

Chapter 351

Media Blitz

Jeremy Westin was surprised to find a freshly-sealed road leading all the way into the isolated bushland area. He followed it to a gate in a chain wire fence, where a sign marked further progress as a private road. There seemed to be something off about the fence but he would need to look closer to identify what it was.

Next to the gate was a security booth. It was circular and made up almost entirely of mirrored glass that didn't allow him to see inside, giving it an unnerving panopticon effect. The fence intersected the circle in the middle, leaving half of the building on each side of the fence. The glass building was incongruously modern amongst the pleasant, bushland surrounds. He wondered about the legality of something that could throw off blinding reflections, although it didn't seem to be doing that at all, despite the sunshine beaming right onto it. Taking a second look, the lack of glare coming off of it was actually quite unusual.

Jeremy pulled up in front of the gate, turned off his car and waited. No one came out and he wondered if the small building wasn't the security station he assumed but some kind of art installation. He stepped out, looking closer at the fence. Instead of the traditional chain-link pattern, the wiring on this fence was deeply varied, as if someone had tried to make a tapestry from a wire fence. The fence also looked a little different in texture and colour to steel mesh he'd seen in the past, but that could easily be a matter of the galvanisation process.

The wiring was shaped into what looked like ideographs from a language he didn't know, and not the same ones in a loop. He suspected that someone who knew the language in question would be able to read the fence like a book, although what language that was eluded him. The closest thing he had seen was hieroglyphs developed by Catholics trying to convert First Nations people in Canada.

He heard a helicopter faintly overhead, although he didn't spot it when he craned his neck to look for it. He walked up to the glass building, of which the only non-glass portion was a steel section on each side where the fence terminated against the wall. There did not appear to be doors. Walking around as much as he could, the building seemed to be made from two complete, unbroken glass curves, one on each side of the fence. He tried cupping his hands to peer through the glass but its reflective surface was impenetrable.

It turned out that there was a door, so seamlessly integrated that Jeremy had missed it entirely. A panel of glass retracted, slightly, with a quiet hiss of air, before sliding out of

the way. It would have revealed the interior of the building if not for an interior wall made of Māori.

“G’day,” Taika said. “Who are you, and why can’t you read the sign? It’s a private road, bro. How about you bugger off so I can go back to looking up photos of Jason Statham with hair?”

Jeremy opened his mouth to speak but a voice behind him beat him to the punch.

“He’s a journalist. Telling them to leave just encourages them.”

Jeremy turned around to see the person behind him. He recognised the face of Jason Asano from the storm of media surrounding the reveal of the two personas, the Starlight Rider and the Starlight Angel. First had come the Angel at the children's hospital, then the Rider in a rolling gunfight on motorcycles. From the beginning, there was debate over whether the two were the same, given that one brought life and the other death.

Rumours linking them to events across Asia and then Africa only fuelled speculation, culminating in the West Africa EVD outbreak. Despite denials from humanitarian workers, rumours persisted of a man who passed through the camps like a miracle healer.

The person healing people in camps was not draped in starlight but described as a mixed-race Asian man. The parallels with the first stories of the Starlight Angel were obvious, however. It was in the wake of this that a small team of journalists starting putting the pieces together and bringing all the events to light. They dug up amateur phone footage, suppressed news stories and myriad firsthand accounts.

Debate flared as to whether the reported events really did or even could take place. The stories and even the footage was so fantastical that most of it was dismissed as hoaxes and film manipulation. Was the Rider, filmed horrifically killing groups of people, the same Starlight Angel being praised as a merciful messenger from God? The reported appearance of other figures, including the dark riders shown in the helicopter news footage from Sydney only muddied the waters.

When the government started releasing a series of inconsistent and ominous public announcements, suddenly there was an explosion in new information about the enigmatic man of starlight. New stories, new footage. A whole slew of reports from China, reportedly suppressed by the government, of a man helping earthquake victims with superhuman powers.

Then the Rider revealed his identity in a small coastal town in New South Wales, captured in a bevy of phone footage. It was so blatant that there was little doubt that the Rider revealed himself to the world on purpose, but he literally vanished. Recordings of the

incident showed many people, primarily Asano's family, appearing to vanish through a magic archway.

Once again there were claims of hoax and doctored footage. Even so, the media immediately turned piranha, descending on the sleepy beach town in a frenzy. What they discovered was that every member of the Asano family had decamped from the town entirely, leaving reporters to scour the town for whatever they could find.

Information started coming in thick and fast. Jason Asano was the brother of a celebrity chef, and footage of his appearances was being juxtaposed with footage from his activities as the Rider. The joking man bantering with his sister as they demonstrated recipes together was a world away from the one massacring drug-fuelled bikers or fighting like a demon when cornered and outnumbered in a Hanoi slum. There was no recorded footage of him ever healing anyone, despite the repeated stories.

The fact that he had been declared legally dead in a hastily covered-up explosion was a key focus of media analysis. Some even postulated that the current Jason Asano was actually an impostor, citing physical differences from his television appearances before and after his reported demise.

Jeremy had sent one of his junior reporters to Casselton Beach, along with the gaggle from other outlets, where unusual stories were turning up from interviewed townsfolk. Asano driving around in a variety of black supercars or being filmed performing elaborate feats of parkour in a park. Some local teenagers found their view counts hitting the stratosphere as their recordings of Jason's parkour antics were revealed in the mainstream media.

Those videos fuelled further speculation regarding an unknown woman apparently putting Asano's young niece through a rigorous training program, including after Jason stopped appearing. That the timing coincided with the activities around the world only cemented Jason as the man of mystery.

Interviews with locals revealed that Asano had been living on an enormous houseboat that appeared out of nowhere one morning and was now gone, just as mysteriously. The houseboat seemed to be a hub of strange activity, from a science-fiction looking helicopter coming and going to strange lights at night to people flying over the water in jet suits that had yet to be released anywhere in the world, let alone, Australia.

The sum total of all these oddities was a media vortex that threatened to swallow up the public warnings being issued as people tried to find the man who could reportedly perform miracles. As a professional participant in the media landscape, Jeremy recognised that something with a lot of power was pushing the Asano narrative hard. There was a lot

of interest in the story, to be sure, but his seasoned sensibilities told him that someone wanted the story painting over whatever else might be going on.

Even so, investigating that meant, like everyone else, investigating Asano. Doing his legwork, he managed to dig up some information about land purchases by Asano's uncle. Looking into Hiro Asano, he discovered that Hiro had been connected to organised crime in Sydney, until just before Jason Asano rose from the grave. At that point he completely extricated himself and moved back to his hometown, living on Jason's houseboat

Further digging led Jeremy to well-buried records relating to a construction project on the expensive chunk of bushland Hiro had purchased. Suspecting this to be the location of the vanished Asano family, Jeremy had come to investigate and now found himself face-to-face with Jason Asano.

There was no indication of how Jason had arrived unnoticed. There was no other vehicle and they were standing in open bushland. At a glance, he seemed a world away from the stories surrounding him, leaning casually against Jeremy's car in shorts, sandals and a Decepticons t-shirt. He had a look of amusement on his face but something in his eyes left Jeremy unsettled. It left him feeling naked, as if Asano was looking at his very soul.

"Hello, Mr Westin," Jason said. "Taika, this is Jeremy Westin. He runs an independent news website called The Westin Front; one of a handful trying to squeak around the media monopoly and do some actual journalism. His speculation about the terrorist readiness exercises has been way off the mark but he's usually pretty good."

"You're Jason Asano," Jeremy said.

"So people keep telling me, but I saw on the news that I'm actually someone else."

"Are you?"

"No. Everyone changes, Mr Westin. I'm not exceptional in that regard."

Jeremy heard fake coughing behind him.

Cough "—load of bull shi—" cough.

Jeremy turned to look at the giant Māori. He turned back to Asano to see that his car had vanished.

"My car."

"We'll take mine," Jason said.

"Yours?"

A terrifying cloud of shadows erupted from Asano, then coalesced into what looked an oversized black hypercar that would not have seemed out of place in a Batman movie. The gullwing doors opened of their own volition and Jason ducked into the driver's seat.

Jeremy stood frozen on the spot, eyes like poached eggs. He almost stumbled over when Taika gave him an encouraging slap on the back. Jason leaned over in the car to speak to Jeremy through the open door.

"Mr Westin – can I call you Jeremy? Jeremy, I don't have a lot of time, for reasons that will become apparent with tragic alacrity. That means that I need you to make a choice now: either get in and learn the single biggest secret on this planet or I give your car back and you leave. You're the first to find us, but your contemporaries will be close behind and I can give one of them the story instead."

Jeremy blinked, still getting over the one-two punch of overt magic and a back slap that seemed to have realigned several vertebrae. He warily entered the car, looking around at the interior like it would champ down and bite him. The gullwing doors closed and his face showed a trapped expression.

"So what do you think of the security booth?" Jason asked.

"What? Uh, it's an odd piece of glasswork. That reflective treatment seems unusual."

"It's not actually glass," Jason said. "That's the cool thing. It's an aluminium-based ceramic. With a few tweaks."

In front of them, the gate started rolling aside and Jeremy's eyes fell on the fencing again.

"Tweaks?" he asked. "Like the wire on the fence?"

"Good eye," Jason said as the car started moving. Jeremy noticed that Asano wasn't touching the steering wheel or the pedals, but he'd conjured the car out of solid shadows, so that wasn't really worth mentioning.

"Things are about to get crazy," Jason said. "The big news companies are using me to mask the very important warnings trying to go out, although I think the government announcements are doing better in countries where more than two companies are owning ninety percent of the media. I don't have to tell you that."

"Why are you showing me these things?" a rattled Jeremy asked.

"Because either today or tomorrow, an interdimensional war with an endless, unrelenting enemy is going to start across the world."

"What?"

Jason drew into the main thoroughfare of the family village, parking in front of the large residence. Erika was waiting for him out front. The street was awash with activity, with many stopping to look as Jason pulled up. Mostly they were Asanos, but not all. Jason spotted Taika's mum loudly directing people as she organised something inside of

the gathering halls. She gave Jason a wave and then went back to yelling at some of Jason's cousins who had paused in the process of carrying a table.

"What's up, Eri?" Jason asked as he stepped out of the car.

"Shade tells me you've been explaining magic to a reporter."

"Someone is clearly building up a specific narrative. I figure that we use the attention on me to put our own out there."

"Ignoring the fact that what you just described is the network's job, not ours, Shade told me that you were doing the explaining yourself."

"Who else was going to do it?"

"Shade, or anyone else that isn't you."

"He needs to know."

"Assuming that's true, you're literally the worst person to explain it to him."

"I'm not that bad."

"So you haven't been dropping bombs with zero context to see how googly you can make his eyes go?"

"Shade, you're a traitor," Jason said.

"Fun is for people with time," Shade said from Erika's shadow. "We have very little of it, so I decided that your sister would be the better introduction for Mr Westin. All you did was unnerve the man for your own amusement."

Jason groaned his concession and he and Erika turned to where Jeremy was still in the car. Jeremy yelped as the car dissolved into darkness around him and he fell to the ground while the shadows were being drawn into Jason's shadow. Jason helped Jeremy to his feet as a motorised scooter came zipping along the thoroughfare.

"Uncle Jason!"

Emi didn't fully stop the scooter before stepping off, allowing the momentum to carry her into a power hug.

"G'day, Moppet," Jason said, returning the hug. "I thought you'd be off working for the Network."

"Farrah had them assign me to Coffs because it's closer to home. I have my own security escort!"

"Someone reliable, I hope."

"It's Ruth and Greg, since they aren't working with Uncle Kai right now."

Jason could sense them both, meandering in the direction of the main thoroughfare. Emi didn't need constant guarding when she was with family.

"Speaking of Kai," Erika said, "Jason, how long before you two are back in the air?"

“Enough time to sleep,” Jason said. “Once Kaito is back at full charge, we’re back at it. The goal is to set up a series of potential teleport destinations so I can get around the country by hopscotching portals. I can portal to anyplace I can halfway remember, so I’m just hanging out on various places while Kaito takes a break. ”

“Let me take care of the journalist,” Erika said. “Emi can take you to our other guest and then I’ll bring the reporter back to you for an interview before you hit the sack.”

“The other guest being our Japanese visitor?” Jason asked. He could already sense an unfamiliar silver-ranker. She was a core-user but her aura had none of the usual sloppiness. Instead, it was clean and sharp.

“Yes,” Erika confirmed.

As Jason’s thoughts drifting to core users, he noticed the absence of his sister in law.

“Amy’s not here?” Jason asked.

"She's still organising civic preparedness for when things kick-off," Erika said.

The Casselton region was too scattered to warrant a permanent Network scanning presence. The Network had foisted the area onto Jason, despite his having evacuated his family. It wouldn’t take too much of his time to portal in and check the area for proto-spaces every couple of days between patrols. The concern was that a manifestation out of his dimensional compass range could lead to a dimensional breach in a neighbouring area. Once the monsters arrived, there was nothing to stop them from wandering in.

For this reason, Amy, as mayor, was preparing to commandeer all the accommodation in the tourist towns of Casselton Beach, Castle Heads and Casselton North. They all fell comfortably inside the range of the compass, if used in the central town of the three, Castle Heads.

Once people started realising the new reality about to descend on them, Amy would be ready to collect most of the regional populace into the three towns. It wouldn’t prevent monsters arriving from out of range but was better than just leaving people to their fates. Few small towns had as much protection.

“Alright, Jeremy,” Jason said. “I’m going to leave you in the capable hands of my sister while I go deal with the Next Damn Thing. Emi, lead the way.”

Chapter 352

Grandmotherly Advice

"We've got her in the guest wing of the main house," Emi said.

"There's a guest wing?" Jason asked.

"It's better than the holding cells, plus only Farrah would be able to get her in there."

"There are holding cells?"

"Farrah thought we would need somewhere to handle intruders until we figure out what to do with them. Plus, a drunk tank. We even have a magically reinforced divvy van. It's all in the administration quarter."

"That's thorough planning, I guess."

"She's up here," Emi said as she pointed at the section of the main residence ahead of them. Jason stopped walking.

"No she's not," he said.

"She's meant to be," Emi pouted.

Jason ruffled his niece's hair and she shoved his hand away, annoyed.

"It seems she wanted a look around. You run off, Moppet, and I'll sort it out."

"I want to see."

"Shade," Jason said.

Shadows emerged out of Jason and Emi's shadows, wreathing Emi in a jet suit that took off and flew her away with a yelp.

"I'll get you Uncle Jason!" her voice rang out of the village as Jason laughed, giving her a wave as she disappeared over a rooftop.

Asano Akari watched a girl spitting invective fly past the rooftop on which she was crouched. She frowned at the unusual sight.

"There are dark days ahead," a voice said and she stood up, whirling to face it. She hadn't sensed his presence at all, despite her silver-rank hearing and aura senses. She still couldn't make out his aura despite his being close enough that she should be able to smell him, which she couldn't.

"We should take our fun where we can get it," Jason said. "There's sadness enough to come."

"You are Asano Jason."

"Seriously, what is with people? Do I have amnesiac tattooed on my forehead?"

"I am Asano Akari," she said.

“G’day. I know we named this place Asano Village but you came an awful long way to visit.”

Examining the woman, Jason was struck by how much the woman resembled the sword at her hip. Her body and aura both were lean and sharp. The way she moved was swift, precise and efficient. Her hair was cinched back in a practical ponytail, her clothes were sleek and fitted while her face had the polished perfection of silver-rank. Although they did not look the same, Jason couldn’t help but be reminded of his first encounter with Sophie. This woman was all sharp edges.

He glanced at the sword hanging from her belt. It was a chokutō, a Japanese straight sword, and his magical senses told him it wasn't conjured. It was a genuine magical item of exquisite craftsmanship, at least physically. For the magical component, he would need to look closer.

