

## Chapter 388

### Loaded For Battle

The alien landscape of the node space was an uncanny mix of familiar features washed out in metallic silver light. A close examination of the ground, rocks and plants did not help, being made up of tiny blocks that gave it the feel of a low-resolution image. Jason wandered over to the river, which he found looked like mercury under the monochrome light.

Jason was uncomfortably uncertain about how to identify if he had the right node, figure out how to alter it and finally repair it without making things worse. Even the terrifyingly knowledgeable Dawn had limited advice. She told him to trust his senses over his eyes and to take his time, matching the theory he had been taught to the reality he encountered. Once he understood one on terms of the other, he would be ready to intervene. To Jason, that sounded a lot like 'get in there and figure it out, idiot.'

He wandered in search of some core area; a big magical-looking thing he could interact with. Eventually, as his aura adapted to the harsh conditions of the space's own corrosive aura, he realised that the entire space was the core he was seeking out.

Despite all the magical theory he had studied, he was unprepared for the discovery that the very land he was walking through was the mechanism he had been searching for. The work of the original Builder was so vast and more nuanced than Jason could even begin to comprehend. For a moment, he despaired of ever understanding enough to begin his task, let alone complete it.

Schooling his negative thoughts he renewed his determination, once more probing the space around him with his magical and aura senses. He stopped looking for individual elements and started looking at everything as a collective whole. His more holistic approach swiftly reveal incongruities in the otherwise exquisite design.

The original artistry of the place, expanded over billions of years from the reality seed from which his universe had been created, was far too sophisticated for Jason to interfere with in any way beyond crude bumbling. Fortunately, this had also been true for whoever had made the changes Jason had come to correct.

The design of the space was so magnificent in its sophistication that it blurred the lines of what constituted the natural world.

"I hope the intelligent design people don't find out about this."

Jason was looking at the blueprints of reality. The underpinnings of matter and energy; the book in which the laws of physics were written. Incepted as a seed from which

the entire universe sprouted, it was like looking at the results of a self-learning program that had been running for eons. Jason was staggered at a mind that could accomplish all that, if such a thing could even be called a mind. Jason was filled with awe and – for the first time since learning of its existence – respect for what the Builder was.

Seeing the result of the Builder's core purpose, creating universes, it brought home to Jason the vast alien consciousness that even the newer, once-mortal builder must possess. It reinforced what Dawn had told him about great astral beings needing mortal vessels not just to interact with physical reality but even to think on a mortal scale. Jason had thought that the Builder he encountered had been using the bodies he inhabited as interchangeable puppets. Now he realised that Thadwick and the other body he used may have had much more of an effect on the Builder than he previously imagined.

"You picked a dud vessel there, mate," Jason muttered to himself. He had to wonder how much the cultists who prepared Thadwick to serve as a vessel understood the process. Then he remembered that this was done right after Rufus had wiped out the local leadership. It was likely that they had managed to dig out the mechanisms for creating vessels without grasping the ramifications of who they selected to be the raw material. Choosing the most expendable person had ramifications that were unfortunate for the Builder's cult but a blessing for Jason himself.

The inexpert alterations Jason sensed in the node space were marring the sublime intricacy of the original work. This made the crude flaws in what was otherwise a perfect system easy to pick out. Like a scratch in a record, they threw off the harmony of the pattern with a jolt.

Jason and his team had been unsure of how reliable their method of identifying the correct nodes was. They had been successful the first time out, but whether this would continue or if they just got lucky, he didn't yet know.

Dawn had advised Jason to take his time to comprehend the space properly and that was exactly what he did. The more he examined the perfection of the design, the more the changes he spotted seemed blasphemous. The door Jason had used to access this space was created by the second Builder, which made sense to Jason. He could not imagine the person who created the magnificence around him giving some idiot the tools to vandalise it.

Jason wasn't sure how long he spent working to understand the node space with what amounted to meditative examination. He had an eerie feeling that time flowed differently within it, although that was more likely to be his imagination than the reality. Sensing the space around him and trying to transpose that with his understanding of astral

magic theory was challenging. It was the difference between having an anatomy textbook open in front of him and a surgery patient open in front of him. Fortunately, his goal was not to make changes but undo the damage that had already been done.

