

## Chapter 384

### You Shouldn't Lie to Your Wife

With the monster waves gone, recovery efforts were underway. The death toll continued to grow as the full depth of the monster wave catastrophe was assessed, blowing past early estimates to cross the two million mark as abandoned rural areas were once more made accessible.

Stalled distribution lines for food and other necessities were opening up again, complicated by a global economy more ravaged than the global populace. Calls for unprecedented social welfare programs were being enacted immediately in some areas and determinedly opposed in others. In the United States, such proposals were the latest battle line in a growing culture war, with claims of socialist takeovers driving massive protests against proposed aid programs.

There was no shortage of people calling for such programs to be enacted, though, leading to open clashes between protesters. While the cities had been relatively safe, they had all suffered some level of overcrowding and food shortage.

In the midst of recovering from an unprecedented global disaster came the events in Kostroma, with more locations following after. Although the magical factions between them did a solid job of controlling the media, once footage started spilling onto the internet, the media companies started jumping in with both feet, airing constant footage of people and places transformed.

In the weeks following Kostroma, none of the handful of subsequently affected sites around the world were as large. A small town in the United States; an almost uninhabited stretch of land in Africa. A section of Alaska that was uninhabited except for wildlife. These places were much easier to contain, the magical factions doing a much better job of keeping the media out and their response hidden.

There was no warning of a transformation event and no escape once the sphere locked in. Once people realised that there was no way to protect themselves from the transformation, new waves of unrest began. Reactions to the transformed, as they quickly became known, varied widely, from the accepting to the violent. A staging site outside of Kostroma processing the affected residents was attacked by a violent mob, with the Russian government denying involvement, despite a failure to crack down on the activity.

In the midst of this came the first footage of the magical factions in open conflict. As Dawn had predicted, a single reality core appeared in each of the affected zones and the factions immediately scrambled after it.

Part of this was Jason's doing. His conversation with Anna, as predicted, had proliferated wildly. What was a closely-held secret about the spoils of the transformation events became open knowledge to every EOA cell, Network branch and Cabal group. With category four power on the table and the competition fierce, all pretence was dropped in pursuit of the reality cores.

Reality cores were roughly the size and shape of an ostrich egg, glowing with transcendent light. The Cabal claimed the ones in Kostroma and Africa, the Network the one in the USA.

As fifth, sixth and seventh locations became affected, it was harder to keep track of who was claiming what from the outside. Despite Jason and his companions never participating, Jason and Asya followed events closely. Itsuki, arriving at Jason's house in the village, found them watching yet another news report.

"If we aren't getting involved," Itsuki asked them, "then why is all this so important?"

"It's about the balance of power," Asya explained. "One faction gaining too much strength could easily lead it either dominating or being allied against by the others. Skirmishes over specific objectives could deteriorate into outright magical war."

The second major population centre to be affected was Pudong, China. It was transformed into a crystal city filled with people who mostly turned into an earth-affinity species with gemstone-like scales covering their bodies. Neither Jason nor Farrah had seen the species before, although Dawn was familiar with them. Much larger than Kostroma, millions of people were affected in Pudong and international groups were already voicing concerns about the Chinese response.

\*\*\*

While the Network leadership caught up in competing for reality cores, the rank and file were refocused on their long-held duty of intercepting dimensional incursions before they became monster waves. This duty, however, came with some unexpected changes.

Rebooting the dimensional detection grid had apparently activated previously unknown elements, namely, grid coverage of the oceans. As if the systems had been there, waiting and dormant all along, suddenly underwater dimensional incursions were detectable.

Given the surface area of the Earth, the Network had always estimated that two-thirds of dimensional incursions went unchecked, with monster waves appearing in the unseen depths. When the monsters had been category two, living and dying in the ocean depths, the Network had only ever dealt with the occasional category three that lasted much longer and sometimes became a threat to shipping. Now that category three monsters were

emerging more frequently as category four incursions increasingly took place, the network was forced to respond.

In the short term, monster surges were often being allowed to take place. This was not a change from before the underwater grid activated and getting the resources to fight category-four monsters underwater was tricky. When it wasn't possible, the monsters were allowed to emerge so the low magic would choke the category fours and the rest could be cleaned up by difficult but manageable operations.