People with weapon essences fell into three camps. One conjured their weapons, usually with multiple options for multiple situations. Another used the best weapon of their type that they could find, using their abilities to enhance them further. The last type did both, using their real weapon personally and employing conjured weapons for various unusual attacks and abilities. The weapon essence users Jason knew well, Valdis and Gary, fell into the second category, although he had met individuals of all three types.

“I’ve been told why you’re here,” Jason said, “but that didn't come across as very flattering as regarding your intentions. How about you tell me about why you've come here and we go from there.”

She looked Jason over. He looked like anyone off the street with his casual clothes, but his undetectable aura gave that the lie. He seemed to be standing at ease, but she could spot his careful balance, ready to move in an instant.

“You are of the assassination type,” she said.

“If you could call a man with an axe a tree assassin,” Jason replied. “It takes some hacking away to get the job done.”

“You accumulate damaging effects instead of making a decisive strike. Unusual for someone with a focus on stealth.”

“Really? When you’re waiting for a monster the size of a traditional rustic cottage to die, good stealth feels like exactly the thing you want, trust me.”

“Many believe that our powers reflect our true natures. Your way of fighting lacks honour.”

“Yep,” Jason agreed with a chuckle, looking at the sword on her hip. “Honour is how people with fancy swords fight people with sticks and claim it’s a fair fight.”

“That is a poor characterisation of honour.”

“And you came to my house to tell me I have none, which is a poor demonstration of respect.”

Akari nodded, acknowledging the point.

“I passed the first test, then?” Jason asked. “Something along the lines of not flipping out when provoked?”

“The assessment is ongoing,” Akari said.

“Then the next question is what gives you the right to come here to judge me and mine?”

“My family has been part of the Network of centuries. When you rose to prominence, we investigated your background and we do, indeed, have a shared ancestor.”

“That’s a fun fact that doesn’t answer my question. How far back is this ancestor, out of curiosity?”

“Early Edo period,” she said.

“The seventeenth century? Not exactly second cousins, then, are we? Which makes me wonder again why I should give a damn about anything you have to say about how we do things here.”

“My family believes in honour, dignity—”

“You keep talking about your family but I didn’t ask about them and I don’t care. State your business.”

She gave him a flat, steely glare that had no discernible impact.

“We have neither the right nor any interest in telling your family how to behave,” Akari said. “How you handle your affairs is your concern and your concern alone.”

“Glad we got that settled,” Jason said. “I don’t know where you parked but the guy at the gate will let you out. I think they’ll start closing airports pretty soon, so you might want to get a move on.”

“My family is well known in Network circles,” she said.

“Aaaand we’re back to the family. If there’s any kind of point you’re edging up on, that would be great. It’s kind of a busy week for me.”

“You have started to shape your family into a clan,” she said. “How you conduct yourselves is not our affair, but you share our name. If you flounder and collapse, that reflects on us, fairly or not. We don’t care what you do, only that you are strong. Right now, your nascent clan stands or falls with you.”

“So you came to make sure I had the goods so this whole project doesn’t collapse in a pile and make you look bad.”

“Yes.”

“So what happens now?” Jason asked. “We fight?”

“That would be pointless,” Akari said. “Your capability in that area is well-documented, but you cannot carry a clan on the strength of arms alone. You need leadership. Management. Foresight. You need to choose subordinates well and raise your people up as a whole. You have to weather setbacks and resolve challenges. Know when to stand firm and when to bend. This last one is something we have heard may be your weakness, yet can be the most important.”

“That doesn’t sound like the kind of assessment where you do a quick few interviews and pass out a survey,” Jason said.

“No. It will be extensive, carried out in a time of challenge and transition. If you can thrive in the coming days then we will be satisfied.”

“And why should we put up with any of this?” Jason asked. “You have no authority over me or my people and acting like you do is kind of giving me the irk.”

“For the duration of the assessment, you will have something that your fledgling clan very much needs: an additional, expert category three.”

“You’ll come work for us while you’re doing your little checks?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll actually do what you’re told? We already have the obnoxiously independent leadership position filled.”

“I will act as directed, within reason, and make clear beforehand when asked to operate beyond the limits I am willing to tolerate.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “I’ll take it to the family and we’ll talk it out. What happens if we tell you to take a hike?”

“Then I will leave and we will hope that your clan is consumed in the coming crisis, which is an acceptable demise that will not reflect poorly on us. Should you survive, once things have settled, then further action will be considered.”

“Good to know.”

Jason sought out his paternal grandmother. Her name was Yumi, although anyone that used it got a glare that stung like a slap across the ear. Yumi had been fully versed in magic during Jason’s time away, through the Network’s induction program.

She had one of the bushland residences, nestled amongst the trees. Jason sensed her up on the balcony and leapt two stories up with his cloak floating around him, which disappeared as he alighted on the wooden floor.

“Polite people knock,” Yumi told him from over a cup of tea. She was sitting at an outdoor table made from native wood.

“I was hoping you could help me with something, Grandmother.”

“This is about our visitor?”

“You’re the only member of the family who was actually Japanese. I was hoping you could share some insights.”

Yumi had come over from Japan with her late husband, shortly before their first child was born. Things had not been easy for Japanese immigrants in the seventies, but they had thrived, eventually becoming naturalised citizens.

Jason talked Yumi through his conversation with Akari.

“What do you think she really wants?” Jason asked. “There’s no way the Japanese Network gives up someone of her skill and power now. Even if she was already on her way here when the grid went down, they should have had her on a plane home immediately. They definitely shouldn’t be offering her up for some open-ended service to a fledging Network family in a different country.”

Yumi had quietly taken in Jason’s explanation and did not respond immediately, sipping delicately at her tea.

“Jason, I have heard it said that you and Miss Hurin are extremely valuable to the Network. Without your usual braggadocio and nonsense, how valuable are you, exactly?”

“Priceless,” Jason said. “So long as we cooperate, we represent knowledge and resources that doesn’t stop paying off. We’ve been offering it on the cheap, too, because protecting the world from monsters is the goal, not a means to profiteer from.”

“There is your answer, then,” Yumi said. “The Asano Network family in Japan want to use our connection, tenuous as it is, to gain advantages from you.”

“Then why come in so aggressively like this?” Jason asked.

“To save face. Their intention is to offer you a service in providing an expert when you need it most. They most likely believe that you will feel obligated to return the favour should their darkest day come to pass. This woman is not here to judge you but as an overture. How she is conducting herself is simply a show of strength, so as for her Asano family to not show weakness in front of ours, maintaining their face.”

“Do you think we should accept that overture?” Jason asked.

“That depends,” Yumi said. “Would she truly be an asset to us?”

“With the state the family is in and what is about to happen? Absolutely. It will be years before we produce our own people even close to her calibre.”

“Then are you willing to reciprocate, when the time comes?”

“I think that’s something I can live with,” Jason said. “Provided there aren’t any unseen dangers lurking below the surface.”

Yumi nodded her approval.

“Yes,” she said. “Make sure that this isn’t an attempt to lure you into some specific troubles.”

“If I find something out, we turn her away, then?”

“No,” Yumi said. “If she’s hiding something then we don’t reject her. If they are dealing with us in bad faith, we close our fist around them.”

“Ah,” Jason said. “We don’t turn her away but demand more.”

“Exactly,” Yumi said. “So long as you are confident of handling whatever mess they want to bring you into, we milk them for all they’re worth.”

Jason nodded.

“I’ll call a meeting of the family to make a final decision, then.”

He moved to jump off the balcony when his grandmother spoke and he paused.

“Jason,” she said. “Did I ever tell you that you were my favourite grandchild?”

“No, Grandmother.”

“Good, because you’re not. You are coming along, though.”

Jason chuckled and leapt over the railing, leaving his smiling grandmother behind.

Chapter 353

A Bloke With Vast Cosmic Power

On a busy Sydney street, people backed off as an archway filled with darkness rose up in the middle of the footpath. Some quick thinkers immediately pulled out their phones, so when, after a few moments, two figures emerged from the arch, they were able to capture it. One was wearing dark robes and impossibly draped in a starry void, while the other was looking rather shell shocked.

Jason pushed the hood back from his head as he looked around.

“I didn’t pick very well,” he said. “Nowhere to park. I feel bad about disrupting traffic.”

He walked into the street where the cars were only crawling along, standing in the path of a car so it stopped. The car ahead slowly moved forward to a full car length, at which point Jason took Jeremy’s car from his inventory, which dropped about thirty centimetres to the road with a crunching sound.

“Oops. How’s your suspension? Never mind, just hurry. We’re holding up traffic, here.”

He turned to Jeremy, who was throwing up in the gutter as more people pulled out their phones.

“Get it together, mate,” Jason said. “You’ve got a story to do. Time to get moving, cobbler.”

Jason helped Jeremy to his feet and led him into the driver’s seat of his car. While a queasy Jeremy was getting settled, Jason looked at the car he had forced to stop. The driver had opened the door to half get out and was also filming with his phone. Jason wandered over to him.

“Sorry about this mate. You know what it’s like finding a park, yeah.”

“You’re really him.”

“Yep. What’s your name, mate?”

“Sanjit.”

“Nice to meet you, Sanjit. Sorry about Jeremy, there. It’s his first time teleporting and he’s not handling it all that well.”

“How do you do those things?” Sanjit asked.

“I’ve got magic powers, Sanjit. Seems crazy, I know, but the spectrum of what constitutes crazy is about to be drastically realigned. There might be some panic, and people always hoard toilet paper when that happens, so I’d advise stocking up now and beating the rush. Hang on a sec.”

Jason moved up to Jeremy's car, where Jeremy had finally settled into the driver's seat, wide-eyed.

"Time to get a shuffle on, bloke," Jason said through the window.

Jeremy gave a dazed nod, started his car and slowly edged it forward. Jason went back to Sanjit.

"I'm suddenly worried if he's okay to drive," Jason said. "Looks like I've caused bit of a hullabaloo, so I'm going to make myself scarce. It was nice to meet you, Sanjit."

"Uh, you too. You're not what I expected."

Jason chuckled and shook Sanjit's hand.

"I'm just an ordinary bloke with vast cosmic power, trying to get by."

Jason flashed him a grin and then went back to the portal, where people were experimentally poking it with their fingers.

"Excuse I," Jason said as he stepped through it and vanished, the portal descended into the ground, leaving a line of darkness that then too disappeared.

Returning to Asano Village, Jason was ready for some overdue rest, but first arranged a meeting of the family decision-makers to take place after he woke up. He took the secret tunnel tram from the main residence, out under the water to where his cloud house now sat at the bottom of the sea. The hidden tram system had been brought online with the rest of the village's magic infrastructure.

Farrah's systems were collecting and delivering magic from elsewhere to fuel it, but certain systems had to be supplemented with spirit coins. Fortunately, Jason had no shortage of iron and bronze coins. The handful of systems in the village requiring silver coins remained dormant.

When Jason had emptied the cloud flask into the water, the cloud house had taken the form of a series of domed rooms, connected by short tunnels. The cloud-stuff domes could be shifted between opaque and transparent and Jason preferred to leave it transparent. When the sun was bright and at the right angles, light reached the depths to illuminate the rooms with a constantly shifting blue light that Jason loved. Other times, the cloud house produced downward-directed, glow lamps that floated over the domes to produce a similar effect.

The reaction to Jason's lighting solution was mixed amongst the few who knew of the cloud house's location. Erika found it distracting while Emi shared her uncles love of the cool, shimmering colour.

Dealing with the reporter and Akari had bitten off a couple of hours of what should have been Jason's time to sleep, or his personal equivalent. Under Farrah's direction, he now entered more of a recuperating trance state that enhanced recovery and maintained a subconscious awareness of his surroundings, even passively expanding his senses. It wasn't the same as being fully alert, but he was easily roused by unexpected stimuli.

It was the middle of the day but Jason was far from the only one whose sleeping patterns had been thrown out of whack. All around the world, Network personnel and others were in a mad scramble to prepare for what was coming. Their efforts were impeded by the chaos in the media, of which the news vortex surrounding Jason was only a part.

Key to the problem was mixed messaging. Some countries had media alerts going out where physicists were talking about dimensional invasion to general disbelief. Others were trying to promote readiness in the population while being vague on the nature of the threat. Add in obfuscating media companies across the globe and it was a giant mess that failed to prepare or inform. There was no way that the media obstructionism would last but the clock was running down before monsters started appearing.

The first recorded incident of monsters manifesting happened in Angola, while Jason was resting. Gem-like monstrosities and blighted earth elementals appeared en masse at a diamond mine. By the time footage started reaching the internet, there were incidents on every continent. Even an Antarctic science team recorded monsters from afar as they evacuated their research station.

In most places around the world, the Network's plans to protect the major population centres proved to be effective. Active searching for proto-spaces around populations centres was working and the spaces were being shut down. People were finally heading for the major centres, although that presented logistical issues of accommodation and overcrowding.

The positive part was that the Network partnerships with civilian governments and the military over the last few years had put in place contingencies that were being immediately enacted, with logistical efforts in the safe zones and Network-supported military response to the monster waves.

It was far from enough to handle the events without loss, however. The death toll rapidly climbed as monsters appeared in isolated and rural areas. The populations were smaller than the cities but whole towns were wiped from the face of the Earth before the overextended response teams were able to intervene.

The day the monsters arrived, the course of human history was irrevocably changed. Those protected in the safe zones watched monster movie footage play across the news as people flooded into the cities. Then, an entirely different kind of movie started playing out.

All over the world, individuals with abilities beyond those of ordinary people started appearing to fight the monsters. These were not the black-fatigued essence users of the Network but colourfully garbed people who appeared in small teams, acting independently of the military and government response.

“Superheroes,” Jason murmured. “That’s genius.”

In the media room of the main residence of Asano Village, Jason was observing a bank of monitors, alongside his closest family members.

“Genius?” Erika asked.

“Think of all the garbled coverage leading up to this,” Jason said. “All the uncertainty and confusion. Now the monsters have come and magic is out there for everyone to see. How are the world governments going to explain this? Are they going to walk people through the complexities of the magical secret societies? The Network, the grid, the secret history? All while people are panicking as monsters emerging from the countryside to slaughter them?”

“People are idiots,” Yumi said. “They always choose a simple lie over a complex truth. Someone wanted this chaos so they can take control of the messaging by giving people a simple answer.”

“Exactly,” Jason said. “The world just went crazy and people aren’t ready to hear about a complex history of secret societies. Superheroes are a paradigm that people can get their heads around. All you need is someone with magic powers, well-defined abdominals and some bright, stretchy fabric.”

“Who are they?” Erika asked.

“The Engineers of Ascension,” Jason said. “The EOA defectors already let the Network know that the media meddling was in preparation to seize control of the narrative with big moves once the monsters started appearing. Now we’re seeing how. What has been the one consistent thing in the news over the last few days?”

“You,” Erika realised.

“Exactly,” Jason said. “They’ve been slowly building up public awareness of me for months, in preparation for today. They were priming the world to accept people with extraordinary powers.”

“How powerful are these superheroes?” Hiro asked.

“We’ve gotten word from a major defector to the American network that the EOA has reached a new threshold in their magical enhancement program. It’s a program to enhance people with magic other than essences and it’s significantly more intrusive. Caustic alchemy baths, surgery to engrave magic runes onto bones. Magic tattoos are the easy part. The result is people who are strong and fast, with a few extra abilities from the magic tattoos I mentioned. These new ones will be silver-rank, and based on what we’ve seen in the past, probably able to boost themselves higher temporarily.”

“They won’t have the experience that Network people have,” Yumi assessed. “They’re going to lose some, but that might work for them. A few heroic sacrifices will go a long way.”

“Most likely,” Jason said. “There’s a reason all those old comic books had the hero looking defeated on the cover.”

