

Chapter 366

An Intelligent King

One proto-space had already disgorged its monstrous contents onto the city of Makassar. A second one, with even stronger magic, was on the verge of doing the same. This proto-space was a troubling reflection of the city it was about to open up on, except that the buildings were grown over with rainforest and the sky was cast over with volcanic ash. The city was not as hot as its normal-world counterpart but was weighed-down with oppressive humidity.

In the heart of the city, four figures stood atop a building. They were roughly the shape of a human but twice the height and covered in brown and green scales. Their faces were the most inhuman part, long and dominated by large, toothy mouths. Above the mouths were eyes filled with intelligence and cunning.

They all wore clothes and chitin-like armour, conjured by just one of their magical abilities. They could also conjure up various weapons, from swords to magical firearms, although none had chosen to do so at that moment. They were looking down at the aperture that the humans had opened, surrounded by the corpses of those same humans. Only a handful had managed to escape back through the shimmering circle.

The only living things in front of the portal were monsters. They had the look of dinosaurs, although not species a palaeontologist would recognise. The toothy jaws of the long-necked quadrupeds made plain that they were not herbivorous. They also moved faster than dinosaurs were thought to, with silver-rank flesh being stronger yet more supple than that of the prehistoric creatures they resembled. It left them looking like giant, single-headed hydras.

Although they were the largest and most numerous of the dino-monsters, they were only one type of many, each a monstrous variant of something someone from earth might recognise. Featherless, bronze-rank raptors, a third the height of a human, that hunted in packs. Horn-headed triceratops variants whose beaked mouths were lined with pointed teeth. Tyrannosaurs whose tiny arms ended not in hands but puckered sphincters that shot poison darts to slow their prey.

Every type appeared to be a meat-eater, built to prey on the mammalian monsters that also populated the proto-space and were themselves not weak. Lanky, giant apes using agility, cunning and powerful fists to escape or even overcome their would-be predators were just one species struggling to survive in the unusually Darwinian monster ecology.

Monsters of any kind rarely preyed on one another, but the three varieties in the crowded proto-space seemed to operate in a hierarchy. At the bottom were the mammalians, which were either bronze or silver-rank. Preying on them were the dino-monsters, ranging from the bronze-rankers at the bottom of the heap to the peak predators, like the tyrannosaurs. Those even went after some of their fellow dino-monsters, as well as the mammalian varieties.

At the top, above even the largest and most savage dinosaur monsters, were the humanoid dino-men. They were not as strong or as tough as the larger dino-monsters, and far fewer in number. What they had did have was intelligence and unusual magical abilities. This ranged from the power to conjure weapons and armour to their most powerful ability: controlling the unintelligent dino-monsters.

One of the dino-men was not like the others. Standing above the intelligent silver-ranked dino-men was the only one of their number to be gold-rank. Quickly dominating the others, he had chosen the smartest and strongest to serve him personally, while the rest were sent to gather the unintelligent monsters together.

Under the gold-ranker's direction, they had pushed back the human incursion and held the aperture secure. They awaited the point where the proto-space delivered them to another world, more vast than the one they knew.

"Will more of the humans come?" One of the silvers asked. He had chosen the name Silha for himself. The other silver-rank male had named himself Kowal, and the female, Chesh. The gold-ranker they referred to as King.

King had been the anchor monster for the proto-space, the one the humans needed to kill to prevent the monsters from entering the human world. Although the proto-space was about to break down and no longer had an anchor monster, King could still feel the proto-space through the lingering connection.

"I don't know if more will come," King said. "We have passed the point of no return. Even if the humans managed to kill me now, it would change nothing. I suspect they know this and prepare for our arrival, instead of further, futile expeditions."

"What will we find on the other side?" Chesh asked.

"I, like you all, am less than two days old," King said. "I know no more than any of you. Not how I came to know what a day is, the language we are speaking or even the concept of a language. What I do know is that the humans will not tolerate our existence. If we are going to make a place for ourselves, we must carve it from their flesh and wash it clean with their blood."

"They will be many, won't they?" Silha asked.

