

Chapter 387

Node Space

The Network team from the Potsdam branch reached the aperture on Babelsberg Park and found it already open. The residue of the ritual used to open it was on the ground and in front of it was a Japanese woman with a category three aura, meditating with her eyes closed.

As trucks and helicopters arrived she gave no reaction, remaining cross-legged on the grass until the Operations Commander approached her and she opened her eyes, dexterously rising to her feet by uncrossing her legs.

“Who are you?” the commander asked.

“Asano Akari.”

“Asano? As in...?”

“Yes. He asked me to stay here to prevent children from wandering in. I’m sure you can take care of that, now.”

She turned to enter the aperture but the commander called out to her.

“Miss Asano.”

She turned back.

“Our people are tracking you by the proto-spaces you’re visiting. There are a lot of Americans and International Committee people around, talking to our high-ups. I don’t know what they have planned, but tell him.”

“Why tell me this?” she asked.

“There are people that don’t like the way the Network has treated him. A lot of people. I was sent to Makassar, both times. I saw him going places no one else could go, saving people we had all written off. Days of it. Never stopping, never resting. He drives himself like a workhorse and then we turn on him? A lot of us think that isn’t right.”

Akari stared at the man and then gave a slight nod.

“I will relay your words to him. I know they will mean a lot.”

Akari moved to the aperture and stepped through.

Cleary and Jack Gerling were in a hospitality suite at the Network’s Berlin branch.

“You’ve reviewed the briefing materials on what we know of Asano’s abilities?” Cleary asked.

“Such as they are,” Gerling said. “Too many holes, damn stealth types. He’s got a lot of escape options. You have no idea what that power where he turns into a bird is about?”

"We don't. We anticipate that you will be able to handle most of his methods through simple power disparity."

"His aura is really as strong as all that?"

"We estimate its strength to be somewhere in the range of what would normally be the zenith of category three. Added to his superior control, we strongly recommend against aura conflict. You should focus on areas in which your superiority is clear. Power, speed, strength. Direct confrontation. The two largest threats to that are if he escapes through ordinary evasion or his portal ability."

"You have countermeasures?" Gerling asked.

"We do, and we plan to catch him coming out of a dimensional space. We've been tracking his patterns. He's been going into a series of incursion spaces, using his team to keep monsters clear of his location while he conducts a large ritual in each."

"What's he doing?"

"We think he is trying to stop the transformation events."

"I want to see one," Gerling said. "People turning into elves and rock people and whatever. Can you get me an elf?"

"Yes," Cleary said. "Just one?"

Gerling laughed.

"One will do for now. Can't get too distracted on the job."

"I appreciate that. Asano's pattern is to enter multiple incursion spaces, perform his ritual and then move on. First Austria, then Switzerland and now Germany," Cleary said. "He's been responding quickly, entering spaces before our people get there, in most cases."

"Why don't our people stop him?"

"He and his companion, Farrah Hurin, have a lot of goodwill amongst the rank and file. They're role models to our younger people. Asano has used interviews to characterise himself as a symbol and credit our personnel as the true protectors of the planet. Given the way that the upper echelons of the Network have been pushing the lower over the last year, it inclines them to give Asano leeway."

"Meaning they won't stop him unless we ride them."

"There have been some who diligently attempted to stop him. After a series of brief altercations with Farrah Hurin, no one else made the attempt."

"Not Asano himself?"

“Asano claims that he is unable to stop his powers once they affect a person. It could be a lie and he doesn’t attack our people to maintain it. It could be genuinely true and he wants to avoid killing our people to maintain their goodwill.”

“I have trouble believing that one woman could beat a whole section of category threes.”

“I believe it was more that she made some quick examples and the rest were reluctant, given that she was just one of four category-threes in their group. The Japanese sisters are largely unknown but all our people have seen what Jason Asano does to the things he fights. The news played the footage of him killing that category four monster in Makassar on a loop. The most powerful monster ever to set foot on Earth and it looked like he tossed it through a wood-chipper. No one wants to end up like that.”

