up a discreet meeting. I think you'll want to hear what he has to say.”

\*\*\*

Gerling had been assigned a pair of assistants to see to his needs. They were both young Network functionaries, iron-rank admin staff with no tactical training. One was David, a man who Gerling disliked for his annoyingly transparent ambition, but was enthusiastic about meeting Gerling's requests. Fiona was a plain but highly competent woman that Gerling appreciated for her ability to know when to be around and when not to be, compared to the stifling David.

Gerling was walking through an aircraft hanger to meet Cleary when his assistants approached him.

“We've found an elf for you, sir,” Fiona told Gerling.

“We have?” David asked.

“It turns out that one of the early reactions of people transforming into strange new species is—”

“Rich people paying to have sex with them,” Gerling realised.

“Precisely,” Fiona said. “Brothels are opening up like mushrooms after rain in the transformation zones and we have contracted someone who has quickly come into high demand, despite her considerable rates.”

“Excellent work.”

“Contracted?” David asked. “I thought we were just going to grab some elf.”

Gerling and Fiona both turned on him with disdain.

“Do you think I'm a rapist?” Gerling asked.

“You kill a lot of people,” David said uncertainly. “I thought you did what you wanted. Isn't that what power is for?”

“And you think what I want is to rape people? Fiona, get this guy replaced.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You just said that you wanted us to get you an elf!” David whined.

“I assumed not raping people went without saying,” Gerling said. “Fiona, make sure the next guy understands that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, and how did you go with getting the people I asked to have sent from the States?”

Fiona checked her watch.

“They should be wheels down in about seven hours, sir.”

“Thank you.”

“Sir...” David said.

“Make sure the next person isn’t like this idiot,” Gerling said to Fiona, gesturing at David. “Is he someone’s nephew or something?”

“His father is the Director of Tactical Operations in New York.”

“Ah. Probably just fire him, then, rather than fire him out of a cannon.”

“We don’t have a cannon, sir,” Fiona said. “I can probably find someone who can conjure one.”

“What?” David asked as Gerling chuckled.

“That’s fine,” Gerling said. “Just reassign him to someone who’ll appreciate a sycophant.”

“Very well, sir,” Fiona said. “Is there anything else?”

“Not unless you have anything else for me,” Gerling said.

Fiona waved her hand and a portal appeared. She reached in and pulled out a can of beer. Gerling laughed as he took it.

“You want to come work for me permanently, Fiona?”

“I would very much like that, sir.”

“Oh, come on,” David complained.

Gerling left his assistant and former assistant behind as he made his way to the office that Cleary had appropriated in the hangar. Cleary was standing over a desk with a monitor set into it, poring over a map on which transformation zones were marked. He looked up as Gerling came in without bothering to knock.

“You requested a training team be sent here from the US?” Cleary asked.

“That’s right.”

“You asked specifically for people that trained with Asano and Hurin in Australia. You want to learn more about them from people who know them?”

“No,” Gerling said. “Those people learned the techniques taught by Hurin and Asano and then brought them home. I want to learn about how they fight and how to fight like them.”

“You beat them both.”

“I should have annihilated them both. You don’t understand how much more powerful than them I am. My old instructor always said that I was coasting on the power of my attacks but I never listened and now Asano and Hurin made me look like a fool. Feel like a fool. You concentrate on finding them; you don’t need my help for that. I need to prepare for the rematch.”

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“Interesting choice of venue,” Anna said. She was in the townhouse that was previously the home of Jason’s Uncle Hiro, now apparently owned by the vampire, Craig Vermillion.

“After the EOA purchased all of Hiro’s assets, I quietly picked this up off them through an appropriate series of cut-outs,” Craig said. “I like to have an off-the-books spot with the little comforts.”

They sat down in the lounge.

“Before we begin,” Craig asked, “is it true about Asya?”

“Yes.”

Craig bowed his head.

“These are dark times, Anna.”

“What do you want, Craig? I have enough on my plate to be going on with.”

“Oh, it’s worse than you think. You are aware that the Cabal has been coming out on top in the contest for the reality cores.”

“I genuinely don’t care.”

“You should. The Network is not the only one threatening to fracture over the behaviour of its most powerful members.”

“Oh?”

“Do you know how vampires grow more powerful, Anna?”

“Time, right? But then you get too powerful and the ambient magic can’t sustain you.”

“Yes,” Craig said. “The old ones have all been slumbering since they reached what you call category four.”

Anna’s eyes went wide.

“Reality cores,” she whispered in horrified realisation.

“Exactly,” Craig said. “It’s not as simple as handing over a core but some of the Cabal’s upper echelons are working on imbuing blood with that power, which should be able to start waking them up. I’ve heard the rumours of the Chinese and Americans having people of that level and they’re probably stronger than an equivalent vampire. How many do they have, though? Two? Three? Five? I promise you that we have more.”

“How many more?”

“I’m not sure any one person knows,” Craig said. “The Cabal is a nest of secrets.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Anna asked. “You’re Cabal. You’re a vampire.”

“And I like the world the way it is. Was, before the damn EOA messed everything up. Even as bad as things have gotten, do you think I want the planet ruled by people with eight-century-old social values and a thirst for human blood?”