

Chapter 385

The Decision Has Been Made

At Jason's request, Kaito didn't conjure a new helicopter on entering the proto-space. Farrah carried a device that she and Jason had built together to find the optimal spot within the proto-space for Jason to conduct his ritual and they would inevitably encounter monsters along the way. They viewed it as a chance to put the bronze-rankers on the team through their paces.

The extradimensional realm diverged heavily from the physical reality outside, the Austrian city replaced with a primordial jungle in which ancient ziggurats poked out of the canopy. The environment was sweltering with both heat and humidity.

"This air is hard to breathe," Kaito said. "It's heavy."

"My clothes are getting sticky," Itsuki said. "It may impair my mobility."

"You still sweat because you ranked up so quickly," Farrah told him. "You clearly focused strictly on advancing your essence abilities. You need to take the time for exercises that will help your body become more magical. I gave you the basics in training but you've clearly neglected them."

"Sorry Miss Hurin," Itsuki said, looking every inch the chastised schoolboy. The Asano sisters, Akari and Mei, watched him with amusement.

It was a silver-rank proto-space, so only the anchor monsters holding the space together and possibly a few others would be silver-rank. For this reason, Jason and the other silvers didn't engage, letting Kaito, Asya, Greg and Itsuki do the sweeping.

They each had their own motifs in their power sets, but Itsuki was the odd man out in more ways than one. The others heavily featured conjured tech in their power sets, which was common for Earth essence-users even without the technology essence. Itsuki's powers were more fantastical in nature. Added to the fact that the others had worked together before and were comfortable with one another, Itsuki literally and figuratively stood apart.

Of the four bronze-rankers, Kaito was the least comfortable due to operating outside of his helicopter. He was very much in the support vein but Jason and Farrah wanted him to experience less than ideal conditions. His vehicle essence powers were not useless without it, however, allowing him to conjure surveillance drones to scout for threats and gun drones to handle them.

Although she was a sniping specialist who favoured strong, singular long shots, Asya conjured a carbine rifle more suited to the closer confines of the jungle. It was a futuristic weapon with glowing blue bits, which Jason strongly approved of.

The person with the actual technology essence, Greg, was ironically the one calling up the most outmoded technology. He conjured an entire outfit from a version of the nineteenth century that only ever existed in pulp novels and old film serials. He had a long brown coat, vest and bowler hat with a pair of goggles slung around the brim. He had a backpack covered in loose flaps and the whole ensemble had enough pouches and pockets that it looked hard to walk in.

Greg also conjured a gun that looked like a replica from a fifties sci-fi movie but made of brass. Greg reached back to rummage through his backpack, pulling out a cable and plugging it onto the base of the strange gun's grip, causing it to hum with power.

Itsuki's powers were more classically magical. Although they shared the dark essence, Itsuki didn't have a cloak like Jason. Instead, he transformed himself into a semi-translucent figure, like a statue made of smoked glass. It made him much harder to sense, allowed him to blend into shadows and, as of bronze rank, made him semi-tangible. This reduced the effect of many attacks on him while also allowing him to go places he otherwise couldn't. So long as he moved slowly, he could pass right through barriers like cages or thorny bushes.

Itsuki was used to playing stealthy scout, much like Jason, which was a poor fit with the others. They already had Asya's enhanced perception from the eye essence and Kaito's drones, making Itsuki's potential contribution limited.

Itsuki had been startled and delighted to experience Jason's party interface, which had given him a whole new perspective on his own abilities. Shade had identified Itsuki's summoned familiar as a darklight ogre, which was a defensive combat familiar whose abilities compelled enemies to attack it while inflicting debuffs on any that did.

Using Magic Society records, Jason had identified the ability that summoned Itsuki's familiar and discovered that the familiar would gain new forms as Itsuki ranked up, eventually becoming something called an eclipse titan.

Once they started encountering monsters, Greg's gun was revealed to fire arcs of electricity that chained from one monster to the next. It did minimal damage but delivered a paralysing jolt, setting up monsters for follow-up attacks. A well-aimed burst of gunfire from Asya or a stream of heavy bullets from Kaito's gun drones finished the job, their smooth teamwork showing off their experience working together.

Jason and Farrah assessed the bronze-rankers as the team progressed towards the location for the ritual.

“Itsuki will have to work a little to find his path,” Jason assessed. “This isn’t a great team composition for him.”

“That’s good,” Farrah said. “His family has clearly been feeding him ideal scenarios to rank him up quickly. A little hardship will knock some unwanted sensibilities out of him.”

