

Chapter 350

Humanity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She'd had to walk to the gas station to get the car running. The petrol in the can in the shed had long since degraded. Fortunately, the money stash had not. She'd bought a cheap burner phone while he was there but she didn't have any of her contacts saved. Like everyone else, she had given up memorising phone numbers years before. She did know where to find the Network branch in Phoenix though, so once her head cleared, she started up the car and continued on.

Jason and Kaito were flying over an Indigenous community in the Northern Territory that wasn't large enough to be spared a Network presence, which was true of most of the outback. Jason blurred and vanished from the passenger seat of the helicopter as he phased into the proto-space. It was something that continued to unnerve Kaito, even when he knew it was coming.

Kaito landed to rest and recover some mana, consuming an iron-rank coin for himself and feeding one to the helicopter through a slot on the outside of the helicopter. The slot had originally been in the cockpit but every person who saw him use a spirit coin on the helicopter made a coin-operated joke. Now, when he conjured the helicopter, the coin intake was located in a discreet spot on the exterior.

Twenty minutes later, his helicopter detected a strong aura burst a few kilometres away and he moved to pick Jason up. Jason had emerged from the proto-space after hunting the anchor monsters.

"Any problems?" Kaito asked as Jason stepped aboard.

"Nah, the anchor monsters were only bronze. No flyers, either, so Shade just flew me right over the trash. It would be nice if I could bring you into the spaces with me."

"We both know that won't be happening."

Jason could only transition into proto-spaces alone and there was no way Kaito trusted Jason enough to enter his spirit vault.

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "There is an issue that has arisen at the family compound."

"Didn't we decide to call it Asano Village?"

"That proposal was rejected," Shade said. "Discussions are ongoing, although the situation is generally too chaotic for such organisational concerns. There is still some contention as to the necessity of moving to the compound, despite your warnings and demonstrations."

"People have been watching the stories that say I'm either a hoax or a killer?"

“They have,” Shade said. “The latest family-related problem is quite different, however. A woman has arrived from Japan claiming that she wants to test your worthiness to carry the Asano name.”

“Bugger that,” Kaito said. “No one gets to tell us if we can carry our own damn name.” Jason glanced at his brother and they shared a nod.

“Damn right,” Jason said.

“What would you like me to do until you get back, Mr Asano?” Shade asked.

“Find that lady and tell her to park her worthiness where the sun doesn’t shine.”

“Very well,” Shade said. “If you do not mind, however, I would prefer to paraphrase.”