“There are teams of these heroes appearing all over the world,” Erika said. “They have this many?”

“I don’t know how many of them will be at this new level of power,” Jason said. “When they were mobilising them in preparation, a lot of the EOA caught wind that something bad was happening and either fought against it or completely defected to the Network. None of these new silver-rank ones, though. Whether through loyalty screening or brainwashing, they knew which side their bread was buttered on and kept their mouths shut.”

“If the EOA had so many defections, it sounds like they messed up,” Ken said.

“No,” Yumi said. “They knew the price and were willing to pay it. They came in ready to make sacrifices in order to grab the initiative.”

“Which is exactly what they’ve done,” Jason said. “Their so-called superheroes are dominating the narrative,” Jason said.

“Piggybacking off of you,” Erika said.

“I’m only a part of it,” Jason said. “Most likely it was opportunism. If I hadn’t come along, it would have made marginal difference to their plan.”

“So, what now?” Erika asked.

“The Network has me on standby right now,” Jason said. “They want me ready to go when silver-rank monsters appear. They also want to establish that the government response can be effective by publicising operations against lower-rank monster swarms, which, in fairness, they are the best at. They don’t want to play into the EOA’s narrative.”

“Does it matter who is telling the story?” Ken asked. “Shouldn’t everyone be out there, doing what they can?”

“No,” Yumi said. “Public reaction is going to be critical in how the long-term response is formed.”

“This is too big for small groups of people to be the centrepiece of the response, even people with powers like Farrah and myself,” Jason said. “That’s the outcome the EOA wants because a broad, military-based response favours the Network. They want to use public opinion to push governments into directing resources their way.”

“This seems like the worst time to be haggling over political points,” Ken said.

“It is,” Jason said, “but the EOA set this into motion, to the point of a revolt forming in their own ranks. Expecting them to act in the public interest now is futile. People are dying and the ones with power are fighting over more power. Some things even an interdimensional monster invasion can’t change.”

“Jason,” Yumi said. “We should have that meeting you scheduled.”

“I don’t think now is exactly the time,” Erika said.

“Yes it is,” Jason said. “We need to discuss a powerful new asset that we may very well need in this new world.”

After bringing the extended Asano family into the village, along with a handful of others, a village committee had been formed to manage the village’s affairs. It had originally begun as a meeting to decide on a name for the village, ultimately settling on Asano Village. Jason had originally wanted that name before later proposing ‘Jason’s Magic Buff Emporium,’ which was resoundingly overruled.

Under Erika’s direction, the committee subsequently evolved into a formalised management group. Specific roles were introduced and membership underwent some early shifting as people took up or begged-off various responsibilities. Erika controlled food logistics, Ken had land development and Hiro was in charge of magical infrastructure. Jason’s paternal grandmother, Yumi, was in charge of medical. A retired doctor, she managed the administrative aspects while Ian was in charge of operations. There were numerous other roles, held both by Asano family members and by other families also in the village.

The extended Asano family made up the majority but there was a scattering of others as well. This included the family members of Asya, Taika, Greg and Emi’s friend Ruby. Kaito’s best friend and former business partner, Benny, had also brought his family as had Erika’s old producer, Wally. Although many of them were left confused, they had all been strongarmed into heading for the village by their family members in the know.

Asya's mother, Rabia, was the member of the village committee representing the non-Asano families and had been working with her daughter over the last few days to introduce everyone at the village to magic. They were using a heavily accelerated version of the Network's induction program.

Jason's role on the committee was not as a permanent member. Although he had become the de facto patriarch of the nascent Asano clan, he was too busy to be involved in the day-to-day management of the village. His formal role was to break voting deadlocks on the committee and set the direction for the family as a whole. He anticipated more than ample outside input in this regard. Generally, the committee would only call on him as needed.

In the meeting of the village committee Jason had called, he presented Akari Asano's proposition of remaining in Asano Village to the group. Debate went around the table but was dominated by Yumi, who highlighted the lack of downside to such a potentially important gain. Consensus was swiftly reached.

"We'll accept her provisionally for the moment, then," Jason said, right as his phone alarm started going off.

"Grandmother," he said as he checked his phone. "I'll have you deal with Akari for now, if you don't mind. It looks like I have work to do."

Chapter 354

A Very Long To-Do List

Strategy meetings to develop effective responses to the monster waves were taking place all over the world. At one such meeting in Sydney, Network and military personnel were discussing the responses still being rolled out, less than a day after the monster waves had begun. Sydney's Director of tactical Operations, Koen Waters, was addressing a meeting being held in a large briefing room.

"In most instances, we anticipate tried and tested methodology to be effective. Existing sweep and clear tactics are the most effective means to rapidly exterminate waves. We foresee three main scenarios where alternative approaches will be more effective. One is when the monsters are clustered together even more than usual and in wide-open spaces. This is a best-case scenario for us because a small number of high-category-operators specialised in area coverage can clear these scenarios. After that, a small team for mop up will be all we need."

"How often can we expect to see this best-case scenario?" Annabeth Tilden asked.

"In the outback, quite frequently," Koen said. "There's an awful lot of flat and empty out there and those are the areas with no dimensional space patrol coverage. This is good news. Australia's geographically-condensed population will see us through this far better than many other nations."

"What's your opinion on the best way to spin this to make us seem in control?"

"Shut up, Other Gordon," Anna said. "This is a strategy meeting, not a political one. What's scenario two, Koen?"

Other Gordon fumed, about to shoot back when he felt the oppression of Koen's aura, leaving him flustered.

"Scenario two is when the landscape is just the opposite. Complex terrain, poor sightlines. It's a bug hunt where the bugs are the size of a bread truck and setting up ambushes."

An Army Major spoke up.

"Military vehicles are much easier to use when not trying to get them through the apertures," he said. "To what degree do you anticipate that compensating?"

"We're rolling out the magically enhanced heavy ordnance program that has been in the works since the category-four incident in England. Major, you should see magically enhanced, vehicle-mounted weapons arriving at bases before the end of the day. Numbers are still limited but we expect them to have an increasing impact as more

enhanced weaponry is mobilised. At the end of the day, though, the best solutions are the small-group special strike teams we've been training up over the last nine months. The ones we're training from scratch aren't ready for deployment, but the retrained teams are already showing positive results."

"You anticipate things being under control, then?" Other Gordon asked.

"Not even close," Koen said. "I'll be discussing the key problems after outlining the scenarios, the third one of which is the problem of power. High-category dimensional spaces contain primarily category-two dimensional entities, along with one or more category threes. Our specialist strike teams have the strength to handle them but not the numbers, while our combined military/Network sweeper teams have the numbers but not the strength."

"Couldn't this scenario be combined with either of the other two?" Anna asked.

"Yes," Koen said. "A scenario one and three combination is harder to deal with than a one, but still manageable. It's combining two and three where things get rough. As we speak, that is the exact situation we're facing at a location in the Blue Mountains. We have multiple strike teams en route, plus Jason Asano."

"This is the man from the news?" the major asked.

"It is," Koen said. "With every analysis we've made of Asano's capabilities, he has turned around and outstripped our projections. Personally, I'm hoping that he never stops, because we do not have what we need to meet the challenges ahead. Too few people, too few resources, too little power."

"I'm assuming this meeting wasn't called just for you to explain how buggered we are," the major said.

"It was not," Koen said. "There is a response that is being tried in some other parts of the world. Africa and Russia are already reporting positive results, only a day into the monster wave. They've been drawing on external support."

"Please tell me you aren't talking about the EOA and their bloody superheroes," Anna said. "League of Heroes my arse."

"No," Koen said.

"I think we need to consider that option," Other Gordon said. "They're getting a lot of positive traction."

"Not an option," Anna said. "Even if we were willing to overlook that they were responsible for this in the first place and then responsible for neutering an effective response in the lead-up, they aren't willing to work with us. Even in situations where we

have arrived together at the same events, they overtly operate alone, with their media teams in tow."

"Their numbers are actually smaller than their media presence would suggest," Koen said. "They do not present the kind of help we need. The Cabal does, and they already have strongholds in the kind of remote, isolated areas where we need increased strategic options."

"So they can claim the credit, too?" Other Gordon asked.

"Actually, just the opposite," Koen said. "The cabal's concern is that their members will get lumped-in with the monsters. If we help keep them hidden until the world has a better handle on everything that's going on, they're offering their secret support."

"Then as the governments representative, I approve," Other Gordon said. "Further, we should be pushing the narrative with our own media teams."

"Absolutely not," Anna said.

"Actually, I agree with Mr Truffett," the major said.

"Who?" Anna asked.

"Me!" Other Gordon roared.

"Oh, right," Anna said. "But no, to media."

"Mrs Tilden," the major said. "Your organisation is used to secrets, but the time for secrets is over. Mr Truffett is not wrong that we are fighting a war on multiple fronts, one of which is public opinion. If we let the Engineers of Ascension control the narrative, that is a beachhead from which they'll launch their invasion. The military has long had protocols for embedding press. We'll use them and show the real face of this conflict."

Anna sighed unhappily but didn't argue back.

"We're willing to discuss it," she said.

A flight of transport helicopters flew over forested mountains. Jason and Akari Asano were just two of a gaggle of essence users, mostly bronze and silvers from strike teams trained by Farrah. Jason and Akari were in Kaito's helicopter, along with one of the strike teams.

The helicopters were on route to where an advanced team had been setting up a landing zone ahead of the monsters' predicted path. The monsters were spread out over a large area, that they were currently flying over. It would be a lengthy and laborious task to dig them all out.

The silver-rank section leader leaned over to speak to Jason.

"I know you do best working independently. You want us to drop you off here?"

"That'd be great," Jason said.

"We're going to jump out here," he told Akari, then turned to the cockpit door.

"HEY KAI. OPEN THE SIDE DOOR."

The cockpit door slid open. Kaito's flight crew, Asya, Greg and Ruby were in front with him.

"I can hear you," Kaito said. "No need to shout."

"WHAT? I CAN'T HEAR YOU OVER THE HELICOPTER!"

"What are you talking about?" Kaito called back. Switching the helicopter controls over to Greg, Kaito got up and stood in the cockpit doorway.

"I THINK SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH YOUR HELICOPTER," Jason yelled into the near-silent helicopter. "IT'S NOT NORMALLY THIS LOUD."

Kaito frowned at him in confusion.

"I WAS WONDERING ABOUT THAT MYSELF," Greg yelled from the front.

Kaito looked questioningly at the Network strike team, who all put their hands over their ears and shook their heads.

"What the hell is going on?" Kaito asked, looking around at his helicopter with worry. "Is it a magic thing?"

Then saw the confused expression on Akari's face and turned a glare on Jason.

"You're an asshole."

The helicopter was filled with laughter as a grouchy Kaito went back to his seat. Slapping a hand on the console, the side door of the helicopter opened up. Still moving at speed, it filled the space with loud, rushing air.

"GET THE HELL OFF MY HELICOPTER," Kaito yelled back, then the cockpit door slammed closed, cutting the cockpit off from the rushing air.

Jason nodded at the door to Akari and they jumped out. Jason made sure he stayed close to her as they dropped, since the cranky Kaito had not activated the slow-fall power of the helicopter. Despite not having a slow-fall power of her own, Akari had leapt from the helicopter with no hesitation. As they closed on the ground, Jason reached out to grab her with a shadow arm and pulled her into his body, using his cloak to arrest their fall.

Jason dropped them lightly into an area with lighter tree coverage and they both turned their heads to the right. A silver-rank monster had sensed their descent and was making a swift but silent path through the trees.

"Let's see what you can do," Jason said and Akari nodded, moving forward.

Despite being a silver-rank monster, it was smaller than most iron-ranks at half the length of a person. A thin, dark green lizard, it had four long legs with feet almost like hands and a flexible tail that ended in a spine-covered bulb. It was quick, jumpy and did a decent job of hiding its aura. There were other silver-rank monsters nearby and it seemed to have tried to use their auras to mask its own. Once it was close, however, they were able to differentiate it.

Jason faded into the shadows as the creature sprung to the attack, engaging Akari in a battle of mobility, speed and quick defences. Physically weak for such a powerful monster, it boasted a suite of special attack forms instead. It shot venomous spines that rapidly regrew on the bulb tail and spat clouds of poison gas that lingered, complicating the environment. It could also spit out a trio of barbed tongues to make flexible, piercing attacks.

Akari was a swordmaster, very much in the vein Jason was familiar with from the other world. She had the ubiquitous combination amongst such essence users of the Sword and Adept essences, in her case matching it with the Magic essence to produce the Master confluence. Forgoing other common choices like the Swift or Foot essences denied her the selection of mobility powers they offered but her adept essence had clearly enhanced her agility. She sprang around the trees almost as easily as the lizard, both of them treating the trees like solid ground and barely putting a foot to soil.

The advantage of her magic essence was that it expanded her repertoire in the face of more exotic abilities. Like other swordmasters, she met attack with attack, her Magic essence giving her more interesting options. It also provided her with a blinking teleport, compensating for the lack of a dedicated mobility essence.

Jason was familiar with the power, which was better in a close-range fight than the teleport Humphrey had from his own magic essence. Akari's ability did not offer long-range travel at higher ranks. Instead, it became more and more effective as a combat ability than Humphrey's or Jason's teleports. Akari left behind after-images that exploded with force and appeared phasing through the lizard, inflicting damage as she passed through it in a briefly incorporeal state.

Akari's sword sliced through the clouds of poison, which split with the blade's passage and dissolved into nothing. Clusters of spine projectiles were deflected by force waves from her swinging sword. The tongues only made one attempt to stab at her, which she nimbly dodged past before bringing her sword down on them. It didn't sever the silver-rank flesh but it did leave the tongues cut and bloody. The lizard snapped them back into its mouth and didn't send them out again.

The silver rank monster was trickier than most, but at the trade-off of much less fortitude. Its silver-rank body was still bizarrely tough for its size but it couldn't take the punishment of a larger monster and Akari eventually landed enough clean hits to take it down.

Akari was a classic swordmaster, the type that was very popular on Adventure Society teams. If they had the ability that matched their high-skill power sets, and Akari certainly did with hers, then their balance of strength and endurance were always welcome. She couldn't frontload damage like Farrah or Humphrey or have the endurance of Jason, but she occupied an efficient middle ground of power and longevity.

"You'd do very well in the other world," Jason told her and she gave him an inquisitive look.

"You really went to a whole other reality?"

"Yep," he said with a sad smile. "I miss my friends but I don't know when I'll get back to them. I have responsibilities here."

"You're going back?"

"Someday."

"How?"

"Figuring that out is on a very long to-do list, and not at the top. Ready to loot your first monster?"

Akari was connected to Jason through his party interface. With Kaito on site, it was not needed to provide comms for the response team, so it was just the two of them. Since they weren't in a proto-space, the lack of magic made the range of Jason's power too small anyway, for effective communication or for looting.

Akari touched the monster and the loot prompt appeared in front of her.

➤ [Would you like to loot \[Toxic Hopper Lizard\]?](#)

"Yes," she accepted and then she grimaced at a face full of rainbow smoke, followed by a huge sack of coins landing on her head, staggering her. They were closely followed by a pair of green, lizard skin boots.

"The trick is to move away before activating the loot power," Jason told her. "Also, if you don't have a storage power, be sure to dodge."

"You could have told me those things beforehand," Akari said, leaning against a tree.

"Is that some humanity poking out from that taciturn exterior? 'Look at me, I'm a very stern clanswoman with a sword. I'm very good at stabbing.'"

“I am very good at stabbing,” Akari said. “You would do well to remember.”

Jason let out a chuckle.

“You don’t seem too sloppy, so let’s split up a little. I’ll keep you in loot range; we won’t run out of monsters.”

“I don’t have anything to keep things taken from monsters in.”

“No worries,” Jason said, tossing her an empty dimensional bag.