“Yes,” King said, looking down at the aperture. “And they will be gathered around the other side of the hole they made in the wall of this world. If we are close to that hole when we cross over, we will be overwhelmed. We must move, so that when we do pass from this world to the next, we do not arrive in their midst.”

“If we leave, more may enter through the hole,” Kowal said.

“It is too late for them to accomplish anything,” King said, looking down at the dino-monsters teeming around the aperture. In range of the dino-men, they were under control and placid, despite their highly aggressive nature.

“Our unintelligent brethren will suffice to occupy any humans that enter, at least in the time it takes for this world to end and pass us into the one that follows.”

Taking King's lead, the four quickly departed the vicinity of the aperture.

On the Network plane, Akari watched Jason, who hadn't spoken since the discussion on the Makassar disaster. Still sitting on the floor, he wasn't meditating. He was just staring into space, stern-faced. She was struck by how different he looked without the usual lively eyes and perpetual half-smirk. Instead of looking at the world like there was a joke only he could see, there was a determination in his silver eyes that slightly unnerved her. Even without his aura behind it, as she couldn't sense it at all, when his eyes flicked in her direction it made her feel like a prey animal.

“We're here,” he said, standing up. The action looked oddly inhuman as he rose straight up from his cross-legged position without using his hands for balance or support. The smooth, confident motion of it made Akari think of a camouflaged praying mantis, revealing its presence with sudden movement.

The Network plane boasted a feature uncommon in most private jets: a quick-deploy hatch in the floor. It was in its own small compartment so as to not disrupt the rest of the plane when the hatch opened. Jason strode towards it even as the pilot announced that they were approaching the drop zone.

Asya joined the pair in the drop compartment, standing by the button for the hatch as Jason and Akari stood on top of it. Jason was shrouded in mist for a few seconds, his combat robes in place when it dispersed.

“Stay safe,” Asya told them, her eyes on Jason.

“The objective is to keep other people safe,” he said as he grabbed Akari's hand. “Hit the button.”

Asya gave him a worried look, lifted the clear cap and slammed her palm onto the big red button. The floor hatch slammed open and Jason and Akari were dumped into the

skies over Darwin. Jason let his shadow arm extended to keep his grip on Akari's hand when dropping from the plane yanked them apart. He would need to pull her close when he decelerated their drop. In the meantime, they both angled their bodies into a streamlined free fall.

As they drew closer to the ground, Akari sensed the silver-ranker below them and they aimed for that spot, an empty beach. As they dropped further and further without Jason pulling out his cloak, Akari became increasingly concerned. The ground seemed to be lunging up at them.

“JASON!”

He didn't turn his head, although she knew his sharp senses heard her despite her voice immediately being carried off in the wind rush of their fall. His eyes were locked on the ground below as she called his name again and again, not eliciting so much as a sideways glance.

She was about to flatten her body to slow the descent when he seemed to sense it. Instead of conjuring his cloak, however, he shocked her with a burst of overwhelming aura suppression that jolted her into holding her descent angle, along with a tug on her arm from Jason.

Finally Jason yanked himself to her with his shadow arm and his starlight cloak came into being, unfurling like wings of night. Gravity's hold was drastically lessened and they rapidly decelerated, barely a hundred metres from the ground. They were travelling at ninety metres per second before Jason opened his cloak and even magic could decelerate them only so much. It took only seconds before they crashed into the soft sand, their superhuman bodies soaking the impact.

They landed on a beach that would normally be full of tourists, but the crisis had even the locals staying in their homes. Akari stood, stunned for a moment, before wheeling on Jason.

“What are you thinking?” Akari demanded.

“Seconds matter,” Jason said, providing no further explanation as he strode toward the man jogging over the sand in their direction, waving a friendly hand.

“Hi, I'm Remy. You two came in pretty hot.”

“Portal,” Jason demanded.

“Jeez, so much for small talk,” Remy said and started drawing a circle in the air with his arm. “You're lucky I can even hit this distance. My ability only got stronger a little while ago. Normally the Network stops giving out cores once you hit silver, but those of us with portals are the chosen few. Especially now.”

