

Chapter 349

Contingencies

"I'm sure Uncle Jason will be here soon," Erika said to her sullen daughter.

"I don't see what the big deal is," Emi's friend Ruby said. "You're always talking about your uncle but he's never around."

The beach birthday party was going well, although the ongoing absence of her uncle was increasingly ruining the birthday girl's mood.

"Mrs Asano, Miss Emi," Shade said. "Mr Asano is on his way."

"Who said that?" Ruby asked, looking around. "Is there a British man hidden somewhere? Is it a birthday surprise, because that would be weird."

"Shade," Erika hissed. "What are you doing?"

"The time for secrecy is over, Mrs Asano," Shade said. "Mr Asano is coming to bring your family to the compound. Prepare them to go."

"What are you talking about?"

She looked up, hearing a commotion, her eyes following the startled gazes and pointed hands to the street that ran along the beachfront. A huge black motorcycle hurtled along at a pace definitely outside the speed limit, a cloak of stars trailing behind like a comet's tail.

The bike swerved off the road, over the grass and off the grassy embankment. Instead of dropping down to the sand, the bike erupted into a cloud of darkness. The rider glided through the air, his cloak swept out like wings of night, absorbing the cloud of shadows. The rider landed in front of Emi, the cloak draping around him. In the middle of the sunny day, surrounded by colourfully-clad children, it looked deeply incongruous.

"Sorry I'm late," Jason said. He ignored the crowd of people pulling out their phones to record.

"What are you doing?" Erika asked as her husband rushed up to join them. Ruby's parent likewise rushed over the sand, protectively standing in front of their daughter.

"Questions can wait," Jason said. "Right now, we go."

Erika opened her mouth to ask a question, processed what Jason had said and then paused.

"Alright," she said, nodding.

"What is going on?" Ruby's father asked. "You're that thing from the news. The one that kills people!"

A pair of silver eyes, shrouded in darkness turned on him and he felt a weight pressing down on his soul.

“Then you should probably watch your tone,” Jason said in the voice he normally saved for people about to die.

“Uncle Jason, that’s my friend’s Dad!”

He looked down at his niece, then pushed the hood back off his head.

“Sorry,” he said. “Happy birthday, Moppet, but we have to go. We’re all moving to the compound. Today.”

He opened a portal arch, which drew an audible reaction from the crowd.

“I need to round up the rest of the family,” Jason said. “I’ll explain later, but things are about to get very, very bad.”

Emi pushed past Ruby’s parents to grab her friend by the arms.

“They have to come too,” she insisted.

Jason looked at the fierce determination on the face of his niece and grinned.

“I have to get the rest of the family, so the portal closes in one minute,” he said. “You have until then to convince them to step through.”

“I am not letting my daughter step into whatever the hell this is!”

More of the Asano family were rushing up as Ian tried to calm down Ruby’s father and Erika spoke to her mother. Some of the Asano family knew what was going on, while others did not and were startled to see Jason clad in magical darkness.

“Son, what’s going on?” Ken asked as he ran onto the sand. Jason had rushed right past him earlier, up on the grassy embankment that bordered the beach. He had been with Hiro, who was following close behind his brother. Behind him was Taika, who had seen Jason in full regalia, the open portal and made an executive decision.

“I’ve got the cake!” he yelled out carrying the box containing the birthday cake Erika had made. He took it straight through the portal without bothering to wait for anyone else.

Jason turned to Ken and Hiro.

“Help me get the ones who don’t know about everything through the portal,” he said. He was struck by the family resemblance as the brothers both nodded and got to work, turning to the still-gathering family members.

Every Network facility on the planet was a frenzy of activity, and they were not alone. All around the world, military units that had worked with the Network were scrambling to expand their readiness for what was to come. Government bodies globally were enacting protocols developed with the Network, attempting to set logistics into place, rapidly

introduce emergency legislation and accelerate a program of public awareness that the world was about to face an unprecedented threat.