“What’s this?” she asked picking it up.

“Dimensional bag,” he said. “Bigger on the inside.”

She held it up in front of her, looking at it with a sceptical expression.

“You’re telling me that this thing is a bag of holding?” she asked and Jason narrowed his eyes at her.

“Do you play Dungeons & Dragons?” he asked.

Her face froze for an instant before she schooled it back into a mask.

“No.”

Chapter 355

Another Step Forward

Akari watched in horror as the leeches crawled off the dried-out remains of what had been, a short while ago, a very intimidating monster. The leeches formed a pile from which a bloody rag shot out to wrap around Jason's hand. The pile then rapidly melted into blood that flowed up and through the rag to finally seep into Jason's skin and disappear.

"Colin can't pop in and out as easily as my other familiars," Jason said. "It's likely as not on account of him being physical, as opposed to incorporeal. When he does come out, though, everybody sure does know about it. Am I talking like a cowboy? It feels like I'm talking like a cowboy. A magic cowboy. That's pretty cool. I bet you could do a great quick-draw combo. On the cheap, too. Gun and swift essences, obviously, but what about the last one? Eye or hand would both work, I reckon. What do you think?"

"Are you an insane person?"

"Probably. This whole ninja warlock thing doesn't seem very plausible."

"We just watched a leech monster devour a two-headed dinosaur."

"That doesn't seem very plausible either," Jason acknowledged. "Good point."

"We just saw that," she said, pointing at the huge ruined monster, "and you're casually discussing some hypothetical essence combination?"

"Lady, you're silver rank. Category three, whatever. Please tell me they didn't just pump you full of monster cores without ever putting you in front of an actual monster?"

"Of course not. I'm just not used to someone who fights like you. You're worse than the dimensional entities."

"Well, that's downright rude, Ma'am."

"Stop talking like a cowboy."

"Counter argument," Jason said in an increasingly sketchy American accent. "What if I double down and get a big hat?"

"What is wrong with you?"

"It took the Network a while to figure that one out. It turns out that once you pass a certain threshold of handsomeness, it starts affecting the ambient magic."

"You are the most aggravating person I have ever met."

"You're not even top three for me. At least you've calmed down some."

"You think I'm calm?" she asked incredulously.

“Perhaps calm isn’t the right term. At ease, maybe. At least you’ve stopped thinking about the fact that every other time you’ve gone on a monster hunt, there were a lot fewer monsters around you and a lot more allies.”

“You’re trying to be supportive? This is the way you do that?”

“You’re not the type to respond to regular sympathy, especially not from a man famous for his lack of sincerity. You’re not my first tsundere.”

“I am not... are you looking to get buried in the forest, never to return?”

“Oh, you can bury me in the forest but I wouldn’t be so confident on the never-to-return part. Resurrection is kind of my thing.”

“You’re saying you can’t be killed?”

“Oh, I can be killed just fine,” Jason said. “It does make me a little cranky, though, so I’d advise against it. Now, I’d love to keep on chatting away, but we do have to deal with the monsters bearing down on us right now.”

“What?”

“You haven’t sensed them yet?”

Akari concentrated on extended her senses, detecting a swarm of weak but multitudinous auras coming their way. She recognised them as wisps from their aura as they were a creature she had encountered in the past. They normally appeared in one of two circumstances: either in swarms or as bait, luring victims into ambushes by more dangerous monsters.

Individually, wisps were feeble and frail creatures whose only attack was a mana drain. Their level of threat was based on the combination of their rank and numbers, as well as how well-equipped their would-be victims were to fight incorporeal entities. Any form of magic attack could affect incorporeal creatures to some degree, but only specialised attacks were truly effective.

Akari had attacks effective against such creatures and the approaching auras were universally bronze-rank. This meant they posed only a limited threat to her, even in the massive numbers she could sense. Her concern was Jason, who was no higher rank than the monsters. He was also known, from her family’s investigations, to specialise in fleshly enemies with few area attacks.

She shifted a tense gaze from the direction of the approaching swarm to glance at Jason, going wide-eyed as she spotted him standing with a sandwich in one hand and what looked like iced tea in the other.

“What are you doing?” she asked and he looked down at his hands in confusion.

“Do you not know how sandwiches work? How sheltered was your upbringing? Were you raised in some isolated mountain fortress? Was there a hot springs episode?”

“I am not an anime character,” she said through gritted teeth.

Jason flashed her an impish grin.

“Boys, why don’t you go out and save the nice lady the trouble?” he asked. Gordon and a handful of Shade’s bodies emerged and dashed off into the trees. Akari tracked them by their auras and magical emanations as they clashed with the approaching swarm. Gordon’s beam attacks vaporized the creatures as they repeatedly passed through the swarm, while the Shades eradicated every one he encountered with a touch. His ability to mana drain outstripped theirs easily and it turned out that they were highly susceptible to their own form of attack. As each was drained in an instant, they dissolved into barely perceptible motes of dust.

Akari sensed the pair of familiars methodically eliminate the wisps like they were painting over an exposed wall until there was nothing left to sense. She and Jason moved to the location of the startlingly brief battle as Jason’s familiars returned to him.

“Good job, blokes,” Jason said as the familiars disappeared back into him. Still eating his snack, a pair of shadow arms emerged from his cloak to trail their fingers through the dust as he walked over the battle site.

➤ [Would you like to loot \[Greater Forest Wisp\]?](#)

He left the area before triggering the looting so the rainbow smoke wouldn’t impair the enjoyment of his sandwich. Once he did, the colourful mist rose up and out from the tree canopy over quite a large area.

“I reckon we swing east, where those things came from next,” he asked. “I suspect we’ve pretty much cleared out this direction. What do you think?”

After regrouping with the main Network force, Jason sent most of Shade’s bodies out to sweep the region for monsters. The Network teams were regrouping and switching to a mop-up protocol as they hunted down any straggling monsters. They were easy to miss in the sprawling forest region and he coordinated with other essence users deploying their own scouting abilities, like Kaito and his drones.

The base camp was being packed up, although the tactical teams remained on standby in case they needed to move rapidly if the scouts found something unexpected. Jason sat in a quiet corner, meditating to consolidate the gains of his latest experiences.

Akari joined him in meditation, hers differing in that she had laid out a mat with a ritual circle stitched into it and was holding a monster core in her hands. After joining up with the Network team, her reserve that Jason had cracked open went back in place, although she was not quite as cool with him. That was not the same as friendly, though, as she remained wary of the strange man who mixed absurdity, power and horror in equal measure.

Individual essence abilities each felt different as they ranked up. As another of Jason's crossed the threshold to silver, he felt an icy cold within the depths of his soul, although it did not offer pain or discomfort. It was a part of him, and a part he felt warmly about, despite the chilly sensation.

-
- Ability [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark) has reached Bronze 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark) has reached Silver 0 (00%).
 - Ability [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark) has gained a new effect.

Ability: [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark)

- Familiar (ritual, summon).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Summon a [Shadow of the Reaper] to serve as a familiar.
- Effect (bronze): Summoned familiar has bronze-rank vessels with additional abilities.
- Effect (silver): Summoned familiar has silver-rank vessels with additional abilities.
- Ability [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached silver rank.

Akari sensed the shift in Jason's magical state, even catching a glimpse of his normally hidden and rather intimidating aura.

"What ability was it?" Akari asked.

"One of my familiar summons, Shade," Jason said. "I'll need to resummon him before he can use his new strength. I've been trading resources in preparation for resummoning all my familiars ever since I first started working with the Network."

"Is it resource-intensive?" she asked. "I've known very few essence users with familiars, most of them ritualists in support teams."

Jason nodding, knowing that was typical across the Network.

“I have most of what I need,” he said. “Silver-rank materials are still somewhat thin on the ground, though and the materials for Gordon are proving especially tricky.”

“Which one is Gordon?”

“The one who looks like he has the God’s Eye Nebula inside him.”

“And he’s called Gordon.”

“He doesn’t have to let what he is define him,” Jason said. “Unfortunately, it does define how to summon his silver-rank vessel. I’m pretty sure the Americans and the Chinese have what I need but I’m not on great terms with either of them. I kind of hauled off on Americans when they tried to recruit me.”

“Why?”

“I made some implications about their policies as a nation.”

“You think your government would be any better if they had America’s global power?”

“No,” Jason said, like a child admitting he hadn’t made his bed.

“What about the Chinese?”

“There have been allegations that I may have filmed some things while I was passing through their country. Footage that possibly might have mysteriously found its way to the international press.”

“What kind of things?”

“Camps, mostly. Not the toasted marshmallow kind. You might have seen some of it on the news a few months back.”

“Is there anyone who doesn’t immediately dislike you?”

“What are you talking about? People love me.”

“I’m still not sold on this idea,” Jason said. He was back in Asano Village, walking alongside Farrah. He had placed the cloud house back in its flask and set it up in a grassy field just outside the village for a special event, at Farrah’s insistence. He had set it up in the form of a single hall, with an open space and amphitheatre seating.

The vortex manipulator was sucking ambient magic in through the building’s roof, disrupting the village’s magic but it was a temporary necessity. Conducting a silver-rank ritual would otherwise require heavily charged mana lamps.

As they left the village thoroughfare, Jason and Farrah were far from the only ones walking over the grass toward the hall. Members of the Asano family and other village residents were collectively moving across the field to head inside. Many of them were pointing out Jason to one another since he was now a celebrity who many of them had barely met.

“Most of these people haven’t seen some proper magic,” Farrah said. “They’ve seen magical effects on the news and here in the village, but now they can see a proper ritualist at work.”

“I’m a proper ritualist?” Jason asked.

“You’re adequate.”

Jason grinned at Farrah’s disapproving expression, knowing how demanding Farrah’s standards as an instructor could be. Her adequate was high praise.

“It means a lot coming from you,” he said. “Thank you.”

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

“I’m not sure that resummoning Shade is the ritual to introduce them with, though.”

“It’ll be fine,” Farrah said. “It can’t be as bad as with Colin, right? You’re not going to bleed out your butt hole and pass out, right?”

“I didn’t bleed out my butt hole.”

“You bled out of everywhere. We thought you might be dead.”

“It went a lot better when I resummoned him at bronze-rank.”

“You know, having a familiar of higher rank than you can be strenuous at higher ranks,” Farrah said. “It’s one of those awkward aspects of being close to a rank-up. You should be fine, given your soul strength, though. Maybe not when you’re pushing up against diamond, I don’t know, but that will be a good problem to have.”

“Yes it will,” Jason agreed.

They went into the hall where people were being organised into the seating. Managing the villagers was the village committee role of Jason’s Nanna, who was very lively after months of recovery from her Alzheimer’s. She had a small staff who were making sure people found places to sit without contention.

The villagers watched as Jason and Farrah set up the ritual circle on the stone floor the cloud house had replicated for the hall, tracing out lines with chalk. It was a large and complex ritual circle with silver spirit coins and silver-rank dark quintessence gems set out in many small piles.

“You know you can get ritual bowls to hold those things,” Farrah said. “Kind of like those little bowls Greg uses for board game bits, except magic and expensive.”

“I don’t think those can be sourced locally,” Jason said.

“Probably not,” Farrah acknowledged.

“Okay, I think we’re good,” Jason said as they completed adjustments to the ritual diagram. Farrah moved over to Erika, who took over crowd control, telling everyone to settle down as Farrah subtly quieted the group with her aura.

“What you’re about to witness is magic,” Erika announced. “Proper, wizards and spell-book magic. You are all going to watch in silence, or There Will Be Repercussions.”

Farrah emphasised Erika’s words with a slight aura surge and the audience felt like gravity was pushing them into their seats. Farrah and Erika took their own seats at the front, next to Emi, leaving Jason alone in the middle of the hall with the ritual circle, in total silence.

He started chanting, his intonations cold as the merciless void of space. As he chanted, the ambient magic was stirred up to the point that even normal people could feel it, but Jason’s aura was projecting out, leaving them frozen in place.

“I call to the realm beyond cold and darkness, where death has no meaning for life has no place. Let mine be the dark beyond darkness, falling on the final road to the end of all things. Let mine be the shadow of death.”

The shift in the ambient magic started to affect physical reality as the hall grew dim. With the final word of the chant, the hall was plunged into darkness yet not a sound disrupted the ritual, the onlookers still arrested by Jason’s aura. A point of cool celestial starlight appeared on the floor and started slowly tracing out the magic diagram until the ritual circle was shedding dim light throughout the hall.

In the darkness between the lines, the piles of coins and quintessence sank into the floor like they were melting. Jason’s aura faded, only for a new one to take its place, spreading out from the ritual circle. It had the feel of an infinite void, inexorably waiting for all things to enter, patient with the certainty that they inevitably would.

A dark figure rose up from the centre of the circle. Then another and another, shadowy forms barely visible in the light of the glowing circle at their feet. The only truly discernible features the dark figures had was that they seemed to be wearing cloaks, within the hoods of which were bright, silver eyes.

Jason could see much more clearly than the others and was startled by what he saw. Not only were the eyes mirrors of his own but Shade’s new bodies kept coming and coming. At bronze rank, Shade had seven bodies and Jason had expected around a dozen or maybe fifteen at silver. New bodies kept rising up to crowd the circle until thirty-one Shades were standing in the room.

With each new body, Shade’s intimidating aura grew stronger, until the last body finally appeared and it vanished, like a magic trick. The light returned to the hall, the ambient cloud house lighting that was familiar at least to Jason and his closest companions. The dark bodies rushed forward in a wave, vanishing into Jason’s shadow until only one remained, standing in front of him.

“Another step forward,” Jason said.

“Yet many are to come,” Shade answered. “This world is large and not the only one demanding your attention. And beyond them lies the infinite.”

“That’s a little above my rank, right now,” Jason said.

“Since when did that ever stop you?” Shade asked.

Chapter 356

Tactical Flexibility

The residents of Asano Village spilled out of the hall into the blessed sunshine, freed from Jason's domineering aura and the unnatural darkness they had been plunged into. Even though the darkness had faded, reaching sunlight coming down from open sky still felt like an escape.

Once outside, many made a beeline for the village, putting the amazing but unnerving demonstration of magic behind them. Others stopped to watch as Jason returned the solid building they had just been occupying to a flask, like putting a genie back into a bottle. Jason's other close friends and family had seen it before and had already paused their other activities longer than they should, thus were rushing back to resume them. The exceptions were Farrah and Emi, who stood by Jason as the building slowly dissolved into cloud-stuff that snaked its way into the bottle.

"You got the recordings for Terrance alright?" Jason asked.

"I haven't checked them but it should be fine," Farrah said. "Once I get back to Sydney I'll give them to him. You really need to rank up that portal ability, Jason."

"One power at a time," Jason said. "I'm going to put Shade through his paces, now that he's ranked up. You're higher-rank than me now, Shade, so I'm anticipating you doing most of the work while I slack off."

"Miss Emi," Shade said. "If you find yourself in need of a shadow-based familiar once you obtain essences, I think you and I should talk."

"Traitor!" Jason exclaimed.

After returning the cloud house to its hidden location underwater, Jason wanted to go out and explore Shade's expanded limits and capabilities. In the village thoroughfare, Shade took the form of a motorcycle which Jason climbed on and they took off.

The front gate at the edge of the property was around three kilometres from the village proper and there was a large crowd on the other side as Jason pulled to a stop. On either side of the road, tents and campers had been clustered.

Once the location of the Asano compound had been released in the press, panicked people had come seeking the Starlight Rider's protection rather than head for the designated safe zones. Mixed in were some with fringe opinions about him that Jason had no interest in. As he pulled up behind the gate he spotted signs and placards welcoming

the messenger of God, decrying the Antichrist and an oddly large number mentioning chemtrails.

“Has Kaito been leaving condensation trails with his helicopter?”