“That was when Asano used that power to turn into some kind of magic bird,” Gerling said. “The briefing notes had nothing about what that power was.”

“We don’t know,” Cleary said. “There are too many unknowns about him, which is why we brought you here. Nothing solves a problem as well as true power.”

Having finally isolated what they hoped was the first node Jason needed to modify to repair the link, Jason and his team returned to Austria. Kaito’s helicopter set down in the Ziller Valley, in an isolated and open space close to the river. Accompanying Jason was the whole group; Dawn, Farrah and the Asano sisters, along with Greg, Asya, Itsuki and Kaito.

Kaito left his helicopter parked on the grass, ready for everyone to jump in at need. The others would remain while Jason entered alone, for the simple reason that only he could enter the space where the node could be modified. He had experimented with node spaces in preparation, opening the door to acclimatise to the conditions without making any changes.

Only Jason and Farrah were able to enter a node space once Jason opened the door. This was a result of their astral affinity, the mechanism preventing non-outworlders from using the door. Farrah could only withstand conditions within the node space for a limited time due to the corrosive aura it contained. Jason was able to withstand it but Farrah’s aura was ground down, after which the space started to have a deleterious effect on her body. For this reason, only Jason was going to go in, while the others would wait outside.

“It will take you time to understand what you are seeing in there,” Dawn advised Jason. “I have pushed as much theory into your head as I can but knowing the theory is

not the same as applying it. Take as long as you need to be certain of every change you make. What you are about to do is outside even my experience.”

Jason solemnly nodded and began opening the portal. He ran a hand over the ground and a line of silver light appeared running along it. From the line rose an arch of smoky glass with blue, silver and gold light twinkling within, the new material from which his portal arches were made. Instead of filling with the familiar dark void, though, it filled with a sheet of silver light. A powerful aura spilled from it and, except for Dawn and Farrah, Jason's companions all took an involuntary step back.

"See you soon," Jason said and then stepped through the door.

“What kind of anomaly?” Cleary asked. He was in the Berlin branch’s grid monitoring station, hovering over the chair of an operator.

“At first I thought it was the start of a transformation event,” the operator explained nervously. “Then I realised it was too small. Much too small, as in, not much bigger than a person.”

“Where a normal transformation event is the size of a city,” Cleary said and patted the operator on the shoulder. “You did well to bring this to my attention quickly.”

Cleary left the monitoring centre, just one small part of the Berlin branch’s extensive complex. Waiting outside were Cleary’s functionaries, who trailed him as he strode away.

“Prep helicopters and a full operations team,” Cleary instructed.

“We’ll have to use the locals,” Cleary’s assistant said. “Our own forces are still being cleared.”

“They haven’t been cleared yet?”

“They’re a heavily armed contingent of non-governmental soldiers with magical abilities, sir. The German government, the Berlin steering committee and the International Committee are dragging their feet. They’re trying to dig up our objective and you said secrecy is paramount so I chose discretion over applying pressure.”

Cleary nodded.

“It was the right choice but now we have a window of unknown duration. Use the local teams and prep them for departure.”

“Destination?”

“The Ziller Valley.”

“Austria?” the assistant asked. “That will add complications.”

“Handle them. Speed over everything.”

“I’ll make sure any complications are dealt with by the time you’re in the air, sir.”

“Where is Gerling?”

“The spa facility, sir. Would you like me to send someone?”

“I’ll go,” Cleary said. “Get going; I want wheels up in ten.”

The landscape Jason found himself in was an alien reimagining of the space by the river he had just left. Like the space in which he claimed the door, it was washed into monochrome by the light that shone with no apparent source. In this case, the light was silver instead of amber, giving everything a blank metallic sheen.

The surroundings looked vaguely natural at a distance, but up close it was clear that everything was composed of tiny cubes, as if the entire landscape had been built from tiny, silver Lego bricks.

