

Chapter 306

Core Users

As a Network team set up a ritual to open the aperture to the proto-astral space, Nigel talked Jason through the assembled force. The Network's tactical presence consisted of two platoons of three nine-person sections. Four of the six boasted silver-rank tactical division members, while a specialist medic section also had Gladys.

"Those five make up the entire category three contingent of the Sydney branch," Nigel explained. "The network does not hold back with category three incursions."

Jason hadn't known how many silver rankers the Sydney branch had, as Shade had only spotted Gladys during their time in Sydney. The tactical personnel either spent their time at another facility or practised better informational security than the healer.

"So you're the only section with no category three?" Jason asked.

"Thorny's the only category two the Ditto trusts to run his own section," Digit said.

"Ditto?" Jason asked.

"DTO," Nigel explained. "Director of Tactical Operations, Koen Waters. He's the strongest of our category threes. That's him there, giving orders."

Nigel pointed out the four people radiating silver-rank auras. One of the men was an Indigenous Australian issuing instructions to the other three.

"Once we go through the aperture, he's the man on the ground with the final say on all operational decisions," Nigel said. "Master under God, as it were. Sections are expected to operate independently, though, since all the magic in dimensional spaces tends to fuzz-out comms. It's not like they don't work at all, but they have a habit of being unreliable, especially when a lot of powers are being thrown around."

"Actually," Jason said, "I might be able to help, there."

"Help how?" Nigel asked.

"I have a power that can serve as a communication system. I got a bump in the numbers it can affect when I hit bronze, but I never had the people to make the most of it."

"What's the range?" Nigel asked.

"About a half-dozen clicks, under normal conditions," Jason said. "With this much magic, at least a dozen, maybe fourteen."

"Clicks," Orange said. "Look at you with the military lingo."

"Yeah, because I've seen a war movie any time in the last thirty years," Jason said. "I guess you do seem like someone who doesn't get closer to movies than running a dog fighting ring in an old Blockbuster store."

“That’s enough,” Nigel scolded as the team cracked up laughing. “Give me a rundown of this ability.”

Jason explained his party interface’s voice chat function to Nigel, who then took him to do the same for the DTO.

“It can do a sixty-person raid group, with each member able to access two discrete channels,” Jason explained. “Each of up to six ten-person parties gets their own, plus another one that’s group wide. That won’t let us include the military, but it should just cover your Network contingent.”

Jason invited Koen and Nigel to a group. The two men were startled as they encountered his interface but Jason quickly demonstrated the functionality.

“This is in line with powers I’ve seen from some international branches,” Koen said. “We’ve never had access to it before, which makes you my new favourite person, Asano. Comms is the second biggest operating concern we have.”

“What’s the biggest?” Jason asked.

“Where to take a dump in active combat,” Koen said. “That being a non-factor for essence users does more to ease our operations than any power in our roster.”

Koen called back the other section leaders so that the tactical sections would be expecting it when Jason sent out raid group invites. Gladys was very different from Jason’s previous experiences. The air of flirtatiousness was replaced with one of cool professionalism. Jason warned Koen that going through the aperture would most likely break the link, but Koen wanted to do it anyway. Getting the people used to the power before they went through would save trouble when it was reapplied on the other side.

Jason returned to Nigel’s section while Nigel remained with Koen, discussion revised operating procedures given access to reliable communication.

“So, you have video game powers?” Digit asked Jason. He was Nigel’s second in command of their section. Nigel’s official rank was section leader, while Digit was section second. That was equivalent to a corporal and lance-corporal, respectively.

“Something like that,” Jason said, glancing over at Koen and Nigel. “Why does Nigel get his own section when he’s only a category two?”

“They were in the army together,” Digit said. “When Koen was bumped from Chief Training Officer up to Director of Tactical Operations, he recruited Nigel to replace him. Most of us actually grew up in Network families and got our essences without any kind of combat experience. We have people from the families who’ve been trained, of course, but we like to pull in more contemporary soldiers like Koen and Thorny to keep us current.”

The aperture to the proto-astral space wasn't visible to the naked eye, although magical senses made it extremely easy to see. It was a more tenuous bridge across dimensional boundaries than a normal aperture, appearing to Jason's senses as if it might collapse at any moment.