“No,” Shade said.

“What’s the chemtrail thing about, then?”

“I don’t know,” Shade said. “Something I have learned in my very long life is that not all knowledge is worth possessing.”

“A font of wisdom, as ever, Shade.”

Aside from the would-be refugees and the loons, there was a contingent of press, present, in what Jason suspected to be one of the least coveted jobs in the current media landscape. He looked over at the sketchy portable toilets that someone was charging for the use of and confirmed that suspicion on the spot.

Numerous people had attempted to bypass what seemed like the simple security of a chain-link fence, even if it was a rather odd one. What they discovered was that anyone who attempted to climb over it passed unconscious, courtesy of the mana-draining field Farrah and Hiro had built into it.

In one instance, a press helicopter had attempted a flyover of the property, only for the pilot and passengers to wake up in a different state with no helicopter, no recording equipment and no idea what happened.

Those who tried to cut their way through the fence suffered considerably worse, discovering that the fence wasn’t so much electrified as it shot lightning bolts.

The village largely ignored the people gathered outside so long as they adhered to two rules: leave a space around the security room and keep the road clear. This second rule was currently being broken by the press gathering in front of the gate to shout over one another, firing questions at Jason.

“You’re obstructing a public thoroughfare,” Jason said. His voice was soft yet somehow carried across the whole group, which fell into silence as Jason’s aura descended. He could see frantic eyes light up with the desire to mob rush the gate as it started to slide open but Jason continued to use fine aura control to not just keep them in place but have them scramble back off the road.

Before he set off, Jason looked around the reporters for the one that was holding up the best against his suppression. He relaxed the strength of his aura against that one person to almost nothing and the man fought through the fear to yell out a question.

“You haven’t allowed press into the compound since before the dimensional invasion began. What are you hiding?”

Jason turned, his silver eyes falling unerringly on the man despite his position at the back of the pack. Then he grinned.

“What I’m hiding is my family. I don’t know if you’ve heard, but there are monsters about.”

Without waiting for a response, Jason’s bike shot off like a rocket.

“...but there are monsters about.”

Anna muted the television on the wall of her office with a groan.

“Why does he keep running into the press?” she complained. “He has magical stealth powers.”

“Because I asked him to,” Terrance said.

“You did this?”

“Of course I did,” Terrance said. “The EOA went to the trouble of legitimising him, after all. We’ve been doing the faceless government response thing and I get it: we want to show everyone that there’s a system in place and that society isn’t crumbling around us. Yet. But the EOA has been kicking us up and down the street with the good-looking superhero act and we need a human face for people to get behind.”

With the Network transitioning their Media Interdiction department into the more traditional Media Relations department, the new Director of Media Relations was Terrence.

“Publicity is a secondary concern at this point.”

“Right up until it isn’t,” Terrance said. “Did you know the superheroes are claiming credit for the grid?”

“They’re admitting to taking it down?”

“NO, they’re claiming that they were secretly keeping away the monsters until terrorists took down their early warning system.”

“They’re claiming to be us?”

“Anna, if they convince the public that they’re us, it’s only a matter of time before governments start switching their support from us to the EOA.”

“That’s insane.”

“I don’t think they care. They know that we’re busy protecting the world with a massive outlay of people and resources. They’re busy taking credit for it using a few flashy idiots in spandex with dedicated media crews.”

“They’re not actually wearing spandex, are they?”

“No, their costume design is actually pretty fabulous,” Terrance conceded.

"You do realise," Anna said, "that if you go with Asano, your human face of the Network is not actually human."

"He's from a small town, Sweetie, not space."

"Never mind. He's not actually Network, either."

"Look," Terrance said. "Asano is charismatic, great at handling the press and he has this light and dark thing that plays amazingly with most of our test demographics."

"You've done focus groups?"

"Of course we have. He tests low with older people, which is partly just racism and partly a religious-based backlash to everything going on. That's actually a positive, though, because it shows that he's the face of magic, not the EOA's knock-off Justice League. He does great with the other demos, though because he has these dichotomies that balance each other out across the board. The lefties love supporting him because he's not white and it makes them feel good about themselves. The conservatives are on board because of the footage we've leaked of him riding around the outback on a motorcycle, tearing through monsters."

"You've been releasing our combat footage?"

"Don't worry about that. He's got that easy-going larrikin thing that makes him relatable, but he's also shrouded in mystery. His powers are dark, dangerous, which brings in the edgelords but he's also running around healing people like emo Jesus. Actually, Farrah should have some footage for me that will let us show off that dark power thing a little more."

"You want to play up the dark powers when people are scared of monsters running around?"

"People need to know that someone is going to save them right now. The EOA has been selling this superhero narrative and people are eating it up, so we have to sell it better. They've been showing off a bunch of second-rate supermen but they've forgotten that people like Batman more. Asano is an Australian, multicultural, yobbo Bruce Wayne."

"And you can sell this? I've met the man and he's mostly pushy and weird."

"You think I picked him on a whim?" Terrance said, "I'm a professional, Anna. I watched every bit of footage we have on him, went over action reports and interviewed anyone I could find who has dealt with him. Then I interviewed him."

"And?"

"He becomes what he needs to get what he wants. He might seem off-kilter to you, but that's because he wants you off-kilter. With regular people, he's relaxed and charming."

When he needs to be in control, he's fierce and domineering. He's confident, he's handsome and he's exactly what we need right now."

"Handsome," Anna groaned, slapping a hand over her eyes.

"Oh, he's a tasty treat, alright. I mean, those eyes; it's like he's hunting you. Gives me the shivers."

"Oh no."

"The sexy shivers."

"Terrance," Anna said disapprovingly.

"And have you seen his brother? We should get some publicity shots of them together. Maybe after spraying them with water."

"Terry..."

"I'd be the creamy filling in that sandwich any day. Plate me, I'm done."

"Do I have to call HR again?"

"Don't be such a prude, sis. It's just you and me."

"Do you want me to tell Mum how you've been acting at work?"

"Oh, you wouldn't."

"I damn well would," Anna said.

"You know, Anna, she keeps complaining that you're never home for dinner. She likes having everyone together but you're always here."

"Yes, well sometimes I have work late. It's the monster apocalypse."

"You know the nomenclature guidelines don't like that term," Terrance said.

"I will not be lectured on appropriate language in the workplace by you."

Jason could have easily tested Shade's abilities in Asano Village but a motorcycle ride in the warm sun of late summer was a balm after the intensity that followed the grid's collapse. Jason had spent almost every waking moment patrolling for proto-spaces or flying off to help put down monster waves. He knew that he would inevitably be called up again, but for the moment he enjoyed the simple pleasure of the wind on his face.

Jason took advantage of the respite, riding to a little coastal town that made Casselton Beach look big. Normally there would be a few tourists and locals enjoying the white sand and clear water but the town had been evacuated. No small number of them were now in tents in front of Asano Village's main gate.

He stopped riding at the edge of town and started walking down the only street. The only noise was the sound of the ocean and the quiet emptiness in the middle of a bright, sunny day was eerie.

“My world is never going back to the way it was, is it?” Jason asked.

“No,” Shade said, a body emerging to glide along the ground next to Jason. “But you will have to become far stronger if you want to hold those responsible to account.”

“Assuming I ever reach that kind of level, who will I have become? Sometimes I look at the way I conduct myself and feel like I’ve become a caricature of myself.”

“Magic pushes people to extremes,” Shade said. “Power gives people the chance to be what they truly desire. It strips away the layers they place between their deepest selves and their behaviour.”

“I’m not sure I like what that says about me.”

“You could have done far worse, Mr Asano. The perfectly righteous man is a myth. I’ve encountered people on myriad worlds and beyond the truly good ones are those doing their best, in spite of their flaws. I’ve seen gods consumed in pettiness and rank villains become vaunted messiahs. What I have never seen is a perfect person, from base mortal to great astral being.”

“You’re saying to stop worrying about what I’ve done in the past and focus on doing my best in the future.”

“I am. I have high hopes for you, Mr Asano.”

“But higher hopes for my niece.”

“If a better ship comes along, it’s only natural to board it.”

“It’s talk like that that makes me like Colin and Gordon more than you.”

They made their way down to the beach.

“It’s not a new ability,” Jason said, “but what kind of vehicles do you think you can manage with all those extra bodies?”

“The existing rank restrictions on the forms I can take remain,” Shade said. “The ability that lets me use such forms is yours, not mine, so flight and submarine forms will still take more bodies to achieve lesser effects.”

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “What kind of limits can you hit with your new body count?”

“I can probably manage a small private plane by employing almost all of my vessels, although that would be forcibly using my higher-rank to push the limits of your lower-rank ability. The energy I would consume in doing so would make the spirit coin cost of that extremely prohibitive until you rank up.”

“So you’re really waiting on me, then. I don’t suppose you could manage a giant rotary cannon if we pulled up a tank or something?”

“We’ve been over this, Mr Asano. I can mimic attack forms that are a permanent part of the structure, but not special and projectile attacks. I can create claws or a battering ram but not poison breath, shooting spines or projectile weaponry.”

“I thought maybe with the rank up...”

“You want to replicate your brother’s entire power set with one racial gift, yes. Give it up, Mr Asano.”

“It’s my ability. Maybe when I rank up.”

“Perhaps we should move on to an ability I actually do possess?”

“Fine.”

Shade’s new plethora of shadow bodies meant that Jason could expand the people he kept a Shade in the shadow of. He could now include his father, his sister’s entire family and Farrah without losing too many bodies for practical purposes.

As for actual new abilities, Shade had gained two on reaching silver rank. One was that any of his shadow bodies could teleport to any of his other bodies. This meant that Jason could deploy Shades all over and call them back at need, or send a group of them to help a family member should they run into trouble.

The range of this ability was equivalent to a portal ability of one rank below Shade’s vessel. This meant that at the baseline of silver-rank, the range was the same as Jason’s portal had been when it first reached bronze, which was roughly forty kilometres.

Shade’s other new ability had the same range limitation. Within that range, Shade was able to act as a medium for any of Jason’s non-combat abilities. This meant that he could shadow jump to one of Shade’s bodies, ignoring the usual requirement of the target shadow needing to be nearby. This massively expanded his non-portal teleportation range, which could be critical when he ran into the cooldown of the portal.

During the motorcycle ride, Shade had left a shadow body behind every few kilometres. Jason stepped into the Shade next to him and appeared next to the most recent body left behind. He stepped back immediately and proceeded to hop from body to body until he arrived back in Asano village.

“No portal arch, no cooldown,” Jason said. “I can’t bring people along, it ups the mana consumption and the range isn’t ideal, but still, this is awesome.”

“It does offer additional tactical flexibility,” Shade said. “I will be able to go to areas you cannot see directly and provide you with shadow jumping options. It is an adequate use of the power.”

“Calm down, mate. Don’t get too excitable.”

Jason stepped back into Shade, jumping back to the beach and began testing other abilities. Another aspect of using shadow bodies as a medium for his powers was that Jason could use his non-combat abilities from Shade as if they were his own body, once again within the same range limit.

His perception power worked, so when he shared the senses of one of Shade's bodies he had his full perceptual range. His Hand of the Reaper ability did not, as the afflictions it could apply apparently marked it as a combat ability.

The most unexpected result was when he manifested his cloak over Shade, for the simple reason that he was able to do so even while having one conjured on himself. To date, he could only have one cloak because he had to occupy it. With Shade's new capability, that was no longer a hard limit.

He had most of Shades bodies teleport to him, aside from the ones attached to family members, then conjured cloaks on all of them. The mana cost of conjuring his cloak was only moderate but having conjured twenty-seven in short order had carved off a serious chunk of his mana.

"Strewth," he croaked, with a slight headache from dumping so much mana in an instant. It had been even more than an extreme mana cost spell, like summoning Shade in the first place cost him. Fortunately, he was near the peak of bronze and his mana pool was rich, courtesy of his high spirit attribute.

Once his cloak ranked up, it would cost a moderate amount of mana for a silver-ranker, which would make it more prohibitive until he had a silver-ranker's mana pool. It was one of the difficulties of being on the cusp of ranking up.

Jason popped a bronze-rank spirit coin in his mouth to help him recover.

"I think I'll go home for a rest," he said, right as his phone started beeping an alarm.

"Oh, bloody hell."

Chapter 357

Broken

One of the best-known locations in the Australian outback, Broken Hill was a carefully chosen target. Its rich history and iconic desert landscapes had woven it into the fabric of Australia's soul. It was also one of the centres to which isolated people from across that region of the outback had been gathered, exploding the population from less than twenty thousand to almost thirty-five thousand.

The Network presence was minimal, with only a single tactical section to protect the support team whose core duty was to check for dimensional incursions. With resources stretched thin, only when a dimensional space was detected would a substantive force be brought in.

The personnel in charge of organising the massive influx of people were regular civil servants, military logistics specialists and no small number of volunteers. There were builders knocking up prefab domiciles and companies donating materials, tools and machinery. Like in other safe zones being set up around the world, people were coming out to show how many were willing to step up and help one another.

Major population centres around the world were being turned into military green zones, while the most rural areas were being abandoned. Broken Hill fell somewhere in the middle, having been placed under Network protection but with only a fraction of the resources allocated to a major city.

The Network had become known to the public as the Global Defense Network in the weeks since the monster waves began, the terrorist readiness exercises claimed as preparation for the worst-case scenario now being faced. The sympathetic portion of the media referred to the 'supernatural task forces' the GDN fielded as the government response to an unimaginable threat. Their practicality and professionalism were intended to instil confidence but this was continually being upstaged by the flashy antics and expert media manipulation of the EOA's League of Heroes.

The EOA's agenda of positioning themselves as a top power player that matched or even eclipsed the Network was built around taking a leading position in responding to the monster waves. This involved a two-pronged attack of raising themselves up as they simultaneously tore the Network down.

The EOA's goal wasn't to convince the governments of the world that they were better than the Network. The governments knew full well that the Network's power, resources and reach easily outstripped the EOA. The EOA's goal was to swing public

sentiment so ferociously in their direction that the governments were forced to give the EOA a seat at the table, shifting support, resources and influence away from the Network.

Various targets around the globe were selected to further this purpose and Broken Hill fit their criteria perfectly. It was under Network protection, but with minimal Network presence. They had a support team to scan for proto-spaces and a nine-person tactical section to protect them. Otherwise, Broken Hill was staffed by regular military, civil servants and volunteers.

In addition, Broken Hill was geographically isolated in a very large nation where the Network had limited magical transport options. These factors tallied up to make Broken Hill a soft target for the EOA's plan. If the Network suffered a catastrophic failure in one of their supposed safe zones, only for the League of Heroes to step in, it would be a major blow to the Network. If it repeatedly happened worldwide, it went from a major blow to a crippling one.

While the network had been scrambling to save as many people as possible, the EOA had been choosing their targets and carefully infiltrating them. The EOA's 'League of Heroes' was the right hand distracting the audience, their clandestine operations were the left hand performing the trick. The volunteer staff and even the military personnel stationed at Broken Hill had no shortage of EOA plants.

The infiltrators in Broken Hill were meticulous and patient. The government and Network personnel were more wary of panic amongst the population than sabotage, leaving the EOA's people safely undetected. Not even Jason, briefly passing through, had picked out their duplicitous emotions amongst the tens of thousands in the overstuffed town.

The EOA played their roles well, not jumping at the first proto-space detected in the region. Earnest volunteers, they worked as hard as anyone to support the team that arrived to intercept the monster wave. It even included the famous Starlight Rider, tearing across the desert on a motorcycle, his cloak of stars flying behind him.

They would only get a single shot and the EOA waited for the right proto-space, lucking out perfectly when one appeared right on top of Broken Hill itself. It was then that the EOA struck. Communications were taken over and the tactical section ambushed and eliminated, as was any military personnel not already suborned. Black-clad paramilitary soldiers swept in from the desert on trucks to contain the town, claiming to be government reinforcements.