Itsuki slowly learned to adapt to his teammates, using stealth to approach monsters detected by the others and lay on afflictions. He was more of a team player than Jason, whose afflictions were damage-focused. Itsuki softened the enemies up with more debilitation effects than damage, luring enemies into kill boxes for the others before vanished as the damage poured in.

Once the team reached the site for the ritual, they needed to clear the space for the largest magic diagram Jason had ever worked with. Kaito and Greg’s experience setting up landing zones came into play. Kaito used an ability from his soaring essence to launch himself into the air, at which point he conjured his helicopter around him. He then flipped it, the blades reconfiguring to maintain its hovering while upside down and descended the helicopter into the jungle canopy. As the rotor blades dropped into the trees, they worked as a giant saw, rapidly clearing the area. Kaito even moved the helicopter around, still upside down, to clear a wider area.

“I was once shot off the side of a mountain by a waterfall experiencing intermittent service failure,” Jason said, watching the upside-down helicopter-turned-power-saw. “I’ve come back from the dead, fought interdimensional dinosaurs and met my evil magic clone. Somehow, this is still the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever seen.”

“He’s very precise,” Akari’s sister Mei said. “You don’t see a lot of that in upside-down helicopters.”

Rather than dismiss his helicopter, Kaito cleared a secondary space in which to land it. While he was doing that, Greg swapped the cable running from his backpack to his gun for a hose, turning it into a flamethrower to clear the ground now littered in shredded trees, leaving behind nothing but charcoal and ash.

Kaito brought his helicopter back to blow away the burnt debris while Greg moved on to the second cleared space. In short order, the pair had cleared out two spaces, one for the ritual and one for the helicopter.

“You’ve got the logistics down,” Jason told Greg as Farrah used an earth-shaping power to flatten out the cleared ground, ready for the ritual.

"This is what we were doing while you were bludging, taking a gap year despite only having completed one semester of university a half-dozen years ago," Greg told him.

"That does sound pretty slack," Kaito agreed.

"I was helping earthquake victims and healing people with Ebola," Jason said. "And it was only half a year."

"That's what you told us you were doing," Greg said. "I bet you actually spent most of the time in a resort in Bermuda."

"What I told you? It was on the news."

"Because the EOA put it there," Farrah contributed, continuing to flatten out the ground. "There's no reason to suspect anything they're behind, right?"

The three Japanese members of the team, Akari, Mei and Itsuki looked on as the others continued to rib Jason.

"Are they always like this?" Mei asked her sister. "It seems very disrespectful."

"I believe it's an Australian cultural practice," Akari said. "You get used to it."

"Do you really?" Itsuki asked.

"Not really," Akari admitted. "They're all very strange."

"I thought Miss Hurin was from another universe, not Australia."

"She seems quite proficient at assimilating."

Carrying out the ritual went smoothly. While Jason did so, with Farrah's assistance, the rest of the team patrolled a wide perimeter to keep any wandering monsters away. If the ambient magic was too badly stirred up, they would need to start over.

Greg's abilities were especially useful, as his power set focused on control and area denial. As such, he was given the largest area of ground to cover. Given time to set up, he conjured iron rods that ended in spheres, which he planted at regular intervals. They would make paralyzing electricity attacks, while automated turrets he emplaced behind them would follow up. Looking like gatling coil guns from the nineteenth century, they could rapidly shoot electrified nails.

When a large pack of iron-rank monsters appeared in his patrol area, Greg deployed a shaft from the top of his backpack. It sprouted helicopter blades, allowing him to swoop over the pack and strafe them with his flamethrower. Only a trio of the toughest monsters survived and Greg landed, at which point the rotor blades were flung from the shaft. Two of the monsters were killed while the third was outright decapitated.

After the ritual was complete, the team climbed into the helicopter and headed back for the aperture.

"A couple more rituals and we should be able to triangulate the first node I need to modify," Jason said. "As for how many nodes it will take in total, I have no idea. That means a lot of proto-spaces."

"Are people just going to let you us in, the way they did here?" Itsuki asked.

"No," Jason said. "We went to the extra effort here to make a point that we will be peaceful in our operations. Sooner or later, though, someone is going to take a hard stance."

"What happens then?" Itsuki asked.

"We hurt as few people as we can but we don't stop. The Network rank and file are just doing their jobs and don't seem interested in impeding us, at least until the people at the top start paying attention to anything but the transformation events."

"You think they'll eventually try and stop us?"

"Yes. Even if they don't realise it now, what we are doing will turn off the reality core spigot. If we're lucky, they won't twig until we're close to the end and the transformation events start slowing down. At that point, someone will definitely put it together. My concern is that someone clearly knew more about what's going on than is good for us. We may start meeting real opposition much earlier."

"And then we fight?" Itsuki asked.

