

Chapter 393

The Edge of Madness

Jason, Farrah and Dawn travelled from place to place, in search of nodes to repair. They used the grid interface in the cloud house to choose their next destinations, refining their accuracy as they learned more from each proto-space and node they explored. After the USA was Canada, Tanzania, Myanmar and more.

They lived an isolated life, along with Jason's family, as people meant nothing but danger. Seeking help from others was exposing vulnerabilities, while those who genuinely willing to help would themselves be in danger by association.

Their methodology would start by using the cloud house's grid interface to detect a suitable target area, then travel there and set up the cloud house as a home base. This allowed Jason's family to safely live outside of Jason's spirit vault, which was slowly becoming less inhospitable but was still far from welcoming.

Once they arrived in a region, Jason and Farrah would wait for proto-spaces to form, in order to go in and identify the right node. They became increasingly proficient at the sequence of entering a space, performing the ritual and getting out before the Network was any the wiser. When possible, they covered any trace of the rituals, hoping to keep the Network unaware of their patterns.

The current lifestyle of Jason and the others afforded a lot of downtime as they travelled or waited on proto-spaces to manifest. Jason and Farrah took the time to maintain a regimented training schedule, which was not always possible when things were busier. Farrah had constructed a new set of exercise equipment for their heightened attributes, as any non-magical weights heavy enough to be valuable were too heavy to be practical.

Other time was spend on magical theory. Dawn continued to teach Jason while Emi learned from Farrah. After making her decision not to follow her uncle, Emi had been reinvigorated, going as far as choosing a magical specialty. Farrah advised against making the choice too quickly, wanting her to see the breadth of options the other world had to offer.

"Fortunately, thirteen-year-olds are famous for taking good advice when presented with it," an exasperated Farrah told Jason while they were doing their physical training, which made him laugh.

"What is it that she wants to learn?" he asked.

"It's a very niche field related to mine," Farrah explained. "I'm a specialist in formation magic and arrays. Permanent and semi-permanent versions of ritual magic, which is one of the core magical fields. It's less specialised than, say, astral magic, which is why I have a broader knowledge base than you're developing, able to tap into a lot of areas."

"Okay."

"What Emi is looking at is a specialised version of my field called formation interactivity. You understand that putting magical formations close together is tricky because they interfere with each other, right?"

"Yeah," Jason said.

"Formation interactivity is the study of the effects of having formation close to one another. At a basic level, it's about reducing the effects so that formations can be used in closer proximity. Advanced applications involve generating positive interactions but that is not a developed area of study. It's also notorious for being one of the most impenetrable branches of magic, which is why it's underdeveloped."

"And my niece has got it into her head to be a groundbreaker," Jason said.

"She's implausibly smart, I'll admit," Farrah said. "Even so, that field is a career. If that's the way she wants to go, she wouldn't have time to be an adventurer. That's locking yourself in a room and never coming out research."

"I assume your intention is to keep working on her foundational skills until you get her into a Magic Society branch and broaden her horizons?"

"That's exactly my intention. My concern is that she's as stubborn and unpredictable as you and your sister."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Jason said.

While the cloud house life was largely isolated from the world, the internet was a window into what they were missing. There was always at least one online news feed running somewhere and as weeks passed they became increasingly happy to be missing it all. As they hid away, quietly completing their tasks, the world was ever more precipitously teetering on the edge of madness.

"Is that a centaur?" Jason asked, glancing at a wall monitor after emerging from the showers post-workout.

"No," Farrah said, likewise emerging. "It's a lot of centaurs."

"I know Salzburg has an old-world charm," Jason said, "but there weren't centaurs around when we were in Austria, right?"

"There were," Dawn said. "Like other members of the Cabal, they have become experts at hiding their presence over the centuries."

"They'd have to," Jason said. "You can't hide being half-horse with a pair of extra-loose slacks. My friend Craig once told me that all Cabal members can pass as human, shape-change into humans or otherwise have the means to remain hidden from the world. Usually a combination of illusion powers and isolation. Hillfolk, haunted houses, mysterious things in the woods and so on."

"That's an incomplete but sufficient description," Dawn said.

"Where do creatures like that come from?" Farrah asked. "The Cabal has always struck me as odd. How does a low-magic world have such overtly magical creatures? It hasn't even developed non-human essence-using species."

"Like so many of this world's issues," Dawn said, "It stems from the same original sin."

"Original sin?" Jason asked. "Are you going native on me, Dawn?"

"The connotations of the term are usefully descriptive," Dawn said. "It goes back to the way the original Builder constructed the seed of this universe using the patterns of existing worlds. There is a reason the other great astral beings intervened. This world is now ravaged by the ramifications of that choice while yours, Miss Hurin, is also being affected. Soon, it will also experience the consequences of the Builder's experiment in full force."

"Which we're going to unleash," Farrah said unhappily.

"You have to cut someone to perform surgery," Jason said. "If there's a better option, you take, it but sometimes there just isn't."

"Just so," Dawn agreed.

"So, the Cabal members are echoes of the worlds the original Builder based this on," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn confirmed. "Even before the magic started to rise, beings started to arise from the incongruities that resulted from the unconventional means by which your universe was established. It was rare, but over hundreds, thousands, millions of years they slowly emerged. Like other living things, they evolved. From simple magical entities to complex beings, they adapted to their environments over countless generations while still being shaped by their origins. Because they were rare, even with the power they possessed, those that adapted to remain hidden are the ones that survived."

"So, they really are connected to the transformation spaces," Farrah said.