The civil and civilian camp workers were not taken in by the obvious lie but were forced to go along by the lack of outside contact and large number of armed soldiers. They

made various attempts to get word out but every phone line was cut and every signal jammed.

In the general chaos of the monster waves, it took a day before the Network realised that Broken Hill had become unreachable. They sent an emergency investigation team who managed to scout out the situation and get word back that someone had taken control of Broken Hill, but it was already too late. The EOA had stalled long enough for the proto-space to start disgorging monsters onto the town in flashes of rainbow light.

Kaito's helicopter flew directly inland at a pace no ordinary helicopter could match. Other teams were approaching Broken Hill from Adelaide, which was closer than Sydney but Kaito would still beat them onsite. Jason and one of Sydney's strongest tactical sections were in the back, the mood sombre. Everyone on board was concerned for the tens of thousands of people they feared being too late to help.

The back section of the helicopter was in a utilitarian configuration with simple chairs for the soldiers to strap into. Jason sat with them, no one uttering a sound. Jason handed out spirit coins, none of them having eaten actual food in weeks. With the status of agricultural areas ranging from under threat to evacuated to under attack, food shortages were already becoming a factor and essence users were all under direction to live exclusively on spirit coins.

It was a small drop in the bucket compared to the food needs of the population at large but every bit would help in what could be a long and harrowing ordeal. The regular consumption of coins would also help the essence users stay fresh and ready for their continuing struggles.

The obvious drawback was the increased need for coins, so China and the US opened up their vaults to keep other parts of the world supplied. France was also contributing, having converted the permanent astral space in Saint-Étienne to a dedicated spirit coin farm. There had been a lot of awkwardness when Farrah had arrived to help them set it up during Jason's sojourn, even with the original Lyon branch members having been replaced by the International Committee.

Jason was likewise pumping out as many coins as he could manage. When finding and shutting down proto-spaces before they could pop, he was taking the time to wipe out any lower-rank monsters he could quickly knock over for the loot. In this, Gordon's sweeping beams were the most effective and the familiar was closing in on his next rank. Jason was still short on the resources required to resummon him, though, but it was hardly the time to be seeking them out.

A wall panel slid open to reveal a screen and Greg's voice came through a speaker.

"Communications just opened with Broken Hill but our people aren't responding. What is coming out is a live news transmission."

The screen blinked to life, showing camera footage of a street filled with chaos, apparently shot by a reporter hiding inside a heavily damaged building. It was far from the only one, some buildings showing collapsed walls while others were on fire, sending up plumes of black smoke. Corpses lay bloody and burned in the street and screams of pain and fear filled the air.

In the middle of the street, a colourfully-dressed man with steel gauntlets was trading blows with a rock monster that had a glowing red gem in its chest. The monster had the edge in strength but the superhero was faster, hammering steel-clad fists on the stone body of the monster. It was a long way from an essence-user fight, at least one Jason or Farrah would be involved in it. No powers were on display, just two supernatural beings pounding away at each other.

As they fought, the reporter's commentary came through.

"...government's unpopular reliance on the so-called Global Defence Network has led to tragedy here in Broken Hill. Claimed as a safe zone, all they accomplished was luring people to their deaths. If not for the rapid intercession of a League of Heroes team, this reporter would already be counted amongst the dead..."

There were actual snarls in the helicopter as people who had thrown everything they had into protecting the populace were badmouthed even as innocents died. Jason opened his map ability, watching the kilometres tick down. Kaito was downing mana potions as quickly as he could while pushing the helicopter to its limits with his abilities, yet their speed felt excruciatingly slow.

With his eyes on the map, Jason felt it as he crossed the distance threshold he needed. His current portal range was four hundred kilometres, and once they got that close to Broken Hill he released his safety belt as he stood up.

The others knew from the briefing that Jason would be heading out alone. He wasn't taking anyone else because he couldn't portal the silver-rankers, which was a good part of the elite section, and he wouldn't take the bronze-rankers and isolate them from the team.

They were quietly glad, as for all their specialist training, they would not plunge into a high-grade monster wave with just their small group. The Adelaide teams would arrive not far behind them for a joint operation.

The side door opened, the influx of air at their incredible speed causing the helicopter to lurch. Jason kept his feet by gripping the seat belt he had just removed and then flung

himself out the door. Gliding towards the ground, he spotted a pleasant enough spot running alongside a creek and rapidly descended there before opening a portal arch and stepping through.

The EOA's superhero program involved all their latest breakthroughs in human enhancement. Their bones were engraved with magic sigils in a series of deeply invasive surgeries. Their flesh was treated and retreated with alchemical baths, deep-tissue injections and magical radiation therapy. Their blood was drawn out and magically altered using modified dialysis machines.

The body modifications were only a part of the procedure, as without similar changes to the soul the massive bodily augmentations could not be handled by the subjects. Volunteers to the program were subjected to magical sensory bombardment while their bodies were undergoing the treatments. For those able to truly open themselves to the changes the result was soul mutation. Many washed out of the program, unable to truly let go and open up their souls. These unfortunates were inevitably crippled by the incomplete enhancement process, which was hideous enough that most of the ones who didn't die asked to be killed. The EOA complied.

The EOA's methods were akin to some of what Jason had experienced inadvertently, although their methods were much cruder and without the months of treatment Jason was given afterwards to help him through the trauma. They also lacked the strength his soul had already gained from ranking up. The result of the EOA's practices were souls that did grow stronger but were warped in the process.

Decades of advancement had managed to reduce the impact on the mental state of the recipients, although the specific means were a closely guarded secret. The recipients themselves remembered only strange feelings, having been in induced comas through the process. Only echoes remained in their souls.

The earliest iron-rank subjects had suffered from twisted minds, which manifested in ways ranging from catatonia to malevolent and depraved tendencies. As the program developed, advancements were made and the later, Bronze-rank subjects showed significantly better results. While the successful subjects often lacked imagination and critical-thinking skills, they made for excellent dumb muscle.

The latest iteration of the process had entirely eliminated the mental problems through the production of a mysterious and extremely secretive implant. The silver-rank enhanced were mentally normal to all tests, without sacrificing any of the abilities the

earlier iterations shared. They were even possible to produce in larger numbers than previous iterations, allowing for the heroes deployed across the world.

The silver-rank enhanced, like their lower-rank predecessors, were able to use alchemical boosts to enhance their rank temporarily but the key material for the boosts were spirit coins. Without access to gold spirit coins, the ability of the silver-rank enhanced to boost themselves was purely theoretical.

What they did have at full strength were magic tattoos. Unlike the magic tattoos Jason was familiar with, these were designed specifically to work with the enhanced, allowing them to carry multiples of each without the magic coming into conflict. Hidden away beneath their costumes, their magic tattoos gave the enhanced access to more exotic powers than just silver rank strength, toughness and speed. Each of the superhero-branded enhanced was given a standard suite that allowed them to project energy beams from their eyes and fly for short periods.

The enhanced had enough of each tattoo to put on a show or to use in a critical moment, but not to employ continually. Although an essence user could only use one tattoo, the silver-ranked enhanced were able to have eight. Even with this advantage, the lack of boost serum meant the superheroes were no match for an equivalent-rank essence user.

Once alerted to the appearance of monsters in town the EOA's media teams moved in on a helicopter and in cars. The media teams were staffed with bronze-rank enhanced and would be able to handle themselves, whatever they told the audience. When the media were in place, the superheroes activated their first flight tattoos.

The heroes flew over a town of people who were fleeing and screaming in response to the multitude of rock monsters pursuing them through the streets. Some of the monsters were hulking, vaguely-humanoid elementals with no heads and giant, opalescent crystals embedded in their chests. Others were basketball-sized flying creatures of crystal and stone, the crystals of each small monster being either blue or red. The smaller monsters with blue crystals conjured up icicles and shot them like arrows, while the red-crystal monsters sent out motes of fire that burned flesh and buildings alike.

The larger monsters, despite their larger crystals, seemed to have no attendant power. They were rampaging around using pure, brute force, smashing through walls and using cars as bludgeons. They seemed more interested in destruction than in killing while the smaller monsters hunted people almost exclusively. Only the fire types would throw flames at the surroundings if no people were around to offer themselves as targets.

The silver-rank superheroes had strength and fortitude in the upper ranges of silver but their speed was closer to the baseline. Even so, they were weaker but faster than the silver-rank monsters.

Each superhero wore magically-enhanced metal gauntlets so as to not use their bare hands against monsters. Without their boost serum, they were equivalent to a mediocre essence user who never used their abilities properly. Only the occasional burst of eyebeams supplemented their brawling combat.

They did not have the strength or the numbers to handle the monsters. The proto-space they had forcibly unleashed on Broken Hill was a category three, and a strong one at that. The larger monsters were silver-rank and there was no shortage of them. The smaller monsters were all bronze-rank.

This was acceptable to the EOA, however. The objective was not to save the people of Broken Hill but to be seen stepping in when the Network had failed. They would pass off the death toll on the Network's failure, played alongside their own people fighting a desperate, but ultimately doomed battle. The EOA media teams were more than happy to make their narrative explicit, as their target demographic were not the strong thinkers.

"The valour of the League of Heroes is clear but they can only do so much. If the governments of the world would offer them support, perhaps such tragedies could be avoided. So long as they continue to prop up the failing Global Defense Network, how many of the so-called safe zones will suffer the fate of Broken Hill? Is Melbourne or Sydney next?"

The armed militia of the EOA had already long fled, leaving the locals and refugees to their fate. The population of the town, scared and scattered, were buoyed by the arrival of the heroes, only to quickly realise that they were little help. Instead of going after the small monsters hunting people, the heroes rushed into visually exciting clashes with the large monsters destroying the town while leaving the people largely alone.

On the outskirts of town, an obsidian arch rose from the ground. Jason stepped out, his cloak manifesting around him as he surveyed the scene of death and destruction. Despite all the things he had seen, it was an apocalyptic display that gave even him pause.

"Shade, bring the bodies you have protecting the family here. We're going to need them all."

Chapter 358

Never Enough

Lauren Chamley and her family hunkered in the bathroom of their house, fearfully checking through the windows from time to time. Crammed in with them was another family, monster wave refugees that the Chamleys had taken in. Many of the families in Broken Hill had opened their homes, although there were never enough places. Most of the people brought in from the surrounding areas had been staying in a tent camp on the outskirts of town.

On one of her periodic checks, Lauren discovered that the house had been set on fire and realised they would need to flee. Knowing it would take both of their cars to carry everyone, she checked the driveway. Of all the terrible crashing they had heard from inside the house, two of those crashes had apparently been the cars. One of them had the back end stomped into the concrete driveway, while the other had wound up in the neighbour's wall, upside down.

The two families reluctantly left the burning house on foot, aiming to get away from the town and the monsters ravaging it. They ducked through yards and took any cover they could find to hide their passage. There were simply too many of them though, leading to their quick discovery.

Although the people they were killing didn't know it, the rock and crystal monsters were unusual for elemental creatures. Most elementals were an unusual type of monster. With their kind, the magical manifestation that would normally create a monster body only created a monster core before mindlessly animating elemental material around it.

These monsters were not actual elementals but true, fully manifested monsters. Although their bodies were of elemental substances the crystal in their forms contained a motive spirit, the false soul that most monsters possessed. What this meant was that rather than mindlessly aggressive elementals, the crystal monsters had minds, if animalistic ones.

Unfortunately, the minds of the small floating monsters had a deep-running vein of sadism, delighting in the pain and suffering of their victims. Rather than go for the kill, they played with their victims like a cat toying with a captured mouse.

The two families were not attacked immediately, the monsters that found them hovering ominously to delight in their fear. This proved lucky as an oddly quiet passenger bus became very loud by smashing through a fence, ramming the monsters and sending them flying.

More monsters were approaching and the bus interposed itself between them and the families. It was a strange design, sleek and black like a bullet train designed by a ninja. The bus door opened to reveal the friendly but anxious face of their neighbour, Griff, who ushered them aboard.

“Our car is in your house,” Lauren told him as she waved her family inside.

“Yeah, that was the point we got out,” Griff said.

The bus took off the moment the last person was in, at which point they noticed it had no driver. The bus was half full of townspeople and was already on the hunt for more survivors. Looking out the windows they saw the monsters peppering the bus with attacks, only for black tendrils to rise out of the bus and intercept them.

“What is going on?” Lauren asked.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Griff said. “I’ve seen more of these busses running around, though. It looks like they’re collecting survivors.”

“Look!” Lauren’s daughter yelled, pointing out the window. Everyone followed her gaze to a dancing figure of darkness and stars, striking down monsters with a sword shimmering with power. The figure moved with impunity, slaying another monster with every flowing motion.

“It’s him, right?” Griff asked.

“It’s him,” Lauren said. “I saw him when he was here a couple of weeks ago. Thank God.”

“I probably wouldn’t say that to his face,” said a voice that sounded vaguely like a butler. “He has a thing about gods.”

In the almost two months since Shade had reached silver-rank, Jason and Shade had continued to uncover the nuances the familiar’s new abilities. One of those discoveries was that if all the shadow bodies involved in creating a vehicle wore starlight cloaks, the properties of the cloak were bestowed upon the vehicle. This was protecting the buses and the survivors inside from the projectile attacks of the monsters.

It took six shadow bodies to form a bus. This was enough for five buses and one body left over to be Jason’s own shadow, allowing him to coordinate the others. Conjuring all those cloaks had been extremely draining, but the presence of so many aggressive enemies also provided a solution. Every attack against an ally within Jason’s aura inflicted an instance of the Sin condition on the enemy making that attack. With all the attacks hitting the buses, that loaded up the monsters with afflictions.

This was something Jason had been taking advantage of more and more. A Shade body wrapped in a starlight cloak was hard to distinguish from Jason himself unless they were standing still in good light. This made them excellent decoys soaking up attacks and triggering Jason's aura's retaliation. On stronger enemies, this gave Jason a chance to frontload his afflictions, while he had another strategy for the weaker ones. It was a strategy that had sent two of his lingering abilities skyrocketing to the front of the pack.

One of the buses tore away, leaving behind the cluster of now-afflicted little monsters that had been attacking it. Jason tossed his sword into the air and caught it with a shadow hand as he threw his real arms out to the side.

"Feed me your sins."

The rock and crystal monsters were immune to Jason's necrotic damage and bleeding powers, but they were subject to the curses levied by his aura. This means that they could be drained away.

The unliving monsters had no life force, so the afflictions were dragged directly out of the crystals in their bodies. The Sin curses flowed out of all the monsters at once and into Jason's waiting hands, flying through the air like a black and purple spiderweb.

Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse, holy).
 - Base cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).

 - Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons and unholy afflictions from a single target. Additionally, cleanse all holy afflictions if the target is an ally. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability ignores any effect that prevents cleansing. Cannot target self.

 - Effect (bronze): Enemies suffer an instance each of [Penance] and [Legacy of Sin] for each condition cleansed from them.

 - Effect (silver): Increase cost to moderate to affect all afflicted enemies and allies in a wide area.

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

 - [Legacy of Sin] (affliction, holy, stacking): You are considered more damaged for the purposes of execute ability damage scaling. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Jason had been startled at how swiftly the ability had climbed up once he started using it in this fashion. Even though he'd had to use it on one monster at a time before it ranked up, no cooldown meant that he could fire it off in quick succession. Many fights had been nothing but his aura and his cleansing power, topping off his mana and leaving behind the transcendent damage holy affliction, Penance. That affliction was now burning through the gathered monsters.

Being smaller and only bronze-rank, without the immense vitality that came at silver, the transcendent damage burned through them in short order. They started dissolving into rainbow smoke, and since enemies wholly annihilated by transcendent damage were auto-looted, this was something that Jason had taken advantage of every time he encountered weak, swarming monsters. As Gordon ran around beaming them down, Jason would take out as many as he could using Shade decoys, his aura and his affliction drain.