The public awareness component was the first to face a crucial impediment. As governments tried to broadcast public service announcements, media companies resisted, unleashing a barrage of legal challenges.

Those challenges didn't completely shut down the flow of information but it was inflicting critical gaps in the knowledge that was going out to the public. With genuine information patchy and inconsistent, those gaps were being filled with speculation, conspiracy theories and outright disinformation. The results in different parts of the world ranged from social media flame wars to panic on the streets.

The legal obstructionism of the media barons was clearly not going to hold up, with the first cases being struck down in hours. Every delay was costly, however, as proto-spaces appeared undetected around the globe. In less than three days, they would start spilling monsters directly into the world.

Farrah had been part of an international task force with hundreds of members from Network branches all around the world to investigate the blackouts. While they had considered a complete collapse of grid functionality a low-probability outcome, contingency plans had been put into place and were currently being carried out.

The core of the response was a program to actively search for proto-spaces by getting Network ritualists out into the field. Farrah's expertise and her studies of the grid had made her a lead in the contingency project, developing a ritual for just that purpose. It had to be simple enough to be employed by those with minimal ritualism skills, efficient enough that it wouldn't break the spirit coin bank yet wide-area enough to actually be worth using.

Farrah had given Jason an item for his trip that allowed him to track proto-spaces, but replicating that item was not a viable solution. On top of the cost to mass-produce it, it was only able to find proto-spaces and not the apertures into them. Only Jason had the power to enter the spaces directly.

Although it was only a side project to the investigation into the grid blackouts, Farrah had taken the contingency ritual through several iterative improvements before disseminating it. It was simple enough that a ritualist in every branch had been made proficient in its use, which was paying off as they taught it to others in turn.

The contingency plans being put into action were a poor substitute for the grid. In addition to tying up personnel and consuming resources, they could only monitor tiny slices of area compared to the coverage of the grid. As a result, the decision had been

made to focus on thorough scanning of population centres over maximising total coverage. The result was that Network ritualists would be deployed prioritising population centres. Major cities were critical both for population and infrastructure, which made preventing monster outbreaks critical.

The tradeoffs for this approach were not easy to swallow. The Network had the people to cover major cities in most of the developed world, but rural and isolated areas would be left unprotected. The impact on agricultural regions would be extreme once hordes of monsters were roaming the countryside but covering expansive regions with minimal population wasn't a viable option. The problem was the food shortages that this would eventually lead to.

Some areas of the world lacked the proper Network coverage to cover even the major population centres. The area most impacted by this was Russia, which was largely dominated by the Cabal. The Network branches there had always been operating in a borderline state effectiveness and the new challenges would be something they were not equipped to meet. The International Committee was working to remedy this but there were already too many fires to put out.

The situation in Russia was part of the impetus for the Network to reach out to the Cabal. The places where the Network was weakest were often those where the Cabal was strongest and the idea of supplementing Network assets with cabal resources was being actively explored.

"Asano," Anna called out as she emerged through the rooftop door. Kaito turned from where he was directing people as they loaded crates onto his helicopter.

"Committeewoman," Kaito greeted after jogging from the helipad to meet her.

"I heard that some of my fellow committeepersons had conscripted you to take their scattered family members to their family compounds."

The members of the Steering Committee were all old family Network, including Anna herself. The kind of work the Asano family had done on their own compound, the old families had put in place decades ago. They didn't have the expertise of Farrah as a guiding hand, but the accumulated knowledge and resources of generations was not to be dismissed.

"You have your own family," Anna continued. "Things are going to get rough and you should make sure they're taken care of."

“Jason is dealing with that,” Kaito said. “He’ll see them right and then come here to help with logistics. Right now, I’m needed here. There’s a lot more people than just our families who are going to need help.”

“No kidding,” Anna said. “I can’t help but notice that you aren’t ferrying committee family members.”

“Farrah told them all to go jump,” Kaito said. “She scares them.”