“After a fact, yes,” Dawn said. “All magical things will grow stronger over time as the ambient magic rises. Part of the reason that earth’s essence users are mediocre is that most of them spend most of their time suffering low-level magical starvation. These transformation zones seem to affect Cabal members even more than the rising ambient magic.”

“Which is why they’re winning out in the competition for reality cores,” Jason said. “The transformation zones they’re fighting in make them stronger.”

“If the Cabal is looking to revive a bunch of ancient vampires, isn’t that bad?” Farrah asked.

“I’m pretty sure it is, yeah,” Jason said. “There nothing we can do about it, though, except to keep doing what we’re doing. We’re two people, not an army that can run around competing for cores all over the world.”

“Exactly,” Dawn said. “It is wise to focus on what you can do and not concern yourself with what you cannot.”

The first node Jason successfully identified and repaired, right before fighting the gold ranker, turned out to be one of the ones they needed to find. The process wasn’t always reliable, with the nodes in the USA and Myanmar being false positives that didn’t need repairing. The only gains were that with each failed node, they would be better at eliminating further false positives as they refined the process of identifying further nodes. The nodes in Canada and Tanzania had been modified and Jason managed to rectify both.

As they worked, the descent into chaos that began with monster waves and transformation events started to escalate. In just a few weeks, things had grown increasingly worse as sections of major cities started to be caught up in transformation zones.

The Bankstown area of Sydney was turned into a city of low-level volcanic activity and stone buildings. The people there were primarily turned into the smoulder race, with onyx skin and glowing, fiery eyes. The area affected included Bankstown airport, which was the Sydney Network branch’s major transport and logistics hub. Not only did the Network’s non-essence user staff get transformed but their planes were turned into bird-like magical constructs. This rendered them inoperable without an essence user with the ability to use specialised magical tools, an ability that rarely appeared on Earth.

Earth had taken a magitech route, combining technology with magic. In terms of accessibility, convenience and cost, this was objectively better than relying on purely

magical devices. Magitech communication was much more convenient and vehicles didn't require someone like Clive with a special power to operate.

Pallimustus also had vehicles that could be driven by anyone but only operable in zones of high magical density. Only something like the vortex accumulator in Jason's cloud constructs could circumvent this problem, which was a level of magic engineering undeveloped on Earth. Magitech was much more suited to earth's conditions and advanced in different directions.

Bankstown airport was now covered in stone buildings, lava pooling in random areas and a bunch of giant metal birds that couldn't move. This hurt the Sydney network branch, especially as they joined a growing movement actively working against the Network's global leadership.

Three factions quickly emerged: The Chinese branches and those who allied with them, forcibly or not; the USA, who did not accept allies, and most of what was left. This faction was the largest, but also the most scattered and least stable. The people attached to the International Committee split rather evenly between the three factions.

The first two factions were focused heavily on claiming reality cores and accordingly became open rivals. The third faction took the name the Network had publicly been using, the Global Defense Network, and continued to intercept proto spaces. What they did do was change the American spelling of 'defense' and change it to the international 'defence.' Most government bodies continued to work with this faction, providing much-needed legitimacy and support.

Sometimes the transformation events were relatively peaceful, although this was rare. Coconut Grove in Miami, Florida was transformed into an elven utopia, with beautiful architecture interwoven with rich, sprawling gardens. The residents were transformed into beautiful elves which, while still traumatic, could have been far worse.

More common were cases like West Canfield, Detroit. The people were turned into goblins and their homes into underground warrens, which rapidly devolved into a lawless combat zone into which the National Guard was sent to restore order. After the first hideous former humans were gunned down, things devolved quickly.

Transformation zones fluctuated in area, from one or two kilometres across to engulfing entire large towns. Less-developed areas, like farms and countryside, tended to have larger areas affected, while events in cities were more contained. Despite the smaller scale, though, once major cities were impacted, it was as if an invisible line between stability and chaos had been crossed.

Conflict between the magical factions become more heated and harder to hide from the population at large. As open battle spilled out of the transformation zones, the people of the world realised that a war was being fought and that their only parts were innocent bystander or collateral damage. EOA superheroes fought the essence users of the Network, who themselves were caught up in infighting.

Driving the escalation was the knowledge that with each passing day, the mythological beings of the Cabal were growing in power as they operated more and more in the open. Centaurs, ogres, fairies and more variously delighted and horrified as they were spotted by the media and had their images revealed to the world.

The Cabal would have been dominating already except that, like the Network, current events had revealed old fault lines in their organisation. Factional infighting abounded as conflicts older than any living civilisation were taken up once more.

Government forces stepped in as best they were able as cities rapidly turned into battlegrounds. Government-Network alliances were strained or broken, which was often the best-case scenario. In China and the US, Network Deep State actors rapidly seized control.

The Global Defence Network faction did their best to hold everything together. The other Network factions were focused on their conflicts with each other, the EOA and the cabal as they fought over reality cores, allowing the GDN to claim the grid infrastructure and continue to intercept proto-spaces. Rapidly forming new agreements with world governments, they avoided the reality core war. The biggest problem was that many of their silver-rank personnel had been pulled into other factions, making higher-rank dimensional incursions difficult and dangerous to handle.

Emergency powers were enacted and martial law was put into place. The cities, which had been largely shielded from the monster waves, were now battlegrounds and people were fleeing into rural areas to escape the fighting. Jason, meanwhile, continued his work as weeks turned into months. At the same time he arrived in his latest location, Venezuela, the ancient vampires the non-Cabal factions had been worrying about made their presence known in the city of Venice.