

Chapter 383

A Chance to Control the Narrative

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

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

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

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

"Need a break?" Dawn asked.

"Yeah," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh?"

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

"Sound advice," Jason said with a chuckle.

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

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

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

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

Jason gave Itsuki a smile tinged with sadness.

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

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

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

“That happened to you?”

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

Itsuki looked conflicted.

“I’m not sure I feel better.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What about the people?” Jason asked.

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m sorry,” Dawn said. “You could no more undo this than unscramble an egg.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Me either,” Farrah said.

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

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

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

Jason lifted his head, wide-eyed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anna sat up straight behind her desk.

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

"Why would you tell me this?"

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

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

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

Anna nodded.

"I can try. Thank you, Asano."