Jason felt the aura of the place trying to suppress his own, giving him the unusual sensation of feeling feeble before an overwhelming power. It had only been a couple of years since Jason was freshly-arrived in the other world, feeling vulnerable and exposed every day. In this place, that feeling came back. It was as if he were standing before the full vastness of the cosmos and being shown his tiny, irrelevant place in it.

Shaking off the sensation, Jason extended his aura out, pushing back against the oppressive force to expand his senses. The first thing he detected was points of power, buried everywhere under the landscape. Unlike the transformation events that revealed only a single reality core with each event, the doorway gave Jason ready access to a treasure trove. He left them where they were as he started to move.

Exploring the space with his senses, he walked slowly, trying to understand the complexities of the world around him. He slowly began to marry what he was perceiving with the theory he had learned but it was slow going. He took his time, examining tiny aspects of the magic flowing through the place like duelling orchestras.

When he finally managed to truly grasp the nature of just one tiny aspect, fitting it to the theory Dawn had been stuffing into his head, it felt like a triumph. It was a first step, allowing him to move onto the next.

Kaito’s drones were the first to detect the approaching helicopters and he warned the others. Farrah looked unhappily at the door standing out in the open. Jason’s party interface had terminated the moment he entered, leaving no way to communicate with him.

“We can’t let him walk out of there not knowing,” Farrah said.

“His freedom is paramount,” Dawn agreed. “The question is how powerful the forces approaching are. If they aren’t too...”

Farrah looked at Dawn, who had trailed off, wide-eyed.

"What is it?" Farrah asked.

"Gold ranker," Dawn whispered.

Farrah froze for a moment and then turned to the others.

"Everyone into the helicopter!" she yelled, shoving Dawn in the direction of the vehicle. "Get in it and go, all of you! As quick as you can!"

"What about you?" Kaito asked.

"I'll get Jason and we'll portal back to the cloud house," Farrah said. "Rendezvous there, no more questions. As fast as you can go, gods dammit!"

Without another word, Farrah plunged into the portal. Dawn hurried toward the helicopter.

"Move!" she ordered. "We may already be moving too late!"

They clambered into the side door of the helicopter and it lifted into the air, even before Kaito slid into the pilot seat. Using every power at his disposal, Kaito accelerated the vehicle, sending it firing through the air faster than any ordinary helicopter could match.

"What is happening?" Akari asked.

"There's a gold-rank essence user on one of those helicopters," Dawn said.

"A category-four?" Akari asked, her face turning pale. "Since when do they even exist?"

"China and the United States both had people reach gold-rank several years ago," Dawn explained. "They have been keeping them in magical stasis since then."

"It's true, then," Asya said. "They really do have them."

"Yes," Dawn said. "Now that they are operating openly, I am more free to speak on it."

"Why weren't you before?" Greg asked.

"There are rules by which I am required to operate," Dawn explained. "They are a frustrating but necessary restriction for someone like me to intervene in the affairs of your world."

"They must be using reality cores to sustain the category four," Asya reasoned.

"It seems likely," Dawn said.

"How many are we dealing with?" Itsuki asked.

"One," Dawn said. "One is all it takes."

She bowed her head, crestfallen.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For not telling us earlier?" Asya asked. "You told us what you could on the way to Makassar."

“No,” Dawn said. “I’m sorry for what is about to happen. The gold-ranker has left his helicopter. Everyone get out the gold spirit coins that Jason gave you and eat them when I say.”

Gerling hurtled through the air, periodic explosions throwing him onward, faster and faster. For all its speed, Kaito’s bronze-rank helicopter, even with Kaito using every power at his disposal, could not match the crude explosion-flight of the gold ranker. The helicopter opened up with weapons and deployed drones to intercept but Gerling went through them as if they were a light pattering of rain. When Gerling struck the helicopter, it exploded in a burst of force and fire, tiny pieces scattering across the sky.