

Chapter 353

A Bloke With Vast Cosmic Power

On a busy Sydney street, people backed off as an archway filled with darkness rose up in the middle of the footpath. Some quick thinkers immediately pulled out their phones, so when, after a few moments, two figures emerged from the arch, they were able to capture it. One was wearing dark robes and impossibly draped in a starry void, while the other was looking rather shell shocked.

Jason pushed the hood back from his head as he looked around.

“I didn’t pick very well,” he said. “Nowhere to park. I feel bad about disrupting traffic.”

He walked into the street where the cars were only crawling along, standing in the path of a car so it stopped. The car ahead slowly moved forward to a full car length, at which point Jason took Jeremy’s car from his inventory, which dropped about thirty centimetres to the road with a crunching sound.

“Oops. How’s your suspension? Never mind, just hurry. We’re holding up traffic, here.”

He turned to Jeremy, who was throwing up in the gutter as more people pulled out their phones.

“Get it together, mate,” Jason said. “You’ve got a story to do. Time to get moving, clobber.”

Jason helped Jeremy to his feet and led him into the driver’s seat of his car. While a queasy Jeremy was getting settled, Jason looked at the car he had forced to stop. The driver had opened the door to half get out and was also filming with his phone. Jason wandered over to him.

“Sorry about this mate. You know what it’s like finding a park, yeah.”

“You’re really him.”

“Yep. What’s your name, mate?”

“Sanjit.”

“Nice to meet you, Sanjit. Sorry about Jeremy, there. It’s his first time teleporting and he’s not handling it all that well.”

“How do you do those things?” Sanjit asked.

“I’ve got magic powers, Sanjit. Seems crazy, I know, but the spectrum of what constitutes crazy is about to be drastically realigned. There might be some panic, and people always hoard toilet paper when that happens, so I’d advise stocking up now and beating the rush. Hang on a sec.”

Jason moved up to Jeremy's car, where Jeremy had finally settled into the driver's seat, wide-eyed.

"Time to get a shuffle on, bloke," Jason said through the window.

Jeremy gave a dazed nod, started his car and slowly edged it forward. Jason went back to Sanjit.

"I'm suddenly worried if he's okay to drive," Jason said. "Looks like I've caused bit of a hullabaloo, so I'm going to make myself scarce. It was nice to meet you, Sanjit."

"Uh, you too. You're not what I expected."

Jason chuckled and shook Sanjit's hand.

"I'm just an ordinary bloke with vast cosmic power, trying to get by."

Jason flashed him a grin and then went back to the portal, where people were experimentally poking it with their fingers.

"Excuse I," Jason said as he stepped through it and vanished, the portal descended into the ground, leaving a line of darkness that then too disappeared.

Returning to Asano Village, Jason was ready for some overdue rest, but first arranged a meeting of the family decision-makers to take place after he woke up. He took the secret tunnel tram from the main residence, out under the water to where his cloud house now sat at the bottom of the sea. The hidden tram system had been brought online with the rest of the village's magic infrastructure.

Farrah's systems were collecting and delivering magic from elsewhere to fuel it, but certain systems had to be supplemented with spirit coins. Fortunately, Jason had no shortage of iron and bronze coins. The handful of systems in the village requiring silver coins remained dormant.

When Jason had emptied the cloud flask into the water, the cloud house had taken the form of a series of domed rooms, connected by short tunnels. The cloud-stuff domes could be shifted between opaque and transparent and Jason preferred to leave it transparent. When the sun was bright and at the right angles, light reached the depths to illuminate the rooms with a constantly shifting blue light that Jason loved. Other times, the cloud house produced downward-directed, glow lamps that floated over the domes to produce a similar effect.

The reaction to Jason's lighting solution was mixed amongst the few who knew of the cloud house's location. Erika found it distracting while Emi shared her uncles love of the cool, shimmering colour.

Dealing with the reporter and Akari had bitten off a couple of hours of what should have been Jason's time to sleep, or his personal equivalent. Under Farrah's direction, he now entered more of a recuperating trance state that enhanced recovery and maintained a subconscious awareness of his surroundings, even passively expanding his senses. It wasn't the same as being fully alert, but he was easily roused by unexpected stimuli.

