

Chapter 319

Foiled Plans

The pair monitoring the aperture from inside the astral space weren't even iron-rankers. Two of Shade's bodies shot out from Jason's shadow as he emerged from the aperture and used mana-draining attacks, which knocked them unconscious as they had no mana to drain. Jason barely paid them attention as he conjured his starlight cloak and looked around.

The astral space seemed to be an interconnected collection of dilapidated manors and crumbling castles, rising up through an impenetrable fog. They were strung together like a spider's web by a network of bridges, none of which looked safe to walk on. Some were rotted wood, others stone arches, pockmarked by erosion. As for the buildings themselves, half or more of each structure had collapsed in sections, exposing the interiors.

The fog below completely shrouded the ground, if there even was one. Astral spaces obeyed their own rules and the fog might hide nothing but an endless drop into nothingness. The sky was dark and stormy, filling the air with drizzle. There was a wet chill in the air, the unpleasantness of which seemed to ignore Jason's bronze-rank resistance to extremes of temperature.

The aperture emerged into a room in a wooden manor. The exterior wall had collapsed, giving him a panoramic view of the surrounds, although enough roof remained to keep the drizzle off him. On the floor was a magic circle, the seal put in place on the aperture.

"This astral space seems well-suited to your combat style," Shade observed. "Complex environments full of dark corners."

Jason nodded. According to the Network intelligence, there were an unknown number of iron and bronze-rankers, plus ten or more of the EOA's elite converted.

"Are you going to unseal the aperture?" Shade asked and Jason spent a moment considering it.

"No," Jason decided. "A small army of Network jackboots doesn't advantage me. We're here for Farrah, not to bring in the EOA or the Network's rogue personnel. The element of surprise is more valuable than numbers if we don't share priorities."

"We scout the area, then?"

"Yes," Jason said. "Let's go find her."

Jason had reunited with the body Shade had sent to France some time ago, giving him access to six of Shade's incarnations. Five of them went out to explore the astral space, while the last remained with Jason, who set out himself.

Things had started to go wrong in the astral space when Barbou quietly slipped away. At first it was thought something happened to him and a search was carried out, until they discovered that he had slipped away before the seals were in place. This had come as a surprise both to the EOA and the bulk of the traitorous Network personnel. They had aligned themselves with Barbou in the expectation that he would be leading them during their time inside the dimensional space.

The EOA realised that he had left after interrogating one of the pairs monitoring the seal. They were only iron-rankers and Barbou had not provided them with any direction beyond sealing the aperture behind him after he left.

In the wake of unified leadership, the remaining people split into influence factions to fill the power vacuum. The EOA and bronze-rank Network personnel united to cow the iron-rankers and the normals, many of whom wanted to leave the dimensional space and surrender to the Network. It was not a good start, given that the goal was to settle in for months, if not years before events outside brought the dimensional space into play.

Word started coming in that something had been spotted moving in the shadows, in more than one location. Since no one had been able to pin down whatever it was, it was assumed to be a stealth-type category two monster. Once they realised that there was more than one of them, they started sending out people to find and stop them. The direct manifestation of monsters in the dimensional space was a threat that would cost them to ignore.

"It appears to be working," Shade said. "They've split into smaller search groups."

"Alright," Jason said. "Keep track of Farrah while I start thinning out the herd. Once she's isolated enough, let me know and I'll move in."

They didn't see the shadowy arm move up from below the ledge. They only noticed something amiss as one of the category ones was pulled over the edge, plummeting down into the fog with a scream. One of his companions ran to the edge to look, even as the category two leader yelled out a warning. The reckless man was yanked off as well, following the first into the fog below.

The three remaining Network operatives clumped together in the middle of the room, eyeing the edge without approaching. They still maintained a watch on the other directions, guns at the ready, and immediately spotted a figure stepping into a doorway from which the door had long since rotted away. It was only vaguely humanoid in shape, wrapped in bloody, ragged cloth and they opened fire with their enchanted weapons immediately. The bullets hammered into the cloth but were absorbed to minimal effect.

They could sense the category two strength from the entity with their aura senses and as it moved into the room, the leader threw out a power. It was a concussive sphere of compressed air that struck the creature and blasted it apart, far more effectively than they had anticipated. Gobbets of flesh scattered all through the room, only for them to realise they were not the remains of a creature but a swarm of leeches. They now clung the walls, floor and ceiling on the side of the room that held the exits.

Beams of blue and orange light, as if from some futuristic energy weapon cut down the normal and iron-rankers as they fled. Trailing behind them was a nebulous entity, the orbs floating around it being the source of the deadly beams. It barely shimmered at the occasional magic bullet passing through it as the fleeing victims desperately fired behind them in retreat.

Four of the EOA's elite converted were moving through the remains of a once-vast castle. They discovered a strange entity stalking them through the shadows, only visible as what looked like a cluster of distant stars in the night sky.

The category two guns Barbou had given them had no effect. The bullets did not pass through the entity to strike the wall behind but stopped dead, silent until they fell harmlessly to the floor. The entity tracked them as they moved, disappearing from one shadow and appearing in the next.

"It won't come out of the dark," one of them said. "Just stay away from the shadows."

"Look around, genius. It's all god damn shadows."

"It's not even attacking," a third one said. "Maybe we should just ignore it."

"We're literally here to find whatever monster was snaking around in the shadows," the last one said. "Now that's done, how is ignoring the thing an appropriate next step?"

"Well shooting it didn't do anything," the third one said. "I'm not the one who assigned all the guys with vision tattoos in the other groups."

"So what do we do?" the second one said.

"Uh, guys? Where did it go?"

