

## Chapter 345

### Grand Tour

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

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

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

“But if it happens in the middle of a city...”

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

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

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

“That’s quite a claim. What makes it so unique?”

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

“Like feng shui or leylines or something.”

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

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

"Nor should it be. What about Asya?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You met the Mirror King?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Has Adrien Barbou resurfaced?" Jason asked.

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

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

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

“But you think they’re lying.”

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

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

“You think it could be?”

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

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

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

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

“Oh?”

“Your father and your uncle have been industrious.”

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“This is incredible,” Jason said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The Network office?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Emi!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s a nice touch,” Jason said.

“That was my idea,” Emi said.

“It was?” Jason asked.

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

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

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

“What is this?” Jason asked.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

"Exactly."

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

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