It was the middle of the day but Jason was far from the only one whose sleeping patterns had been thrown out of whack. All around the world, Network personnel and others were in a mad scramble to prepare for what was coming. Their efforts were impeded by the chaos in the media, of which the news vortex surrounding Jason was only a part.

Key to the problem was mixed messaging. Some countries had media alerts going out where physicists were talking about dimensional invasion to general disbelief. Others were trying to promote readiness in the population while being vague on the nature of the threat. Add in obfuscating media companies across the globe and it was a giant mess that failed to prepare or inform. There was no way that the media obstructionism would last but the clock was running down before monsters started appearing.

The first recorded incident of monsters manifesting happened in Angola, while Jason was resting. Gem-like monstrosities and blighted earth elementals appeared en masse at a diamond mine. By the time footage started reaching the internet, there were incidents on every continent. Even an Antarctic science team recorded monsters from afar as they evacuated their research station.

In most places around the world, the Network's plans to protect the major population centres proved to be effective. Active searching for proto-spaces around populations centres was working and the spaces were being shut down. People were finally heading for the major centres, although that presented logistical issues of accommodation and overcrowding.

The positive part was that the Network partnerships with civilian governments and the military over the last few years had put in place contingencies that were being immediately enacted, with logistical efforts in the safe zones and Network-supported military response to the monster waves.

It was far from enough to handle the events without loss, however. The death toll rapidly climbed as monsters appeared in isolated and rural areas. The populations were smaller than the cities but whole towns were wiped from the face of the Earth before the overextended response teams were able to intervene.

The day the monsters arrived, the course of human history was irrevocably changed. Those protected in the safe zones watched monster movie footage play across the news as people flooded into the cities. Then, an entirely different kind of movie started playing out.

All over the world, individuals with abilities beyond those of ordinary people started appearing to fight the monsters. These were not the black-fatigued essence users of the Network but colourfully garbed people who appeared in small teams, acting independently of the military and government response.

“Superheroes,” Jason murmured. “That’s genius.”

In the media room of the main residence of Asano Village, Jason was observing a bank of monitors, alongside his closest family members.

“Genius?” Erika asked.

“Think of all the garbled coverage leading up to this,” Jason said. “All the uncertainty and confusion. Now the monsters have come and magic is out there for everyone to see. How are the world governments going to explain this? Are they going to walk people through the complexities of the magical secret societies? The Network, the grid, the secret history? All while people are panicking as monsters emerging from the countryside to slaughter them?”

“People are idiots,” Yumi said. “They always choose a simple lie over a complex truth. Someone wanted this chaos so they can take control of the messaging by giving people a simple answer.”

“Exactly,” Jason said. “The world just went crazy and people aren’t ready to hear about a complex history of secret societies. Superheroes are a paradigm that people can get their heads around. All you need is someone with magic powers, well-defined abdominals and some bright, stretchy fabric.”

“Who are they?” Erika asked.

“The Engineers of Ascension,” Jason said. “The EOA defectors already let the Network know that the media meddling was in preparation to seize control of the narrative with big moves once the monsters started appearing. Now we’re seeing how. What has been the one consistent thing in the news over the last few days?”

“You,” Erika realised.

“Exactly,” Jason said. “They’ve been slowly building up public awareness of me for months, in preparation for today. They were priming the world to accept people with extraordinary powers.”

“How powerful are these superheroes?” Hiro asked.

“We’ve gotten word from a major defector to the American network that the EOA has reached a new threshold in their magical enhancement program. It’s a program to enhance people with magic other than essences and it’s significantly more intrusive. Caustic alchemy baths, surgery to engrave magic runes onto bones. Magic tattoos are the easy part. The result is people who are strong and fast, with a few extra abilities from the magic tattoos I mentioned. These new ones will be silver-rank, and based on what we’ve seen in the past, probably able to boost themselves higher temporarily.”

“They won’t have the experience that Network people have,” Yumi assessed. “They’re going to lose some, but that might work for them. A few heroic sacrifices will go a long way.”

“Most likely,” Jason said. “There’s a reason all those old comic books had the hero looking defeated on the cover.”

“There are teams of these heroes appearing all over the world,” Erika said. “They have this many?”