Feast of Absolution's ascension to silver demonstrated once again why it was arguably Jason's most potent ability. It was the often-overlooked passive it was paired with, however, that gave Jason his first taste of true silver-rank power.

Ability: [Sin Eater] (Sin)

- Special ability (recovery, holy).
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).

 - Effect (iron): Increased resistance to afflictions. Gain an instance of [Resistant] each time you resist an affliction or cleanse an affliction using essence abilities.

 - Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Integrity] for each affliction you resist or remove using essence abilities.

 - Effect (silver): Health, mana and stamina gained through your own essence abilities of the drain and recovery type can exceed the normal maximum. Excess health, stamina and mana deplete over time until the normal maximum is reached.

 - [Resistant] (boon, holy, stacking): Resistance to afflictions is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to negate instances of [Vulnerable] on a 1:1 basis.

 - [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy, stacking): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Now, instead of wasting all the mana and stamina that Feast of Absolution was feeding him, he could absorb it all, even if it started draining away immediately. More importantly, he could use his health draining abilities while fully recovered, stocking up hit points like a D&D character to absorb hits that would normally take a silver-ranker to survive. That would be less of an issue once he reached silver, but while he remained at bronze-rank it was potentially an immeasurable boon.

Jason had long employed a drain-heal method of staying alive in fights, but without the fortitude of silver-rank, he was always running on a knife's edge. If not for Colin's regeneration, his incredible amulet and his custom combat robe he would have fallen many times.

As monsters disintegrated around him, Jason's shadow detached from his body and turned into a motorcycle. He leapt on and rocketed off in pursuit of another bus being harassed by monsters. As he went, he struck down the monsters he passed with his sword like a hooligan hitting mailboxes with a baseball bat.

He could sense the silver-rank monsters and the superheroes fighting them. It was his first time encountering them in person and he made a startling discovery, but it was not the time to explore it. Since the silver-rank monsters seemed uninterested in the populace, Jason left them for the heroes and continued scooping up survivors.

The five buses could not be everywhere and had to head to Jason's still-open portal to empty themselves of passengers periodically. Jason did his best to shield survivors until a bus could arrive, shepherding them together in readiness to board quickly. He could only cover so much ground, though, and throughout the town he sensed lives being snuffed out in quick succession. He had to rely on his meditative techniques to keep his mind clear, knowing that bad decisions made in anger would cost lives.

On Kaito's helicopter, the passengers were still watching the live feed from the town.

"... Jason Asano, the Starlight Rider, has arrived to join the other heroes in trying to save the town. Despite his valiant efforts, however, the situation only serves to highlight how one hero has been propping up the failing Global Defense Network. Even as we watch, the—"

Suddenly the cracked door they were filming through was swung wide open.

"Why is there a bunch of people with magic powers hiding in here, pretending to be a news crew, while people who don't have any powers are dying out there?" Jason growled. "You are going to get out of here and start helping people to safety."

He pointed to one end of town.

"Find anyone not on a bus and get them to the portal down that end of town. If I find you hiding again – and I will – you'll wish the monsters got to you first, you cowardly sacks of shi–"

The feed cut out, replaced by a pair of news anchors.

"Uh, we seem to be having technical difficulties, but I'm sure our news team will be fine with Jason Asano watching over them. Going to Michael for analysis of the unfolding situation..."

"...military and GDN personnel are rapidly setting up a camp to receive them, even as more Broken Hill residents emerge from the portal you're seeing on screen. We are standing some four-hundred kilometres from Broken Hill, yet the people escaping are claiming that they travelled that distance instantaneously through the mysterious arch believed to be one of the Starlight Rider's many abilities. There seems to be a strong nauseating factor to the exotic form of travel as many of the escapees are demonstrating, right on the grass..."

Terrance was talking on his phone as he watched the coverage.

"Make sure the coverage highlights the difference between the EOA fighting monsters and Jason rescuing people. I want to see interviews with every person from Broken Hill with the power of speech. No, don't send a news crew to the town, you maniac. Take a footage feed from Kaito's drones and have a panel of analysts dissect how useless their superheroes are."

Just as he ended the call, Aram came rushing into Terrance's office.

"New development?" Terrance asked.

"We're pretty sure the EOA are responsible for the Broken Hill disaster."

"No kidding," Terrance said. "I do not want a single word of that getting into the press. No pointed suggestions, no leaks, nothing."

"Isn't it bad for them?"

"The moment accusations start, the EOA will turn it around to accuse us of setting them up. Salacious accusations going back and forth slide right into their tone of discourse, not ours, which will make us look desperate."

"We have proof!"

"So does climate change and how's that going? If I hear anyone on our side peddling a line about the EOA being behind this, I will personally have wild monkey sex with your father."

"My father's dead, you arsehole."

“Then he won’t struggle, will he? Get back to work.”

Jason was tireless as he went through Broken Hill, constantly draining afflictions to amass stamina and mana. He would lure monsters to a bus to draw them away from scattered survivors and then afflict and drain them in clusters, before sending the buses to collect those survivors.

His incredible senses allowed him to tag monsters and survivors on his tactical map ability, the sight of which constantly threatened to crush his spirit. As fast as he worked and as hard as he fought, it was never enough. Again and again, the red dots of an unfriendly intersected with the green dot of a friendly, which then blinked out.

The superheroes had finally finished off the silver-rank monsters and had started chasing down the smaller ones, but they were built for cinematic battles, not efficient sweep-and-clear. Only the arrival of Kaito and the Network strike teams would be able to carry that out successfully, their numbers and practised tactics outpacing what Jason could accomplish.

When reinforcements finally came into range of his voice chat power, Jason was filled with relief at the assistance and remorse that he couldn’t do more. It hadn’t been that long but it felt like an endless slog as more and more lives faded from his senses. He opened up a voice chat to start relaying the situation they were flying into.

Finally, Jason found himself in the remains of the town, every civilian in it either dead or evacuated. He had used his portal again and again as it reached capacity. At his current rank, a thousand normals could go through before hitting the limit, which put the survivor count, based on portal use, at less than twenty-thousand survivors.

He had swept the town and patrolled the outskirts multiple times to make sure, as had Kaito with his drones. He stood amongst the ruins and the dead, feeling empty and at a loss. They didn’t have hard numbers yet but he could see with his own eyes the bodies piled up in the burned-out remains of the tent camp. Based on that and his portal count, he estimated somewhere between ten and fifteen-thousand had died.

Jason instinctually wanted to collect up the bodies instead of just leaving them where they lay, but there would be an organised operation to collect and identify the dead that he would only muddle up if he interfered.

His gaze turned to the superheroes, standing together with their media team who were pointing a camera his way.

Chapter 359

Media Landscape

Smoke rose from smouldering buildings into an orange sunset over Broken Hill.

“Shade,” Jason said quietly as he looked over at the EOA media team. “Please find an ordinary handgun and discreetly leave it nearby.”

Jason had spotted enough armed dead that it would not be a difficult task. He had seen the military personnel, mostly clustered around their post near the tent city. Many of them had been killed by firearms rather than monsters. Only a handful of the military had survived, isolated and armed with weapons that couldn't harm the monsters. He got them out with the other survivors, although a few had insisted on trying to fight. Rather than let them learn the hard way, he had Shade knock them out and then shoved them on a bus with the others.

He had also seen some black-clad corpses other than the Network's tactical section, which were likely part of the group responsible for the Broken Hill tragedy. Not all of them had managed to safely extract, whether due to monster attacks or the military and Network personnel not going down as easily as anticipated.

One of Shade's bodies slipped away, unseen in the growing shadows of evening.

Penelope was the leader of the EOA's media team.

“I don't know that talking to him is a good idea,” she said.

“It's all upsides,” said, Garret, the leader of the superhero team. “You said yourself that we were having trouble finding stand-out personalities in our hero ranks. If we can associate ourselves with Asano, that might change. He's the face of magic right now.”

“I don't think he's going to be very accommodating,” Penelope said.

“That's fine, too. If he accuses us of setting all this in motion, we use it to tar the Network. One way or the other, it's a win for us.”

“We could make a point that he's a better fit for the League of Heroes than the Network,” Penelope mused. “There's no way he jumps ship, but we have been working to paint him as being one of us who only works for them. An actual interview might help push that along.”

“See?” Garret said. “We win every way.”

They were speaking quietly as the face of the media team, Davina, was giving a voice over for the live feed as the camera recorded Jason.

“As the sun truly sets on Broken Hill, we can only wonder if the historic town will ever see a new dawn after the catastrophe it has suffered. For all his valiant efforts, Jason Asano, the Starlight Rider, stands in the ruins of the Global Defense Network’s failure. Again, we apologise to viewers for the graphic images on display...”

As Davina continued to narrate, Penelope silently grabbed her attention, communicating her intentions with hand signals. Davina nodded.

“We’re going to approach Mr Asano with the head of the League of Heroes team, Garret Dunhurst, a.k.a. Skybolt. Skybolt, this will be your first time meeting with your fellow hero, is this correct?”

“It is, Davina, and I only wish it could be under better circumstances. Unfortunately, the crisis we all face means that every hero is facing terrible circumstances and the Starlight Rider is no exception.”

Davina, Garret and the camera operator approached Jason. They could only see the silver eyes under his hood, the light on the camera failing to penetrate it.

“Mr Asano, despite working side by side with your fellow heroes, the death toll is clearly in the thousands. Do you think that closer collaboration with your fellow heroes might reduce the impact should further GDN safe zones be compromised?”

Seconds ticking over in the dead air as they awaited Jason’s response.

“Mr Asano?”

“You think we’re heroes?” Jason asked in a voice of weariness-infused gravel. “Stepping forward is the absolute minimum to expect of people with our abilities. To do any less would make us nothing but worthless cowards. If you want to see heroes, look to the people who have no powers yet they step onto the same field as us. And why do they do that? For no more reason than there are people in need of help. They don’t have the strength to face what we can face, but here they are, making the ultimate sacrifice.”

He gestured at the ruined town around them.

“If you want to find heroes, go digging through the rubble. They’re piled high. You think we compare to them because we run around in costumes, fighting monsters?”

“We protect the people,” Garret said.

“We aren’t the ones that will get the world through this calamity,” Jason said. “We can help some people, yes, but we’re just a symbol. The people of the world will get through this disaster not by waiting for some fool in a costume like me to save them. They’ll get through this by coming together, the human race united. A network of people who are heroes not for the powers they possess but their willingness to raise one another out of the darkness.”

Garret could feel himself losing control of the narrative and tried to guide Jason towards making an accusation.

“Those people will need leadership and guidance. Heroes to show them the way. Surely you recognise that without us, the body count today would have been much greater, perhaps even total.”

“Leadership and guidance,” Jason repeated. “That’s the kind of language you hear from dictators. In the free world, we choose our leaders, they don’t choose us, but I can see why you would think that way, given where your powers come from. We may accept your League of Heroes because the monsters are here and we need everyone we can get. But I won’t forget who unleashed those monsters in the first place so that you could run around playing super friends. There will come a day when the monsters aren’t looming over us and the people hiding behind you will face a reckoning.”

“Just to be clear,” Davina said, “Mr Asano, are you claiming that there is some kind of secret cabal behind the League of Heroes who brought the monsters down on us all? That is quite the accusation, for which I assume you have some amount of proof.”

The chuckle that came from inside Jason’s dark hood could have frozen water.

“I don’t need to prove anything or convince anyone. The day will come when the people hidden in the dark will die, alone and unknown. And no one will ever hear about it.”

“You were just talking about dictatorship,” Davina said. “Now you’re talking about extrajudicial murder?”

“Someone needs to hold the men behind the curtain to account, but if you don’t like it, who’s going to stop me?” Jason asked. “Your heroes, here?”

A pair of silver eyes fixed on Garret.

“Are you going to stand in my way, Spybolt?”

“It’s Skybolt.”

“I don’t care. I’ll be the villain to your hero, but you’d best stop me now. You’re as strong as you’re ever going to get, while my power grows with every passing day.”

He turned back on the reporter.

“What about you, Davina? You’re one of the league’s secret heroes. Are you going to stop me?”

“I don’t know where you got this idea about me having powers came from but you are completely wrong.”

“Is that so? Shade, if you would?”

A shadowy figure emerged from the camera operator’s shadow, taking the camera off his shoulder and focused on Davina. A shadow arm shot out from Jason and picked up a

nearby pistol, which Jason then pointed at the reporter as Shades rose up behind her and Jason both. With silver-rank reflexes, Garret interposed himself between Jason and the reporter but Jason was already disappearing into his own Shade.

He emerged behind the reporter, shooting her in the back of the head without hesitation. Garret had the reflexes but not the awareness to stop it, taking just too long to realise where Jason appeared from. Davina staggered forward a few steps, groaning loudly as she held a hand over her head where she was shot.

“You’re a maniac!” she spat at Jason, turning around to face him. He pulled his hood back to reveal his face, his eyes were bloodshot, red and puffy from tears. In an instant, he went from faceless menace to a man shattered in grief at the tragedy around him.

“I’m sorry,” he said bitterly. “If that bullet to the head left you with a headache, maybe you don’t have powers. That’s why you hid instead of stepping out to help these people, right?”

“You can stop your play, Asano,” Penelope said. “The studio cut the broadcast.”

Jason didn't bother to say anything more, opening a portal and stepping through.

They arrived a short distance from the camp containing the Broken Hill survivors. Jason started walking in that direction over the yellow, shin-high grass.

“You did grab the memory drive from the camera, right?” Jason asked.

“Of course,” Shade said. “I am uncertain how it will help, though, given that the footage went out live.”

“Never underestimate the value of the unedited original,” Jason said. “There was probably a broadcast delay on the live feed, so there’s no telling how much they managed to edit our little play.”

“I cannot help but notice that with your ability to control your physiology, as grief-inducing as the day's events were, you should neither get bloodshot eyes nor produce tears.”

“The dead deserve tears,” Jason said. “Your father best take care of them or he and I are going to have words.”

“I don’t think you are ready to threaten the Reaper, Mr Asano.”

“Not yet.”

He tucked his hood back up over his head as they drew closer to the camp.

“This is a wagonload of horse manure,” Terrance said. “I have work to do.”

“Not if you get removed from your position, you don’t,” Anna told him as they walked the halls of the Network office in Sydney. “Make no mistake, if this workplace mediation doesn’t go well, you will be replaced.”

As a publicity man, Terrance was forced to admire Anna’s choice of tearing him down in the halls where anyone could and would overhear. It sent a message that the upper management was accountable, the general staff were respected and that family was not a shield against bad behaviour. That did not mean that he wouldn’t argue back.

“We have more important things to deal with than someone’s feelings getting hurt.”

“Terry, you threatened to have sex with the man’s dead father. I’ve worked with Aram a long time and he’s a good man whose father was incredibly important to him. You are going to apologise and you are going to god damn mean it or I will throw you out of the building myself.”

“You can’t force me to be sincere.”

“Terry, we all need to be at our very best. If people refuse to deal with you, people that you need to rely on, then things are going to get missed. If they have someone who has authority over them and is free to abuse them, that is going to detract from their performance. This isn’t you and me in the backyard. These are people that work hard, work well and are deserving of your respect. The problem here, Terry, is you, and I will excise that problem one way or another. If you can’t get your head around that and realise that you need to do better, then I do not want you here. Which, in case you’re not paying attention, means that you won’t be.”

“You’re not the only member of the Steering Committee, Anna. Some of the others like the way I do things.”

“And they’ll interfere when I try to fire you,” Anna acknowledged. “But do they have the stones to interfere when I throw you off the roof?”

“Oh, come on, Anna.”