“She should. You’re moving resources for the dimensional space detection contingency?”

“People, resources, whatever it takes.”

“I’ll let you get back to it, then,” Anna said.

“Jason said he’ll come here once our family has been rounded up,” Kaito said. “He can move a lot of people through those portals of his, you should get him ferrying people. Let him sort out those committee people’s families, if only to stop them throwing their weight around.”

“Can’t your brother only portal to places he’s been before?”

“Farrah had him scope out all the Network family compounds for reference before he went on his trip,” Kaito said. “He can portal right to them.”

Kaito turned and headed back for the helicopter. As he approached he snapped his fingers and it started spinning its rotors.

Anna returned to the chaos of the operations centre, where Ketevan was marshalling the chaos like a general in the midst of battle. As Director of Operations, she had a lot more to do than Anna, whose oversight role had been reduced to Asya looping her in on International Committee directives as she passed them onto Ketevan. It had always been the case the IC didn’t have actual authority over the branches but with a global crisis, any branch not getting with the program was dooming the people they should be protecting.

Anna waited for a rare lull and made her way into what used to be her own office.

“Keti,” Anna said. “I’m pretty much useless at this point. Do you have anywhere I can make myself useful?”

“Absolutely,” Ketevan said. “We’ve got a bunch of people coming in from the EOA looking to defect.”

“Defect?”

“The rank and file didn’t know what the people in charge were doing. Once the grid went down, orders started coming in and a lot of them didn’t like it when they realised what

was happening. They've started to approach Network branches all over looking to contribute."

"Isn't there a concern about infiltration?" Anna asked.

"Of course there is," Ketevan said. "Right now, though, we need warm bodies and information, and they have both. I'd love for you to take that whole mess off my hands."

"Alright," Anna said. "Point me in the right direction."

While the Network was in chaos, in a quiet, still and largely empty stretch of Arizona desert, an old shed sat a few miles from a town that wasn't much more than a gas station, a bar and a pervasive sense of having been left behind by life.

No one had gone to the old building in years and the gate lock on the chain-link fence had long ago rusted shut. None of the locals remembered it being anything but abandoned, with the only surprise being that it hadn't fallen down yet.

The building was largely empty, which made the two things that were present stand out. The more ordinary one was a 2002 Pontiac Firebird in pewter metallic, covered by a dusty car sheet.

The other object was significantly more extraordinary, and likewise covered in a sheet. It was a glass cylinder filled with a liquid that only looked like water, radiating cold despite not being connected to any kind of cooling device. The truly unusual part was the naked woman floating in the liquid, neither truly alive nor truly dead.

What the sheet did not cover was the magical diagram that had been cut into the concrete floor, seemingly with a saw, in a circle around the glass cylinder and its bizarre contents. It was covered in dirt and dust, as were the piles of spirit coins placed in locations around the circle.

The small town did not have anyone with magic, regardless of what old Raquel would claim about her psychic powers. No one, then sensed the disembodied soul approach from the west, enter the building and slip into the body in the tank.

After sitting dormant for many years, light started shining from the lines of the magical diagram on the floor. One by one, the spirit coins within it disappeared and the liquid within the tank started to glow. Finally, the now embodied soul, opened her eyes. The glass shattered sending icy liquid flooding across the floor and she staggered out, eyes blinking in confusion. She moved to the car, leaning heavily on it as she worked her lungs for the first time.

Eventually her mind and body came into sync as her soul imprinted her memories onto the still-pliable brain. She was disoriented, uncertain as to how long the process had

taken by the time she regained lucidity. She had never really expected it to work, but after what happened, she knew it was her only chance. If she had played along, they would have watched her every moment, ever ready to swing the axe. Better to take the risk and seize the initiative.

She pulled the cover off the car and peered into the side mirror, seeing a face fifteen years younger than it should be looking back. It was not the face of Mrs South, which was a name she had now surrendered. She was once again Audrey Blaine, and she was hungry.