

Chapter 328

A Lot of Anomalies

While Farrah and Jason fought the silver-rank monsters, Cotsworth looked on through the monitor displaying what the camera drone above the fight recorded. Although the transmission was occasionally spotty due to magical interference, he had a fairly clear vantage on what was taking place. Mel was standing next to him, likewise looking on.

"They certainly don't fight like us," she said. "Taking on multiple category threes is incredible. I can't imagine keeping up that kind of output over the long term, though."

"Hurin is probably exhausting herself quite quickly," Cotsworth observed. "She's well-suited to blitz-attacking the most powerful enemies but would fare worse in a general DE sweep. Asano is a different beast altogether. At a glance, he doesn't seem to be doing anything."

"Poison?" Mel posited. "He only ever makes two attacks against an enemy, which are presumably special attacks."

"I believe that affliction specialist is the term," Cotsworth said. "The Perth branch has one. It's hard to even notice that their abilities are taking effect, but they also shine against the most powerful enemies, although it does take longer to drop them. The advantage is that they are highly resource-efficient, which is presumably why we're seeing Asano move from one fight to the next, here."

"There's talk of new strategic approaches based on the way these two fight," Mel said. "Any truth to the rumours, sir?"

"I believe that is the idea. What do you think?"

"I don't see throwing out our existing approach," she said. "Her methods are too resource-intensive and he's too slow for a large scale sweep and clear. They are taking us to school on the big stuff, though. Developing some strike teams specialised in eliminating ADE targets could really do some work. To be honest, I don't see why it hasn't happened already."

"There's been a lot of push for it from the branches," Cotsworth said. "The International Committee has been pushing back, though. Threats of reduced resource allocation for branches employing what they call 'unnecessary high-risk' practices."

"That sounds like a load of crap."

"It is," Cotsworth said. "The IC doesn't like it any more than we do. It's the Chinese and the Americans threatening to withhold resources if the rest of the world doesn't play by their rules."

"Bunch of pricks," Mel said. "They poach all the looters, then leverage them to hold it over the rest of us."

"That's why Asano represents a chance to make a change," Cotsworth said. "Word is, the Sydney branch is willing to share him and his looting abilities with the rest of the country."

Even as they spoke, the tactical teams were using their connection to Jason to clean up the loot from the army of dead monsters. They stuck to the periphery, making sure to stay clear of Jason, Farrah and the silver-rank monsters.

"These two can also provide specific tactical guidance," Cotsworth continued. "If we're trying to work up new strategies blind, it's not worth the backlash. If we can quickly and efficiently work up new approaches, though, suddenly it's a lot more viable."

"And what happens if the US or China swoops in and takes these two away?" Mel asked.

"Then we're back where we started," Cotsworth said. "At the beck and call of the superpowers."

As they continued to watch the fight play out, the head of the support team approached.

"Ditto Cotsworth," she said. "We're getting some odd readings off the dimensional space."

"Odd how?" Cotsworth asked.

"We've been observing the integrity of the space, as per normal. A dimensional space normally takes forty-three hours to break down, with a natural variance. When we first came in, our readings came back normal, but now our projections are off. It's looking like this space might last as much as sixty hours, maybe a little over."

"Explanation?"

"I only know of one-dimensional incursion phenomenon that has operated outside of the normal time frame," she said, looking into the distance at the ongoing fight. "I can't confirm that the change happened when they entered the astral space, but I can't rule it out, either. I will say that the Sydney branch didn't record anything like this the last time Asano entered a dimensional incursion space. It could be the other one or it could be unrelated."

"Alright," Cotsworth said. "Just record everything so we can hand it off to..."

He trailed off as a blinding column of light appeared in the distance.

"Uh, sir," Mel said. "I think I may have noticed the effect of his abilities."

“Eleven silver rank monster cores,” Jason listed as he lay the loot out on the table. “Thirty-one tubs of toad jelly, not sure what that’s for.”

“You put it in tubs?” Cotsworth said.

“It came that way,” Jason said. “We took our cut of the silver spirit coins and we’re keeping the lower rank ones we looted ourselves. I daresay the army of monsters will give you enough to be going on with. Three tins of healing ointment, that’s the good stuff, so save it for your category threes. Lucrative loot, from those toads. A spool of bark-thread hair from one of the yowies. The big red thing didn’t cough up anything too special, sadly.”