They looked around, realising that every shadow was empty. After the starlight entity had been dogging them so closely, its sudden absence was disconcerting. Then they heard a scream from nearby.

The EOA member stumbled over the edge, plunging down with a scream.

“Bitch!” his companion said, swing a backhand blow at Farrah, who had just shouldered the man off the side of the building. Her hands were cuffed but she used her bound arms to intercept the strike and entangle his. She then slung him into a fireman’s carry and tossed him off the side after his fellow.

She had picked her moment well. They were leading her through what she assumed was an astral space, given the unusual environment. There were more precarious narrow spaces than not and she had played docile prisoner until one of them got sloppy and moved too close to an edge. She was now free, but the keys to her cuffs and manacles had gone over the edge with the two men

A group of EOA and Network operative found each other, both having lost members. Many were still in the process of having their flesh blacken with rot.

“You have healers right?” one of the EOA asked.

“He took out the healers first.”

“He?”

“It had a man’s voice when it was chanting those creepy spells. It’s an essence user. Probably the one Barbou warned us about.”

“Essence user, nothing. It’s some kind of shadow monster.”

“Shadows don’t use huge scary knives. It looked like a sacrificial dagger and I’m not looking to be anyone’s sacrifice.”

“It’s just a guy. I’m sure I hit him with my barbed spear power. That must have hurt.”

“It did,” came a cold voice. There was a resonating quality to it that immediately arrested the attention and sent a chill down the spine.

“You’re Asano, aren’t you?” the man with the spear power asked. He was one of those marked with blackened flesh. “If we can make you bleed, we can make you die.”

“You wouldn’t be the first. *Your blood is not yours to keep, but mine of which to feast.*”

The man’s life force emerged from within his body as a red glow and a good portion of it streamed away to be devoured by the darkness. As it did, the man’s flesh was visibly dessicated.

“There!” one of them shouted, pointing in the direction of the stream of life force. Bullets and powers erupted in that direction, just as the draining power came to an end. A shadowy figure emerged from the other direction, dashing forward to bite into an exposed neck with an ornate black and red dagger.

Farrah stopped and hid as she spotted a strange figure crossing the wooden bridge in her direction. It looked like a cloaked humanoid, but made entirely of manifested darkness.

“Miss Hurin,” a voice spoke. “I have been sent to assist you.”

Farrah stepped out from behind the half-shattered wall.

“Assist me how?”

The figure tossed a small object at her, but rather than catch it she dodged out of the way. What landed on the ground was a small key. Looking closer, it was crudely made, but conformed to the common design for a suppression collar skeleton key. She picked it up and pressed it to the collar at her neck, which clicked open.

She snatched it off and threw it over the edge of the building, where it fell away into the fog. She immediately felt the relief of magic flowing into her for the first time in what felt like years. Her mana stores had long dried up, leaving her with a constant pounding headache, but finally they started to replenish. She turned to the shadowy figure, which maintained a respectful distance, halfway across the bridge.

“My name is Shade. May I offer you a recovery potion?”

“You said you were sent to assist me,” she said warily.

“That is correct,” Shade said.

“Who sent you?”

Outside the astral space, the ritualist team that had been examining the apertures were reporting to Hector. They were standing in front of the aperture Asano had entered while the logistics team was preparing to assemble another tent.

“We have no idea what Asano did,” the lead ritualist said. “It didn’t open the aperture for us, though. We’ve explored every option in our knowledge base and the simple fact is, those apertures are not going to open.”

The aperture suddenly opened, a dozen people pouring out of it, looking variously terrified, half dead or both. Moments later they were surrounded by guns pointed at their heads.

“We surrender. Just keep whatever you sent in there away from us!”

On his way to the to Swiss border, Adrien Barbou stopped his car to use a wi-fi hotspot and logged into a private chat room. Soon after, a second person entered and sent a video chat invitation. He accepted and the face of a stern-faced woman appeared on his screen.

“Mrs West,” he said. “It’s done. My remaining Network contacts have informed me that they accessed the dimensional space faster than anticipated, but things have otherwise played out as you directed.”

“The outworlder, Asano?”

“Yes.”

“That works in our favour,” West said. “The more value he has for them, the more they will believe that our goal was to obtain the other outworlder. Once they believe they have foiled our plans, they won’t be looking for our true plot. You did maintain that the outworlder was our goal to everyone involved, yes?”

“Yes, Mrs West. No slip ups.”

“Good. You’ve done well, Adrien.”

“I’m surprised you were willing to sacrifice a team of elite converted,” Adrien said.

“The category twos will soon be out of date,” Mrs West said. “Anything below a category three is expendable for the plan. Now that your part with the Network is done, you’ll learn the rest once you arrive here. Your contact will meet you in Zurich, as arranged.”

“Thank you, Mrs West.”

In a Los Angeles branch of the Network the Operations Director was standing by the window, his assistant, Cleary, standing next to her.

“Ma’am, we need to accelerate the recruitment of the outworlder. Once he’s acquired the other outworlder, Asano may turn his attention to Network activity. If he teaches the other branches how to accomplish non-core advancement, it will erode our advantage. Just having them know it’s possible is bad enough.”

“They always knew, Cleary. Most branches have someone determined to crack non-core advancement. It’s not like the process is hard to figure out. Physical training and meditation are hardly esoteric practices. They just lack the specific techniques to make those practices efficient.”

“Which Asano had already agreed to give them.”

“Which he won’t, because he’ll be joining us. Timing is everything, Cleary. He was never going to be responsive until the other outworlder was recovered. Now she has been, the time to take advantage has come. The Sydney branch has failed him and the Lyon branch has made an enemy of him. He is now primed to deal with the people who know what they’re doing.”