It couldn't be traversed in its natural state and a team of network ritualists worked to stabilise and open the aperture. It was a similar process to opening up the archway into the astral space the Order of the Reaper had occupied, with the aperture at the centre of a large magical diagram. Mana lamps were unnecessary, as the aperture itself provided all the magic needed.

Jason watched with interest as the ritual was carried out, after which the aperture took the form of a normal, open astral space aperture. Jason went through with the rest of Nigel's section.

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- You have entered a zone of extreme magical saturation. Magical manifestations will occur at an increased rate.
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They arrived in a lush jungle, the air heavy with magic and humidity both. Through the canopy he glimpsed a large tower made from crude brickwork. The bricks were little more than crudely shaped rock held together with roughly slathered-on mortar.

"We see a lot of repeat scenarios," Nigel explained to Jason. "Usually the geography is similar, thus we're still in a valley. Jungle could be better, but could be worse. Good news: Probably no weird magic to impact our items and abilities. Bad news: This jungle will be crawling with venomous monsters. All kinds of serpents, primates with poisonous wrist barbs, giant bugs, big cats. Those are the least likely to have poison, but don't rule it out."

As Nigel went through his explanation, he led his people and Jason away from the aperture to allow more people to pour through. Nigel's section took up a perimeter position alongside the other Network tactical sections as the military teams moved in; first the combat soldiers and then the logistics people, alongside the Network's own auxiliaries.

"That tower in the distance," Nigel pointed out, "means we're dealing with giants, based on the scale and construction methods. A lot of the category two roamers we see will probably be troll and ogre variants. Jungle giants are smaller than most variants, around three metres tall. They're faster than the typical giant; not what you'd call agile, but they'll surprise you if you aren't careful. Expect some exotic abilities like poison breath and camouflage. Trust your aura and magic senses over your eyes."

"Good to know," Jason said. "You know, poison and giants are right in my sweet spot."

"I'll have to take your word for it," Nigel said. "Your job is to observe, not to fight."

"Will do," Jason conceded. "There'll be other chances."

"The category three anchor entity will most likely also be some kind of giant," Nigel said.

"ADEs, plural," Green corrected him. While the others were watching the jungle around them, he was occupied with a computer tablet in his hands. The tablet had magic engraving carved directly into the back, looking like an odd combination of magical diagram and simplified circuit board.

Each Network section had what they called a signaller which, in Nigel's team, was the laconic Green. The signaller had two primary tasks. One was to maintain communications gear, which was notoriously unreliable around heavy magic, while the other was to track the anchor entities that were the ultimate goal of the operation.

"I'm tracking three ADE readings," Green said. "That might be three big ones or three clusters, moving in groups."

"My guess would be small groups of stronger trolls or ogres," Nigel said. "That's a good thing. Multiple ADEs means we have to track them all down but they'll be individually weaker. When we're dealing with category threes, we like them as weak as we can get. Increased numbers we can live with since, as you can see, we have numbers of our own. We throw almost everything we have at category three incursions."

"What do you keep in reserve for other incursions if they happen?" Jason asked.

"We have four reserve sections on standby," Nigel said. "They'll be able to handle anything below a category three incursion if one pops up."

A ground base was assembled in startlingly little time, this time Jason getting to watch as Network members who could manipulate earth or even directly reshape it into simple buildings went to work. Koen did multiple comm checks with Jason's power while this was going on and once the military took over for the Network teams maintaining the perimeter, Koen sent the sections out into the jungle. Before being sent out, each section was supplied with poison resist and antivenom potions.

"I'm good," Jason said when they were offered to him. "Poison works like a recovery potion on me."

Nigel's team all turned to him.

"What?" he asked. "I told you that poison's kind of my thing."

"Is anything not your kind of thing?" Darce asked.

"Store-bought mayonnaise," Jason said. "Make it yourself or don't use it. Oh, and canned beans."

“I like canned beans,” Cobbo said. It was the first time Jason had heard the flat-faced, taciturn man speak.

“I’ll make you some proper baked beans,” Jason promised. “It’ll change your life.”

“Make double-sure to keep Asano safe,” Keon said over voice chat as the Network teams started making their way into the jungle. “He’s not just a VIP observer, now; he’s our communication’s hub.”