"Not if we can avoid it," Jason said. "We can't fight the whole Network."

Itsuki nodded.

"That task force we met outside the aperture," he said. "Are you really strong enough to take on twelve category threes alone?"

"Of course not; it was all bluff. Well, mostly bluff. I mean, I'd have to cheat, certainly. Probably."

"It's a matter of training," Farrah interjected. "Those men were traditional essence users from this world. Their training is all about group tactics for monster elimination, not intelligent, singular enemies with a wide variety of powers. They aren't ready for someone who fights like Jason."

"Basically, they're specced for PvE, not PvP," Jason said. "Once Farrah and I return to her world, I won't be able to swagger around like that. I'm making hay while the sun shines."

"I imagine he'll swagger about anyway," Farrah said. "He's just going to get slapped down when he does."

Things were tense when Jason and his companions returned to the aperture but they were allowed to depart unchallenged. Soon after, Kaito's helicopter landed next to a tour bus on an isolated stretch of road near the Czech border. Kaito dismissed the helicopter and they piled into the tour bus, which was a luxurious, twin-level cloud coach on the inside.

"Were there problems with the Network?" Dawn asked by way of greeting as they arrived.

"No," Jason said, falling into a soft cloud chair. "The extra legwork seems to have done the trick. This time."

"Now that we are in the right region," Dawn said, "you can ideally utilise Kaito to beat the local branches to new apertures. Did you take notes?"

"I did," Jason said.

"Good. Hopefully, the results of these rituals help us refine exactly which nodes we are looking for. Until we get more data, we can't even be certain we're after the right nodes."

An attention-getting supercar drove through the town of Conrad, Montana, making its way to an oilseed refinery on the outskirts. It parked in front of the administration building and a man in a sharp suit named Emerson Cleary stepped out, bringing a briefcase from the passenger seat with him. He took a small box that barely fit from the vehicle's meagre trunk space and carried it inside, holding it by the handle on top.

The office was a cheap but functional prefab affair, with a middle-aged receptionist talking on the phone. Cleary sat the box on the desk and pressed his finger on the phone cradle, hanging up the call.

"Excuse me?" the receptionist asked indignantly as she gave him an unfriendly look up and down, before looking out the window at his car. "Who exactly do you think you are?"

"Where can I find Mr Tallman?" Cleary asked.

"I'd asked if you checked the shop where they sell manners, but clearly not," she said.

The office manager hurried in from the back, his body language obsequious.

"I'm sorry, Sir, I'll take you to the special projects building at once."

"I haven't logged him in as a visitor, yet," the receptionist said and the manager turned on her.

"I swear to God, Janet, if I find a single record of this man ever having been here you will be unemployed by the end of the day. You are not to so much as breathe a word of this to anyone."

"If you look in the parking lot, Darren," she said, "You'll see thirty or so dusty trucks and one shiny, red mid-life crisis. I think people might notice."

"Shut up, Janet! Can I take your briefcase or your box, Sir?"

"Reach for that box, Darren," Cleary said, "and you and Janet will both be dead before your hand gets there."

Darren went pale.

"This way, please, Sir. May I ask your name?"

"Probably best that you didn't, Darren."

None of the employees ever went into the special projects building, which was a small brick hut in a corner of the industrial lot with no signage. Darren hovered curiously as Cleary stood at the door until Cleary glared at him and he skittered away. Cleary went inside, where he stepped into the silent elevator and descended deep into the Earth.

When the elevator reached the bottom floor, Cleary walked down a corridor with lights that lit up at his approach and dimmed once more behind him. Eventually, he reached a circular room with several doors. One of them open and a pasty-faced man appeared.

"Deputy Director Cleary," he greeted, although his eyes were locked on the box. "That's it?"

"This is it," Cleary confirmed.

"I would have thought they would send more security."

"They did," Cleary said. "You just haven't seen them."

"I see. This way, please."

The man opened a door and led Cleary through. After walking down another hallway they reached a second door, beyond which was a large room, mostly empty. There was a table and chair, but what drew the eye was a pair of large cylinders, situated in the middle of elaborate magical circles. The cylinders were filled with milky liquid and what appeared to be human forms could just be made out through the white murk.

"So this is them," Cleary said.

"Yes. I need written confirmation of the orders before we can move forward."

Cleary set the box and his briefcase on the table and opened the briefcase. He took out a folder and handed it to the other man, who started looking through it. As he did, Cleary opened the box, revealing an object the size of an ostrich egg, shining with transcendent light.

“Are we waking up both?” the pasty man asked.

“Just one, until we secure a larger supply.”

“Very well. When do we start?”

“Immediately,” Cleary said. “The decision has been made to bring Jason Asano’s project under our control.”