A shimmering sheet of rainbow light appeared in front of him and Jason marched through without hesitation.

Jason stepped out of the portal, which led to the inside of a ramshackle slum house in Makassar. It was largely empty, aside from a rotting mattress and the stench of urine.

“We’re in a slum near Paotere Harbour,” Remy said after coming through the portal behind Jason. “There’s a command post there; you should be able to sense the essence users from here.”

Jason was already moving, kicking the rotten door right off its hinges and dashing out. His cloak spread out like wings, whipping him into the air and then launching him over the rooftops. He did not pause to revel in the sensation of personal flight, his attention being elsewhere.

-
- You have entered an area coterminous to a proto-space.
 - The proto-space is in the final stages of breaking down and can no longer be prevented from purging into your current space.
 - If you enter the proto-space, the breakdown will be decelerated and the manifested entities within will be purged into your current space at a reduced rate.
-

“A thank you would be nice,” Remy called after him, having emerged from the portal after Jason. He turned to Akari, who had followed close behind. “Your friend is kind of a dick.”

Akari followed Jason outside and leapt up, hopping rapidly over the corrugated rooftops of the slum. She chased after him, likewise detecting the cluster of essence users. She also detected essence-users clashing with monsters all around. It seemed that the slum had already been evacuated, having neither normal-rank auras or signs of having been ravaged by monsters.

Jason quickly reached Paotere Harbour, clustered with wooden pinisi ships crammed against one another. He could see that the boats were being used to evacuate civilians while the open space of the docks had been occupied by a Network command post. Jason’s distinctive appearance was well known and Akari arrived to join him as he was being shown to the camp’s command tent.

“Is it true that you can stall out a dimensional space?” the commander asked after the briefest introductions.

“It’s too late to stop the monsters coming out,” Jason said. “I think I can slow down the rate at which they emerge, though. I’m not sure by how much.”

“Whatever you can do, we’ll take, but we haven’t been able to secure the aperture. The other side is packed tight with category three-dimensional entities.”

“Not an issue,” Jason said. “I’ll buy you as much time as I can.”

“I don’t suppose you have any of those magic buses on hand for moving evacuees?”

Jason closed his eyes, exploring his sense of the proto-space that none of the other essence users could even detect without rituals. In most cases, a proper astral space would cut Jason off from his familiars, while a proto-space would not. Jason had become familiar enough with them to tell if it would be any different which, in this case, it was not. He would miss Shade in the proto-space but others needed what his familiar could offer more.

“Alright,” Jason said, marching outside. “Clear me some room.”

The commander ordered space clear as Shades started emerging from Jason, only one remaining as Jason’s shadow.

“I’m going to need some mana,” Jason said, turning his head to where people were being evacuated by boat. He took to the air, his cloak winging him out over the water where he landed on the mast of a pinisi boat, perched like a dark bird. He had picked out the boat with the most wretched-looking passengers.

“Feed me your sins.”

He drained all the sickness from the slum residents, turning it all into mana. His Sin Eater power meant that he could absorb it all, exceeding his normal mana limit, although it would leak away over time. He intended to use it before well before that happened.

Returning to the shore, he conjured cloaks over the thirty Shades standing by, barely having enough mana for all of them, even after collecting extra. Immediately afterwards, the Shades started merging to form five buses with shadowy, starlit exteriors.

“All yours, commander,” Jason said. Shade had experience coordinating with Network forces from Broken Hill and knew what to do.

“We can get you to the aperture,” the commander said. “Fair warning, though, establishing an arrival zone wasn’t going well, last I heard.”

“I’ll make my own way,” Jason said.

Jason’s figure blurred as the air around him seemed to slowly bend. They felt him project his aura which seemed to merge with the world around it, blending until it was once again undetectable. Then the warped space snapped back into place and he was gone. The commander and the other Network staff were left staring at the empty space Jason had just vacated.

“He can just go into dimensional spaces on his own?”

“Yes,” Akari, said, distracted by the essence users she could still sense fighting to keep the waterfront evacuation zone free of monsters. “Where can you use me?”

“What's your specialisation?” the commander asked her.

“Killing things.”