

## Chapter 381

### Collateral Damage

Dawn, Erika, Yumi and Asya were on the sandy beach of the lagoon, waiting for the other to emerge from the sea cave. Jason and the others emerged on black jet skis that dissolved into darkness as they beached themselves on the sand. Erika snatched her daughter into a worried hug and Farrah slapped Jason on the arm.

“Got it done?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said.

Dawn had been staring at Jason even before they left the cave, her gaze unerringly locked onto his aura through the stone.

“What did you do?” Dawn asked him. “The transcendent strain in your aura has been strengthened. It may only offer flavour, rather than power, but it is a startling thing to detect in an aura at your rank. It might be intimidating but it will also draw attention.”

“Probably for the best that he can hide his aura so well, then,” Farrah said.

“Yes, it is,” Dawn said. “What does have power is the force inside your aura antithetical to the Builder. Most people wouldn’t recognise it, but I’m familiar enough with the Builder to know what it is. It was there the first time we met, but now the glowing ember is a burning flame.”

“The Builder and his freaky cyborg army killed a lot of people in the other world, including both Farrah and myself,” Jason said. “I am antithetical to the Builder.”

“You’ll be lucky if any of the Builder’s adherents don’t attack you on sight after sensing that aura,” Dawn said.

“I’ll consider myself lucky if they do,” Jason said. “Rooting out those infiltrating pricks is something I’ve done before and I’ll be more than happy to do again.”

“So, this is it,” said Denji. “Our clan has fulfilled its purpose. Now I am unsure of what course to chart.”

As Tiwari clan patriarch, it was Denji’s duty to lead a clan now riddled with fissures. Large portions of the clan had treated their long-held purpose as mythological, so Jason’s arrival had left many uncertain or angry. Denji would be required to lead his clan to a new purpose.

“The first thing is to consolidate the clan in the wake of our new reality,” Denji’s brother, Koya, said. “Things will be uncertain as we choose our own destiny, but we must move forward together.”

“Father is right, Uncle Denji,” Itsuki said. “We will all be together.”

“We are far from a unified force, son,” Koya said, “I think it might be a good time to broaden your horizons. Mr Asano, I was hoping that you might take Itsuki under your wing for a time.”

Itsuki’s eyes went wide at the idea.

“You might not want to do that,” Emi said. “He may learn more about the A-Team than magic powers.”

“The old Liam Neeson movie?” Itsuki asked.

“Oh, holy, crap,” Jason said. “What have you been teaching this boy? He definitely needs to have his education expanded upon.”

“Did I miss something?” Koya asked.

“Clearly,” Erika said. “Does your son even know who George Peppard is?”

“The male lead from Breakfast at Tiffany’s?” Koya asked. “What is going on?”

“You can just ignore them,” Yumi said. “My grandchildren have skewed views on certain cultural properties. You should also ignore Breakfast at Tiffany’s. Mickey Rooney as a Japanese man? Excruciating.”

“You know what’s worse?” Jason asked. “That movie where Obi-Wan Kenobi plays a man named Koichi Asano.”

“That movie,” Denji growled. “I can only imagine how aggravating it must be to have your name being used like that.”

Asya wrapped her arm inside Jason’s.

“If I had a bingo card for you,” she told him, “I’d have just crossed off ‘get the patriarch of an ancient Japanese clan to complain about old movies during a treasure hunt on a deserted tropical island.’ You are the only person who would have that on their card.”

“That’s a very specific bingo card.”

“Yours would be,” she said. “There really is no one quite like you.”

“If you two are going to make out,” Emi said, “could you save it for the plane? Also, can we get a plane?”

“Shade is my familiar, Moppet. You can’t just tell him to...”

Darkness streamed out of Jason’s shadow to take the form of a plane, blasting down air as it hovered in place. One of Shade’s bodies emerged from Jason and stood next to Emi.

“Would you like to come aboard, Miss Emi?” Shade said loudly, over the rush of air.

“Traitor,” Jason accused.