“We’ll make sure everything is tallied up,” Cotsworth said. “I understand you’ve got a preliminary arrangement with the International Committee about the harvest results.”

“It won’t be finalised until I tell the yanks and the Chinese to get on their bikes,” Jason said.

“You don’t anticipate being tempted away?” Cotsworth asked.

“I don’t see what they have to offer that I’m not already getting from the International Committee. Sure, they could offer me more of it but if I wanted more I would have negotiated harder. Maybe they have some big secrets they could bring me in on but that doesn’t sit well with me. At the end of the day, the job is to protect people from monsters and that means all the people. We have a lot to offer and the rising tide should raise all ships. From what I’ve heard, that isn’t the way the US and the Chinese will want to go.”

“I won’t lie, that’s exactly what a lot of us wanted to hear,” Cotsworth said.

By the time the plane returned Jason and Farrah to Sydney it was late in the evening. Erika had refused the ride home offered by the Network in favour of a hastily-arranged induction briefing on magic. She had a lot of questions.

Jason portalled them back to Casselton Beach, with a ten-minute mid-way pause on the secluded beach he had been using as a discreet stopover point.

“Maybe you should have dropped us closer to the chip shop,” Erika said.

“I’m trying not to be too blatant about magic,” Jason said. “Any more.”

After returning to the houseboat, he set up a video call with the Network headquarters in Sydney.

“Gladys,” he greeted. “I sorry our meeting today got put off.”

“Getting interrupted by alien invasions from another dimension is something you get used to around here,” Gladys said.

They spoke for a while about Jason’s grandmother and her ongoing treatment, which was going well.

"I still wouldn't go dropping any bombs about magic being real quite yet," Gladys advised. "With her advanced stage of Alzheimer's, her grasp of reality was fragmentary at best. Give her time to adjust before letting her know that everything she knows about actual reality is wrong."

"Thank you for taking such good care with her treatment."

"Thank you for saving at least some of our people. I knew that Miranda was a sea skank but I didn't think she was bad enough to murder our own. Keith wasn't a bad young lad and he didn't deserve to go out like that."

"Any trace of her yet?" Jason asked.

"No, it's like she dropped off the face of the Earth. Anna said the Lyon branch is missing a portal user and we haven't caught that Sebastian guy's scent either. Best estimate is that they either have or still are portal hopping to whoever is behind it all."

"Any movement on figuring out who that is?"

"Still just postulation at this point," Gladys said. "Barbou sacrificed EOA and Network personnel. It could be some faction in either organisation, the Cabal or some smaller group looking to make a big play. Don't anticipate learning more until they make their next move."

"I really don't like that Barbou got away," Jason said. "I'm worried enough about Farrah without having the guy who tortured her still out there somewhere."

"She's the reason you wanted to meet with me, yes?" Gladys asked.

"Yeah."

"How is she doing?"

"To all appearances, like nothing happened," Jason said. "That just worries me all the more. As much as she might brush it off you don't go through something like that – for weeks – without it leaving an impact. I'm worried she's burying a psychological cancer that won't show itself until it metastasises."

"Well," Gladys said, "the first thing you need to do is put away your assumptions. Culture plays a huge role in our psychological makeup and she's from an entirely different world. We also don't know how much having magic affects the way we process trauma. The short-term effects seem positive, but the long-term implications remain a mystery because we don't have the research base yet. It could be that our minds just handle it better, or we may pay for those short-term protections down the road."

"So you're saying no one knows and there's nothing I can do."

"I'm saying don't push her to respond the way you think she should. Listen to what she tells you. Watch for what she shows you. Be there for her if and when she needs you."

And don't underestimate the power of shared experiences. You went through some stuff yourself, while you were on the other side, right?"

"Where did you hear that?"

"I didn't need anyone to tell me when you're running around like an angry thorn bush," she said. "Your friend isn't the only one in need of recovery. My recommendation is for you both to take things easy for a good long while. Springtime is coming to that nice little town of yours. Enjoy it."

He didn't respond, his mind churning over.

"I know it's not what you wanted to hear," Gladys said. "You want to be active and do something for your friend. Sometimes, the best thing you can do is step back and not make things worse."

Lance Houseman entered the hotel room in Sydney where his assistant, Franklin, was waiting. Lance was a broad-shouldered man whose silver rank made him look thirty, while his true age was almost double that. Franklin was a slender, iron-rank, black man holding a computer tablet. Both men wore impeccable suits.