Nigel’s team was not assigned to pursue any of the ADE targets. That was left to the four groups with silver-rankers, while Gladys’ team acted as a roving support unit. Nigel’s team was tasked with sweeping an extended perimeter of the camp, reducing the number of bronze-rank threats the military needed to deal with. The iron-rank bullets in the military’s guns would hurt a bronze-rank monster but they would blow through an expensive stockpile of ammo for each one they dropped.

Nigel’s team carried bronze-rank carbine weapons, although most had them slung away. Nigel and Jonno both conjured their own guns, which would consume their mana for ammunition instead of expensive, bronze-rank bullets. Higgy carried a conjured shield and no weapon at all.

“I don’t love being called Higgy,” he confided in Jason as he conjured his shield, “but at least they didn’t go with Captain America.”

Darce, Digit and Cobbo also had conjured weapons; a whip, bow and spear, respectively. Only the scout team of Orange, Green and Woolzy kept their guns in hand.

Darce had preternatural control over her segmented iron whip, which she quickly demonstrated as they made their way through the jungle. Lesser monsters started coming out of the jungle every few minutes, their fearless, berserker rage completely at odds with their lack of threat. The others left them to Darce and her dancing whip, which struck them down out of their air.

Jason was astounded at the sheer number of monsters in the proto-astral space, trumping not just the other world but even the magically-saturated astral space in which he had spent months in constant battle. He had wondered how they managed to collect enough cores to field such a large force of bronze-rankers, but that quickly became clear. Jason’s ability to loot extended to the entire raid group, to the delight of Koen. He did have to revise procedures on the fly again as loot rained down on anyone who touched a kill.

Jason was reduced to a magic wi-fi hotspot as he withheld from joining the fights, even against powerful bronze-rank monsters like a hydra and a hulking bog ogre. His only active contribution was to drain poison from the team to save on their consumables.

The section's teamwork was something Jason paid significant attention to as they took down monster after monster. His own team had refined their teamwork to the point of excellence, but in a very different way to the Network operatives.

Jason's team was a collection of individuals who learned to dynamically reconfigure their approaches to build varying synergies that maximised their potential in any given circumstance. It was an approach that made the most of each individual's full suite of abilities, which both promoted versatility and helped advance those abilities to higher ranks.

The Network section's teamwork had clear origins in military tactics, with the group forming a lean, effective unit able to act in perfect unison. Their coordination was all about coming down on any threat like a hammer, taking it out before it had any chance to respond. Each member only used a handful of powers, but each one was a force multiplier to the team's effectiveness.

The scouts rarely used their guns with the expensive ammunition, instead baiting monsters into overlapping fields of fire from the other team members and their conjured weapons, throwing in some effects to hinder and control. Orange, as it turned out, was an affliction specialist like Jason. His abilities were more about inflicting debuffs than damage, though, setting enemies up for the team.

The team was highly offence-oriented, with three Onslaught confluence essences amongst them. Jason knew that was a favourite amongst humans in the other world, due to its synergy with the human aptitude for special attacks.

Watching the team of core users work together, Jason started to realise that they were making the most of their nature as core users. He knew from his own training, where he had many discussions with Rufus, that core users often focused on subsets of their essence abilities. Without the need to use every essence ability in order to advance them, they could ignore whole sections of their power set.

Rufus had always framed this as a universal bad, as they were wasting elements of their kit and leaving potential synergies on the table. Watching the military-style tactics of the team, though, Jason recognised that his own team would never be able to fight in that manner if they wanted to advance their abilities. The core users could ignore this restriction to develop an incredibly focused approach.

It was not something Jason would ever go for himself, since it would be hampering his own advancement, but he couldn't help but admit that it was effective. Jason had been expecting a bunch of second-rate core users, but was forced to acknowledge that they had made the most of their advantages.

Jason also suspected that the uniformity of their approach would make it much easier to swap personnel between teams. The more individualistic nature of an adventurer team made it hard to accommodate new or temporary members, and losing a member could be crippling. The Network, he imagined, would find this much less of a problem.

One thing that stood out was Nigel. Jason had originally thought it was the lack of proper training techniques alone that was slowing Nigel down, but it became clear that fighting like a core user was also impeding his progress. Nigel would need to fight more like an adventurer and less like a soldier if he was going to start advancing his abilities more quickly.

While he came to admire the tactics of the core-users, he also spotted a critical weakness. If that weakness came into play on this expedition, he knew he might not remain an observer after all.