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The Tiwari men were returned to Japan and Itsuki went off with his father to pack his things. Souta Tiwari, who had been looking into Jason's poisoning, met them on arrival. He offered to report to Jason, who said that he was uninterested in Tiwari clan affairs. Jason already knew everything from the Shade dwelling in Souta's shadow and it truly was internal Tiwari affairs. Jason had bigger things to deal with than some disgruntled clansmen, although if they'd gone after his family, instead, it would be a different story.

"Mr Asano," Souta said as they waited for Itsuki to return. "The Japanese authorities came to find you during your absence. We truthfully told them that you had already departed, but it might be time for you to bring this trip to Japan to an end."

"Well, I did set off a bunch of car bombs, so I can hardly blame them. Good thing you tried to murder me or I'd feel bad about bringing that to your door."

Souta gave Jason an awkward smile.

"Don't worry, mate. We'll be off and away promptly."

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Koya looked at his son, madly shoving things into the dark, floating orb that was the aperture to Itsuki's storage space.

"This is an important opportunity, son, but while I know you admire Mr Asano, do not lose sight of how dangerous he is."

"We are all dangerous, Father. We've both killed many monsters."

"That's not what I mean. You need not fear the man who kills, for all you need to do is be better. Fear the man who kills, then smiles and laughs like it is any other day. That man has no lines, whatever he might tell you. Or tell himself."

"I don't think he's like that," Itsuki said. "Look at the things he's done. It's clear how hard he's trying to be a good man."

"Exactly," Koya said. "Good men don't have to try."

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On the way back to Australia, Jason, Farrah and Dawn sequestered themselves in a cabin to discuss the next move.

"If you absorbed the door, you should have some idea of how it operates," Dawn said to Jason.

"Yes," he agreed, "although how to operate it properly is another matter. I'm going to need to advance my knowledge of astral magic or I'll just fumble around, accomplishing nothing."

“I can continue to help you with that,” Dawn said. “In the meantime, Miss Hurin can work on our own system to tap into the grid, now that you have lost access to Network resources.”

“We’re going to need access?” Farrah asked.

“As best I can understand,” Jason said, “the underlying makeup of reality is made of nodes, of which just this planet has an incalculable number. Fuelling those nodes are what you might call reality cores. Batteries for the universe. These are the things that everyone is going to be fighting over.”

“These events you described taking place after the grid goes back up,” Farrah said to Dawn. “They’re going to reveal these reality cores?”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “As best as I can determine, each event will reveal one, which you can expect the magical factions to be fighting over.”

“What about the proto-spaces?” Farrah asked.

“They will continue, and we need to use them,” Dawn said. “They represent the points at which the dimensional membrane around this reality is most strained. There, rituals to find the altered nodes will be more effective, allowing us to detect them over a wider area.”

“As best we can tell, the Network founder used the door to create the imbalance in the link and then founded the Network to slow down the damage once it escalated,” Jason explained. “The whole reason the link between worlds is out of whack is that the door was used to modify specific nodes. That’s what we need to track down: the nodes the founder modified, so we can restore them to what amounts to factory default.”

“It will be quite hit and miss at first,” Dawn said. “As more of the link is normalised, the rest will start to stand out and our successes will accelerate at the end.”

“Which will stop it siphoning magic from my world,” Farrah said. “That will finally trigger the oversized monster surge, giving the Builder’s forces a chance to invade.”

“Yes,” Jason said. “This world is just collateral damage. Unfortunately, the only way out is through. Someone like me coming along to fix the link was part of the plan. I’m going to be the trigger that starts the invasion.”

“There is no other option,” Dawn said.

“I know,” Jason said. “The only way out is through. We need to identify the nodes and fix the link, hopefully before the magical factions plunder too many of the nodes and the whole system is thrown off.”

“What if one of the nodes we need is affected by these events?” Farrah asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said.

“We will need to figure that out as we go,” Dawn said. “Even I can’t know that until I see it for myself. I suspect, though, that we will have an amount of leeway.”

“Meaning we don’t have to hit every node?” Jason asked. “That’s some welcome breathing room.”

“These are just educated guesses,” Dawn said. “It could well be that I am wrong and every affected node must be restored.”

“I guess we have a plan, then,” Farrah said. “If we’re going to be running around in proto-spaces, though, won’t the Network get grouchy?”