"Room's clean, sir," Franklin said. "The locals didn't try anything, magical or otherwise."

"They'd be stupid if they did," Lance said. "You've gone over the materials?"

"Yes, sir," Franklin said.

"Then let's take a seat and go over them. Did anything happen while we were in the air?"

"Asano worked with the tactical team of another branch. This time he brought the woman he liberated with him."

Franklin handed over a file as they sat down, side by side, in the large suite's comfortable armchairs.

"This is everything we have on her, which is, essentially, nothing. The most concrete thing we have is an analysis of her abilities, courtesy of a drone recording. I've put the raw footage and an analysed break down of it to your laptop but, in brief, she's a blitz attacker. Highly capable, extreme damage output. She seems to have an ability to ignore rank barriers as there was no noticeable damage impedance from the silver-rank monsters. That's possibly just a factor of the poor video source, however."

"She's another Trelawney, then."

"Initial assessment is that she's potentially more capable than Trelawney, although that assessment has received some pushback."

"Of course it has," Lance said. "Our people aren't used to not having the best there is, but this woman comes from a world where our best is the norm. Value assessment?"

"Our best guess is that she's very close to crossing the line to silver-rank. Tactically she would be an asset, but no more than any other top-flight silver. It's the knowledge she brought back from the other world that's valuable. Our assets inside the Sydney branch claim that Asano has asserted that her value in this regard is higher than his."

"And what about him?" Lance asked. "Did we finally get a look at his abilities?"

"Yes, sir, although not a good one. We believe he's an affliction specialist so his abilities have limited visual effect. Most of them, anyway."

"Oh?"

"His abilities appear to work in stages. Initially, his powers inflict a rapidly accelerating necrosis, which he puts in place before moving on to other combatants. Then he comes back and switches to attacks based around what we believe to be oblivion energy."

"He's wiping stuff out of existence?"

"Yes, sir. Allow me to show you a clip."

Franklin pulled up a video file on his tablet, showing a man on a motorcycle trailing a dark cloak of stars behind him as he circled some stricken-looking hairy giants. A huge column of light crashed down on the giants, one after another, wholly eradicating each one.

"That's a lot of oblivion energy, if that's really what it is," Lance said. "We're sure this guy is bronze-rank?"

"There are a lot of anomalies in that regard," Franklin said. "He also seems to ignore rank suppression, which is possibly due to items or a learned ability from the other world. We have no information on anything like that existing, but our knowledge of the other world is centuries out of date. It may well be a more recent development. The analysts think it's more likely a result of individual abilities, though. We do have one of our own who can do that, after all."

"What else?"

"His aura is highly anomalous. He did something we don't understand while he was in France that had a physiological effect similar to a rank-up. Since then, he appears different, magically. His aura was already reported to be significantly more powerful than his rank suggested and now it's something else entirely. It apparently still reads as bronze rank but with a strength that easily matches silver. One of our informants referred to it as feeling like..."

Franklin scrolled through his notes on the tablet.

“...being bludgeoned to death by the Ten Commandments,” he read.

“How colourful.”

“As best we can tell, he’s bronze-rank. With the unusual factors surrounding him and the borderline strength of the other outworlder, our analysts suggest treating them as silver, from a tactical perspective.”

“What do they make of Asano’s tactical value?”

“We don’t have a full handle of his abilities yet, but early assessment places his value at extremely high. High endurance, escalating damage, oblivion energy. He’s built for taking down ADEs. His high mobility and stealth capabilities are just sweeteners. The problem is his behavioural profile.”

“Oh?”

“He’s erratic. Rash. It’s hard to predict when he’ll fight versus when he’ll talk. He’s willing to accept extreme consequences for bold moves. Strongly anti-authoritarian. Even so, he’s made connections in the Network and the Cabal. He values friendship over alliances. He also appears to be suffering from post-traumatic stress we believe stems from an extended period in some kind of combat zone.”

“They think he’s been to war?”

“Or something like it,” Franklin said.

“What’s the suggested approach?”

"Personal benefits won't win him over," Franklin said. "He seems to value relationships, so offering benefits for the other outworlder and his family will be better received. It's all in the packet I left in your room. He doesn't respect politeness. Be honest, show strength. He'll respect that. Do not threaten him, however. He cannot be intimidated and he'll see it as a challenge."

“He sounds like a huge pain the ass.”

“That sums up his behavioural analysis, quite neatly, if more colloquially than the written report.”