“You’ll survive,” she said. “You can go liquid form.”

“It’ll take me hours to pool myself back together after a fall like that. That’s assuming I don’t lose any of myself down a storm drain again.”

“Don’t worry,” Anna said. “I’ll have the stuff from your office boxed up and waiting for you.”

Jason quietly arrived at Asano Village in the washed-out light of predawn. He had spent the night in the survivor’s camp but not to sleep. He hadn’t been sure what solace he

could offer the survivors but all he had left to give was his time. He then spent additional hours in debrief and even more time talking to the press.

Erika, Emi and Ken gathered around him, catching him in a supportive embrace. They moved to the lounge of the village's main residence, Emi sitting on a couch between Jason and her mother, each of them holding one of her hands.

For all that Emi's intelligence and maturity was beyond her age, the things she had seen that day had been a lot for a thirteen-year-old. Erika had told Emi she shouldn't watch the news but hadn't stopped her. They had all been glued to the television, catching every glimpse of Jason amongst the violence and the ruins and the death.

Jason and his family sat in awkward silence. Like much of the country and even the world, they had been watching him on the news all day. It began with the early scraps of action captured by the hiding EOA team, then the interviews with survivors. Footage from Kaito's drones had been fed live to the press, showing Jason moving like a dark, flittering bug in his desperate striving to extricate survivors.

Many countries around the world had fought back against the EOA's media control, including Australia. The Emergency Communications Act had passed with overwhelming support in Parliament, despite unprecedented pushback from the media on all fronts. Not only did the law enact massive emergency funds for the public broadcast network but required government information updates to air daily on all free-to-air networks and instituted an Office of Media Disinformation with fierce enforcement powers.

Privacy advocates pushed back against what they termed draconian measures against press freedom, which the media companies got entirely behind with complaints about editorial independence. The wake of tragedy, however, was always the easiest time to curtail civil liberties. Broken Hill was the largest of Australia's disasters, but not the first.

"I'm not going to keep Shade's bodies with you anymore," Jason said finally. "I like being able to communicate and know that he's there if something happens. It's become clear to me, though, that I need to stop splitting my power."

Shade had called his bodies back to Jason but it had taken time for them to get into range. They could only merge from forty kilometres away and had merged into an unmanned surveillance plane, moving at speed before travelling the last leg through the portal. In the time it took, there was one less bus picking up survivors than there could have been. Jason couldn't help but think of the lives that he failed to save.

"We understand," Erika said.

His mind kept going back to the waterfall village where he had fought the elemental tyrant as the villagers evacuated. He had saved everyone that day. Everyone. All it had

cost him was a scar. He was so much more powerful, now, yet he had done so much worse. He was unmarked but thousands of people were dead. He knew that one monster was different from an entire proto-space worth, but that didn't offer him solace.

"I need to get stronger," he murmured, head bowed.

"You're already strong, son," Ken said.

"No," Jason said. "I've seen power so vast that my mind is too limited to comprehend the scope of it. I'm a grain of sand before that. A bug on a windshield."

"What will you be if you get that kind of power?" Erika asked. "You're talking about god-like power, right? Is that what you want for yourself? If you become that powerful, will we be the grains of sand to you?"

Jason looked up her with tremulous eyes.

"I don't know," he said.

"Power isn't everything, Jason," Erika told him, nodding at Emi's small hand in his. "Power can't offer you that."

He tilted his head as he sensed a familiar aura approaching.

"What is it?" Ken asked.

"Someone I know just arrived at the village gate."

"As in the gate three kilometres away?" Erika asked. She and Ken both had aura senses, but theirs barely covered the room.

Jason's senses had grown to incredible proportions. They were based in his aura strength, although they reached further than his aura, like a radar sending out signals. He was still getting a handle on them, though.

In the familiar calm of Asano Village, they weren't onerous. In Broken Hill, the monsters and the chaos was overwhelming but he'd pushed himself to endure extending his senses to the limit. He had to know where the survivors needed him most.

Jason stood up.

"I'll be back in a moment," he said, opening a portal and stepping through, emerging outside the village gate. Most of the people camping there had long gone as food shortages became worse. They had been forced to the cities where the government was rationing out food supplies after seizing control of the supply chains. Only the most committed and unhinged people remained outside Asano village.

A car had stopped in front of the gate and the security guard on duty had emerged from the booth. It was some distant cousin Jason didn't really know, looking at him nervously.

"It's fine," Jason said. "I'll handle this."

Dawn stepped out of the car, an expensive but ordinary European sedan.

“I’m sorry about what you went through today.”

“Save your sympathy for the families of the dead.”

“Very well. I was hoping you might put me up for a little while. A normal-rank avatar isn’t up to the rigours of an increasingly dangerous world, as you well know.”

Chapter 360

Instability

In the Sydney branch's media operations centre, Terrance was going through the footage Jason had stolen from the EOA at Broken Hill again, discussing it with his publicity staff.

"The key to what he's doing here is that he's not telling us what the EOA's secrets are, which would get people immediately calling bull. He's 'inadvertently' letting slip in his anger that he knows what the EOA's secrets are. Instead of people denying what he's telling us, he's got them wondering what he's keeping to himself."

He pointed at one of his staffers.

"Hailey, what is number one on trending right now?"

"Which platform?" she asked.

"Just pick one."

"Alright, boss, just a moment... number one is #scottbaioeyebears."

"Scott Baio? The Charles in Charge guy? You know what I'm looking for, Hailey."

"Number three is #wheredothepowerscomefrom."

"Where do the powers come from?" Terrance repeated. "When the monster waves started, people were asking about the powers but it was one more thing in a world gone crazy. Now people are getting a handle on monsters and superheroes, so it's time to refocus that question, which is exactly what Asano just did."

The doors opened up and Aram came in.

"The Steering Committee wants an in-person update," he said.

"Very well," Terrance said. "Hailey, take over the analysis. Pay particular attention to the way that instead of going against the EOA's hero narrative, Asano played into it to give himself the authority he then used to undercut it. Seriously, I could kiss that man. I mean, I couldn't, he was very clear on that, but still..."

Jason and Dawn were riding the underground tram out to the cloud house.

"You're getting close to silver-rank, now," she said.

"Events have accelerated my advancement," he said flatly. "If I had the choice, I'd rather it take longer and not have all the death."

Globally, the death toll from the monster waves was over two-hundred thousand, although those were soft numbers. The count was potentially much higher.

"You have a question for me," Dawn said. "One that you need to ask before we can move forward."

"Why didn't you tell me about Farrah?"

"You realise that you could have asked that instead of punching my nose through my brain."

"No regrets. I bet you were all 'that little bastard' afterwards."

"Of course I wasn't," she lied. "I'm an ancient and powerful being, so I'm a little more mature than someone who just turned twenty-six. I noticed that you didn't celebrate your birthday last week."

"It's not a celebratory time. I never liked my birthday anyway."

"Because it's on April Fool's Day?"

"It might seem like a fun combination but it's not," Jason said. "Why didn't you tell me about Farrah?"

"Because of you."

"Me?"

"If I had come to you when you first arrived back, what you have done?"

"I'd have gone and got her."

"No," Dawn said. "You'd have died trying. Think about the state you were in when you got back. No local resources, no allies, no information, no understanding of the magical society of your world. You were also still very much caught up in a war mentality. Your first instinct to every obstacle was to murder it."

"I'd have found a way."

"You did, when you were ready. You had allies, information and a more balanced mindset."

"You could have shown me how."

"And would you have trusted me enough to listen?"

He grimaced.

"No," he acknowledged.

"She was sent here to help you, not just as a warrior but as a friend. She understands what you've been through because she has been through much the same. Most of all, she is someone you can trust. It took time to get there, even with your family. Except for your niece, but she couldn't offer you the support you needed."

"I know what Farrah represents," Jason growled, then his face softened. "And I am grateful that she was brought back."

“You can thank the Reaper for that,” Dawn said. “He was the one who offered. He wanted to avoid the World Phoenix sending your soul zipping back and forth across the astral with her tokens every time she needed you in one world or the other.”

“And now I have to figure out how to astral travel fully intact or not at all,” Jason said.
“You will.”

The tram tunnel emerged from underground into the underwater section.

“This is rather nice,” Dawn said.

“I like it. I have more questions for you.”

“The Builder did not violate the agreement,” Dawn said.

“Then how are the Engineers of Ascension making converted with his clockwork cores?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t know everything, Mr Asano, and I can only tell you so much of what I do. What I can tell you is that the Builder has not intervened in this world any time in the last five centuries or so.”

“Unless he found a way to sneak past you.”

“Sneaking past me is possible,” Dawn said. “Sneaking past the World-Phoenix is not.”

“You’re saying you can’t help me figure out what’s going on, then?”

“I am not saying that. I would direct you to the defector from the EOA leadership who is working with the American Network branches. She has insights into their enhancement program from its very origins.”

“How exactly is it that you get your information?” Jason asked.

“I’m not going to tell you that.”

“Is it just a bunch of people?”

“It is not just a bunch of people.”

“You don’t want to tell me who they are because then I could just go ask the bunch of people myself, right?”

“It is not just a bunch of people!”

“Sure, it’s not. I totally believe you.”

“I’m beginning to understand why the Builder was so caught up in killing someone as insignificant as you.”

“Rude.”

The tram came to a stop at the end of the tunnel and they went through the airlock into the cloud house. Jason looked around as he did every time he entered, still happy with the configuration of interlinked domes.

"This is rather nice," Dawn said, the air shimmering with light passing through the water outside. "It reminds me of home a little."

"And where's home?" Jason asked.

"The city-universe of Interstice," she said. "It's minute by the standards of a normal reality, but quite large by the standards of a city. It is also profoundly magical, yet unique in that monsters do not manifest there. Many consider it to be the capital city of the astral, at least the portion of it that we know. The astral is more vast than even a diamond-ranker like myself can conceptualise."

"So, the astral has its own societies, then?"

"Many worlds are more familiar with astral travel than the one you have known. Pallimustus has rather undeveloped astral magic, although the Builder's intervention is changing that. Even now, your friend Clive is deciphering and disseminating more advanced astral knowledge."

"You know about my team?"

"They are all doing well. They do not know that you are alive again, however."

"Knowledge must know I'm not dead. She knew about the token your boss gave me."

"She knows. She just isn't telling."

"Bloody transcendents and their bloody games," he muttered, shaking his head.

They went through a tunnel into a lounge room, each sitting in a comfortable cloud armchair.

"I'd offer you refreshments but I don't keep any on hand," Jason said. "Rationing, you know."

"...consistently gaining ground in defining the discourse," Terrance reported. He was standing in the Steering Committee meeting room giving his report.

"The EOA was always running on a clock before they lost control of the narrative," he continued. "We're seeing them pay for it now. Even in the beginning, certain areas were resistant to their obfuscation. In the US, for example, the EOA has incredible media dominance but the Emergency Broadcast System cut through a lot of the noise. Now that countries are enacting media intervention laws like our Emergency Communications Act, the EOA can't muddy the waters so easily."

"We know the EOA have been insinuating themselves into states who have long felt that the Network was a tool of the west," Anna said. "Certain states are even looking to oust the Network and have the EOA fill the role. This is the EOA's endgame, as far as we can tell. What is your assessment, based on media analysis, for further action on this front?" Anna asked.

"If the projections of the grid coming back up inside of two to three weeks hold up, then I think the EOA are pretty much out of steam in terms of infiltrating governments. I would be looking out for a reorientation of their plans moving forward. There is no way they don't know about the grid projections, so we're keeping a sharp eye for a shift in messaging that might indicate whatever new approach they're going for."

"Alright, thank you, Terrance," The committee chairwoman said. "So long as nothing else terrible comes up, I don't anticipate there being any problems."

"Oh, come on," Terrance exclaimed. "Why would you say something like that?"

"Why are you here, Dawn?" Jason asked. "I'm sure that you could find a nice, secure spot in any of the big cities."

"I warned you in the past of what is happening to your world as the magical density grows."

"You did."

"Most of the astral spaces on this world were already going undiscovered, under the water," she said. "With the deactivation of the grid, the rate of magic being introduced to your world increased by a third, which is a not-inconsiderable amount."

"It's accelerated the process," Jason said. "Not hard to surmise."

"It's worse than that, I'm afraid. I've been studying the effects on your world and the rate of acceleration seems to have crossed some manner of threshold."

"Meaning something's happened that won't get fixed when the grid goes back up? I don't suppose you ever considered helping with that. Or warning us what the EOA was up to?"

"I am an astral magic specialist, Mr Asano. While I am not unversed in array magic, I am used to operating with higher-order magic, meaning higher-rank rituals in high-magic zones. Your friend, Farrah, is more conversant with lower-order array magic than I am and better suited to the task. As for warning you, there are rules on how much I am allowed to interfere."

"That seems like a convenient excuse for acting when you want to and ignoring us when you don't."

"Then where do we draw the line, Mr Asano? Where would you like the intervention of higher-order beings to stop? Do you want the World-Phoenix coming in and solving all your problems? Of course, what constitutes a problem and an acceptable solution would be for us to decide. What if it was the Reaper instead? The Builder? How much freedom are you willing to give up? Knowing you, Mr Asano, I'm guessing not very much. There are lines that we do not cross and I recommend you be grateful for that. As it stands, my presence here is already edging that line. I am a servant of the World-Phoenix, whose authority is dimensional integrity, so I have some leeway on how free I can be with information pertaining to that. Anything else I need to be more careful with. I can help you connect dots but not draw the dots myself. Even then, I must be cautious."

Jason looked unhappy but nodded, acknowledging the point.

"If you're an astral magic specialist," he said, "how about you help me get my head around these books that Knowledge gave me?"

"Yes."

"Wait, yes? As in yes, you'll help me out without bugging about being mysterious?"

"Yes."

"Uh... great. Thank you."

"I will need some local accommodation."

"We can do that. The food won't be terrific; we're rationing the same as everyone else."

"This avatar can be sustained on spirit coins."

"No worries, then. Now, back to what you were saying about some kind of change that won't be fixed when the grid goes back up. Are you talking about direct manifestations, with no proto-spaces?"

"No, that is still a number of years away. A smaller number, now, but there is time for more pressing concerns. What I am talking about is something even I have not seen before. Do recall that I told you about the previous Builder creating this universe as an experiment?"

"Something about making it using existing realities as a template instead of starting from scratch?"

"Precisely. I have been examining the dimensional integrity of this world and I believe that the increased magic from the current circumstances has triggered a unique symptom of instability based on templates from which your world was constructed. Once the grid is back up, the acceleration in magic will be arrested somewhat as the proto-spaces it

detects are once more being intercepted. At that point, I believe the instability will show itself, like a dimensional whiplash effect.”

“Show itself how?”

“By the flaws introduced in the way this universe was constructed manifesting directly. Pockets of reality, warping into patterns based on the templates on which this reality was designed.”

“What will that look like?”

“Like an astral or proto-astral space. Different geography, climate, magical conditions. Except there will be no dimensional boundary. Instead of being connected to your world, these zones will be part of it, the space they occupied being reshaped on the most fundamental level.”

“What about people in that space?”

“I don’t know.”

“Will there be monsters?”

“I don’t know. What the previous Builder did here was drastic enough that he was removed and replaced. This is, as far as I am aware, unprecedented. If the World-Phoenix knows more, it has not shared that information with me.”

“Doesn’t feel great, does it?”

“No, it does not.”

“So, what do we do?” Jason asked. “Farrah said the grid reactivation team is hoping to get it back up in less than two weeks. Until just now, I thought that was a good thing.”

“All you can do is warn the world. I am not withholding information here; I truly do not know. You will need to discover how to deal with whatever comes for yourselves, although I have a place that you can start.”

“You’re going to connect some dots for me?”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “It is time for Akari Asano to tell you why she is really here.”