Jason's examination finally helped him understand that if he could delicately undermine the changes that had been made, the space would heal itself. Rather than relying on Jason's ham-fisted fumbling, it would be more like plucking a splinter than stitching up a wound. The actual mechanism for making changes was ostensibly easy, just a little well-placed aura pressure, but Jason did not rush. Measure twice, cut once was good advice for the building blocks of a house, let alone the building blocks of the universe.

Finally, Jason made his first adjustment; a tiny, delicate and oh-so-careful change. He then watched and waited, hoping he hadn't made things worse. Straining his perception to the limit, he finally sensed signs that the affected area was returning to its natural state as the garish wound settled back into its pristine surroundings. He continued observing until he was certain that he wasn't just imagining the gradual shift change before moving on to do it again.

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In the space between Jason's magical archway and the operations camp rapidly established by the Network tactical support team, Gerling dropped the ragged, unconscious Asano sisters on the ground. Network personnel moved forward to clamp category-three suppression collars onto their necks, while someone brought Gerling a folding chair and a can of beer. Cleary came out of the command tent and walked over as Gerling sat down, unconcerned as he waited for Jason to emerge.

"We're looking at using reality cores to potentially develop category four suppression collars," Cleary said, looking at the unconscious sisters. "More category four essence users is obviously the priority but we're sure the Chinese have their own category fours already, which are most likely being woken up like you."

"You want to lock them down if we can, instead of killing them?" Gerling asked. "Seems like an unnecessary risk."

"Not my call," Cleary said. "A category-three collar is all we need for Asano, in any case. We didn't find any trace of Farrah Hurin, so we suspect she went in to warn him and he'll know what he's walking into. He could emerge at any moment."

"What about the others?" Gerling asked.

"The unknown entity, Dawn, appears to have been killed by the explosion. We're taking samples from what's left of her but it's not much. The category twos survived the

explosion, probably by consuming high-rank spirit coins, according to early examination of the bodies. Between the explosion and the subsequent weakening effect, though, only one survived the fall. It was the Tiwari boy, using a teleport power to escape the helicopter right before you hit it.

“He got away?”

“No. He’s stealthy but our category-threes tracked him down. He’s under interrogation now.”

“Bring him out,” Gerling said. “The bodies, too. You said you wanted Asano humbled, right? Let’s show him the extent of his failure.”

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Farrah was increasingly suffering as she forced herself onward through the alien silver landscape. Her excellent control over her aura prevented it from collapsing suddenly, eking out every scrap of strength before it finally gave way. She continued searching for Jason regardless, even as the mystical corrosion started impacting her body. She finally found Jason returning to the door, having rectified the node as best he could.

“What are you doing?” he asked her moving close and pushing his own aura out to protect her. The overextension meant that his own aura was being chewed away but he ignored it, leading Farrah back in the direction of the door.

“The Network will be waiting outside,” Farrah said. “They have a gold-ranker with them.”

“China?”

“I don’t know.”

“What about the others?”

“They fled in Kaito’s helicopter. I don’t know if they got away.”

“If they got caught, I’ll open a portal for you to get them out through while I distract the gold-ranker. I’m what he’s here for. If they go away, I’ll open a portal for us to get out through.”

“Don’t risk yourself. You’re the one who can fix the world, now.”

“They won’t kill me. They need me alive.”

“Do they need your arms and legs?”

“I’ve been through worse than anything they can do, and I still have tricks up my sleeve.”

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Jason and Farrah stepped out of the magic door, which descended into the ground and vanished. Farrah had her obsidian armour and sword already conjured, while Jason

had his blood robes, cloak and his dagger. He also had two orange and blue orbs with an eye pattern floating around him. Jason's familiar, Gordon, could surround himself with six orbs; three primarily blue with some orange and three primarily orange with some blue.

As of silver-rank, and while Gordon was subsumed into Jason, Jason was now able to call up one of each orb for his own use. Just like Gordon, he could make attacks with them or use the new functions available as of silver rank. One orb could trigger the butterfly effect that spread Jason's afflictions, while the other could turn into a floating shield.

There was a Network operations camp set up nearby, the layout familiar to Farrah and Jason both. It was some distance away, as the magic door had been given a lot of space. The only things nearby were the folding chair containing Gerling and the people around him, living and dead.