“I don’t know how many of them will be at this new level of power,” Jason said. “When they were mobilising them in preparation, a lot of the EOA caught wind that something bad was happening and either fought against it or completely defected to the Network. None of these new silver-rank ones, though. Whether through loyalty screening or brainwashing, they knew which side their bread was buttered on and kept their mouths shut.”

“If the EOA had so many defections, it sounds like they messed up,” Ken said.

“No,” Yumi said. “They knew the price and were willing to pay it. They came in ready to make sacrifices in order to grab the initiative.”

“Which is exactly what they’ve done,” Jason said. “Their so-called superheroes are dominating the narrative,” Jason said.

“Piggybacking off of you,” Erika said.

“I’m only a part of it,” Jason said. “Most likely it was opportunism. If I hadn’t come along, it would have made marginal difference to their plan.”

“So, what now?” Erika asked.

“The Network has me on standby right now,” Jason said. “They want me ready to go when silver-rank monsters appear. They also want to establish that the government response can be effective by publicising operations against lower-rank monster swarms, which, in fairness, they are the best at. They don’t want to play into the EOA’s narrative.”

“Does it matter who is telling the story?” Ken asked. “Shouldn’t everyone be out there, doing what they can?”

“No,” Yumi said. “Public reaction is going to be critical in how the long-term response is formed.”

“This is too big for small groups of people to be the centrepiece of the response, even people with powers like Farrah and myself,” Jason said. “That’s the outcome the EOA wants because a broad, military-based response favours the Network. They want to use public opinion to push governments into directing resources their way.”

“This seems like the worst time to be haggling over political points,” Ken said.

“It is,” Jason said, “but the EOA set this into motion, to the point of a revolt forming in their own ranks. Expecting them to act in the public interest now is futile. People are dying and the ones with power are fighting over more power. Some things even an interdimensional monster invasion can’t change.”

“Jason,” Yumi said. “We should have that meeting you scheduled.”

“I don’t think now is exactly the time,” Erika said.

“Yes it is,” Jason said. “We need to discuss a powerful new asset that we may very well need in this new world.”

After bringing the extended Asano family into the village, along with a handful of others, a village committee had been formed to manage the village’s affairs. It had originally begun as a meeting to decide on a name for the village, ultimately settling on Asano Village. Jason had originally wanted that name before later proposing ‘Jason’s Magic Buff Emporium,’ which was resoundingly overruled.

Under Erika’s direction, the committee subsequently evolved into a formalised management group. Specific roles were introduced and membership underwent some early shifting as people took up or begged-off various responsibilities. Erika controlled food logistics, Ken had land development and Hiro was in charge of magical infrastructure. Jason’s paternal grandmother, Yumi, was in charge of medical. A retired doctor, she managed the administrative aspects while Ian was in charge of operations. There were numerous other roles, held both by Asano family members and by other families also in the village.

The extended Asano family made up the majority but there was a scattering of others as well. This included the family members of Asya, Taika, Greg and Emi’s friend Ruby. Kaito’s best friend and former business partner, Benny, had also brought his family as had Erika’s old producer, Wally. Although many of them were left confused, they had all been strongarmed into heading for the village by their family members in the know.

Asya's mother, Rabia, was the member of the village committee representing the non-Asano families and had been working with her daughter over the last few days to introduce everyone at the village to magic. They were using a heavily accelerated version of the Network's induction program.

Jason's role on the committee was not as a permanent member. Although he had become the de facto patriarch of the nascent Asano clan, he was too busy to be involved in the day-to-day management of the village. His formal role was to break voting deadlocks on the committee and set the direction for the family as a whole. He anticipated more than ample outside input in this regard. Generally, the committee would only call on him as needed.

In the meeting of the village committee Jason had called, he presented Akari Asano's proposition of remaining in Asano Village to the group. Debate went around the table but was dominated by Yumi, who highlighted the lack of downside to such a potentially important gain. Consensus was swiftly reached.

"We'll accept her provisionally for the moment, then," Jason said, right as his phone alarm started going off.

"Grandmother," he said as he checked his phone. "I'll have you deal with Akari for now, if you don't mind. It looks like I have work to do."