“Let them,” Jason said.

“A support team might be useful,” Farrah said. “Silvers would be best, but we have bronze-rankers we can trust. They can help keep the monsters and the Network off our backs while we’re operating in proto-spaces.”

“We can talk about it after we get back to Australia and take stock,” Jason said. “There are a lot of things up in the air right now.”

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Jason sat alone in his cloud house, in a dome beneath the water offshore of Asano Village. Emi was giving Itsuki a tour while Jason meditated, feeling completely safe for the first time since his second battle in Makassar. Some of his abilities even ranked up, although he knew that speed to be an illusion.

Early in a rank, abilities always went up faster, but with every rank, the later thresholds become harder and harder to pass. His powers might go up two or three ranks quickly now, but it would be a decade or more before they started reaching gold. He could only hope that the challenges ahead were enough to accelerate the timeline a little.

He had a monitor manifest out of a cloud wall and started watching the news. It was story after story on the changes currently rocking the world as everyday life and magic continued to collide.

“...it has been almost twenty-four hours since the last new monster wave, with waves that appeared before that point continuing to be dealt with across the globe. A Global Defense Network spokesperson claimed that under normal conditions, monster waves would no longer appear, although she did stress that regions that have ejected the GDN presence are not operating under normal conditions.”

A picture of the League of Heroes logo appeared on the screen.

“Questions continued to be asked about the League of Heroes that have taken over in the wake of GDN departures, specifically about the organisation behind them, the Engineers of Ascension. There is also the enigmatic and reclusive Cabal, although they

are yet to make any visible attempts to seize political power. The EOA, as they are commonly known, was first revealed by Jason Asano, who himself is coming under fire amid accusations of a series of car bombings in Japan...”

Jason flicked off the screen with a mental command and it sank into the cloud wall. He got up, walked through the cloud house, following the tunnel linked to the central underwater dome. He then took the tunnel to the airlock, leaving the cloud house for the tunnel system running under Asano Village. He took out the cloud flask, removed the stopper and placed the end into the physical aperture next to the airlock. The cloud house started breaking down and flowing into the flask.

Jason hadn't yet used the new form of his cloud flask, the palace, which became available when he had raised the flask to silver rank. He didn't expect the palace form to be as grand as Emir's, since Emir had already taken his flask to gold rank. The cloud house form had become more impressive at bronze-rank and Jason imagined the palace form would operate on the same principle. Even so, he did not anticipate being disappointed to only get a small palace.

He did not test the palace form after the cloud house had returned to the flask. Instead, he placed the flask in his inventory and sat in the small, underground tram cart that would carry him through the tunnels to Asano Village.

As he neared the village, he sensed Annabeth Tilden arrive at the main gate. The serene bushland of Asano Village allowed Jason's senses to be quite alert to distant events, compared to a crowded city where stimulus was so much heavier. His silver-rank spirit attribute helped him filter it all, but only at higher rank would he be able to actively monitor a whole city when he blanketed it with his senses.

Leaving the secret tunnels in the basement of the main residence, Jason hunted up Farrah and they went outside. Shade took the form of a car and drove them out to the main gate, where Annabeth was waiting in her own car. The Network Sydney branch committeewoman was accompanied by Nigel, the man in charge of the branch's tactical training, along with a pair of other silver-rankers.

Nigel had worked closely with Farrah as they revamped the Network's training program, with Nigel himself, a rare non-core user, soaring up to silver rank after using Farrah's training methods. Nigel had reached his rank in almost as little time as Jason.

Jason and Farrah stepped out of the cloud of darkness that their car turned into, while Anna and Nigel got out of their own car. Nigel conspicuously placed himself in a position to intervene if Jason or Farrah made a move on Anna. The other silver-rankers

stayed close to her person. Looking on were some lingering fringe types, religious zealots and conspiracy theorists still camped outside the main gate, although most had moved on.

“Really, Nige?” Jason asked, looking at Nigel in between himself and Anna.

“I hate it when people call me Nige.”

“I hate it when people betray me, so I guess we’re both out of luck. Hello, Anna.”