The Asano sisters were alive but much worse for wear, collared and sprawled on the ground. Itsuki was also collared and unconscious, his wound suggesting he went down fighting. Jason could sense their auras, suppressed though they were. He could not sense Kaito, Asya, Greg or Dawn. There were three corpses on the ground, too damaged to recognise, but he knew.

In the folding chair was a man sitting amongst Jason's beaten and killed companions with a can of beer in his hand, as if he were at a casual barbecue. He was a hairy behemoth, in plain fatigues who tossed aside the can as he rose slowly from the chair. The can landed on a body whose long dark hair hadn't all been burned away.

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Inside Jason's spirit Vault, Jason's family looked up at a sky filling with angry red clouds as thunder pealed. The floral scent of the gardens turned coppery as the flowers faded and the plants grew savage barbs.

A scared Emi hugged her father tightly. They all knew they were in Jason's soul.

"Daddy, what's happening to Uncle Jason?"

"I don't know, Sweetie," Ian said, placing a comforting hand on his daughter's head. "I don't know."

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Gerling was around ten metres away from Jason and Farrah and took a few steps forward.

"Look at you two, all loaded for battle. You think you can beat me?"

"Let the others go," Jason said. "I have what you want. They get you nothing, now."

“If it were up to me, I’d go for it,” Gerling said. “Personally, I’d like for you and me to rumble. I want to see all this power you’re meant to have for myself. But the big boys back home don’t want you beaten. They want you broken. Humbled. You’ve been walking around, doing whatever you want for far too long. It’s time for you to learn that you don’t run this world, Asano. We do.”

“You don’t have to kill anyone else,” Jason said.

“Yeah,” Gerling acknowledged. “It’s not exactly out of my way, though.”

“Get them out,” Jason told Farrah silently through the voice chat of his party interface and then burst into action, charging directly at Gerling as Shade bodies spread out beside him.

A wild grin erupted on Gerling’s face and he threw a fist at Jason from which a bolt of force shot out. Jason moved to step into a Shade body and shadow-jump away, only for it to fail. He felt some oppressive magic shut him down the moment he tried and the force bolt exploded as it struck him, throwing him through the air.

Jason used his silver-rank agility to acrobatically adjust his trajectory, flipping in the air to land on his feet. The simple attack was not a high damage one but coming from a gold-ranker it still felt like being hit with a hammer. He resumed his charge, not seeming to dodge a second bolt but when it struck Jason it passed right through.

At silver rank, one of the effects of Jason’s cloak was to give him some limited ability to manipulate space. It had taken him some time to get a handle on it, but now Jason could dodge attacks in such a way as they seemed to hit. It was an ability with limitations and restrictions that Jason expertly hid, making what was little more than a magically enhanced dodge appear as a mysterious defensive power.

Missing his attack didn’t dismay Gerling, instead, delighting him as he launched himself forward to meet Jason in a rush. He tried to crash-tackle the smaller man but Jason managed to evade. Some strange magic was preventing his shadow jumps but that was not the extent of his evasive skills. Using Shade’s bodies for pure obfuscation, Jason stepped through them, one of many dark figures for Gerling to pin down.

The gold-ranker’s first approach was to swing with his fists as they shimmered with force. Jason had more skill, more combat experience and was devilishly elusive. It still wasn’t enough in the face of the gold-ranker’s raw speed and a fist soon landed in Jason’s gut, sending him tumbling across the grass.

Gerling followed up quickly, punting Jason before he had a chance to get up. Once more, Jason rolled across the ground after suffering a savage blow. Gerling leapt into the air and used a special attack that drove him down like a hammer, Jason barely rolling

away as Gerling's boots hit the ground. The attack still caused a small crater, the secondary force shattering the shield Jason managed to interpose using one of the orbs floating around him. Jason was showered in earth and once more sent tumbling away.

Lying where he fell, Jason raised an arm in Gerling's direction but it wasn't aimed at the gold-ranker. While Gerling had been kicking Jason along the ground like a ball, Jason had been taking the blows, letting them knock him further and further from Itsuki and the Asano sisters. Farrah had made her way to the prisoners and Jason raised a portal arch right next to them.

Gerling turned and looked, not rushing after Jason or the portal as he stood and laughed. The arch rose up like normal, but instead of filling with a dark portal, it remained empty and inert.

"You didn't seriously think we'd try this without doing something about those portals, right?" Gerling mocked.