Stockpiled essences that offered any help were broken out and assigned to new trainees in a recruitment storm made possible by the network's now public operations. Water essences had always been useful and were in short supply but there was a large stock of aquatic essences that were previously unvalued. More promising recruits were given more desirable essences like shark, turtle and octopus, while less appealing ones like coral and manatee went to those filling out the numbers in a crisis.

New recruits could only help down the line, though, even being rushed through accelerated training programs. The Network needed new infrastructure, logistics and protocols, but most of all, more warm bodies to cover what was suddenly a tripled number of incidents. Part of this was supplied by Network personnel ousted from countries like Iran and Venezuela.

Thus far, the EOA had managed to keep up with the challenge, now that they had claimed the Network's role in those regions, although how long that would last was an open question. Surprisingly, they were much more prepared than the Network for underwater operations, as if somehow they had known what was coming beforehand.

The open nature of the magical threat and the fresh memory of the monster waves also made it much easier for nations to fund and mobilise support, be it for the Network, the EOA or the Cabal, who were still working with the Network in many areas. In Africa, especially, the Network and the Cabal were in defiance of the conflict between their organisations as they continued to work together in relative harmony. Only the appearance of reality cores brought about any discord, although, for the moment, the cooperation was holding.

\*\*\*

Although it required more tweaking than Farrah had wanted, she finally completed a design for a grid detection system that Jason's cloud constructs were able to replicate. Jason decided that was a good time to leave Asano Village behind, protecting it by having no high-value targets present.

He considered taking his mother, concerned someone might see her as a potential hostage, but anyone who went to the trouble would certainly know beforehand of their estrangement. There were definitely spies amongst the residents, including Kaito and Amy. Both had been approached to spy on Jason by people who understood their fraught history. Both had the presence of mind to accept the generous offers, while immediately telling Jason so he could feed disinformation.

Kaito was coming with Jason as part of his support team, while Amy was remaining behind to administer the village and watch over their children. They said their goodbyes to one another away from Jason, although they knew that his senses picked up everything in the village.

“It’s creepy knowing that he’s kind of watching us right now,” Amy said to her husband as they embraced outside their eldest daughter’s bedroom. “He told me that he wasn’t the person I knew anymore and he was right. He’s almost alien.”

“He can only sense our auras, and only if he’s paying attention,” Kaito assured her.

“So he says,” Amy countered. “The truth is that we don’t know what he’s capable of. You and I both have magic, now, but can you do anything like the things he does? He turned into a bird made of outer space. He used those butterflies to wipe out whole sections of a city. Yes, they were those awful undead things, but what if they weren’t? What if he starts doing that to regular people?”

“People have had power like that long before Jason came along. The whole Cold War was a bunch of people playing chicken with nuclear annihilation.”

“But it’s Jason, Kai. I still know him well enough to realise how wrong it could go. He’s rash and impulsive. He gets caught up in ideas and stops looking at the consequences, without generals or launch codes or anything else to stop him.”

“We have to trust him, Ames.”

“Do we?”

“I’ve learned enough about all this to know that yes, we do.”

“There was a time I relied on him more than anyone,” Amy said. “I don’t think I can go back to that.”

“Let me do that. You just concentrate on looking after the people here.”

“You just make sure you come back to me. You have two little princesses that will be waiting for you.”

\*\*\*

In the city of Bregenz, Austria, a Network team had sealed off the road running up past Sacred Heart Church, along with the church itself and the surrounding area. The

Commander of Tactical Operations was named Franz, who watched as the ritualist team worked on opening the aperture that had appeared. The tactical teams were ready to move in; one nine-person section of category threes and two sections of category-twos, each led by a category three. There was also a military contingent, armed with magical firearms.

Franz was glad not to have been assigned to the response teams put together for the transformation events. Working for the Network gave him a sense of purpose and he was much more interested in protecting people by fighting monsters than chasing after power by fighting people. Despite having plateaued at category three, he had no ambitions to rise higher.

Few people could even dream of the lifespan and power that Franz already enjoyed. Since magic had come out in the open and his status was no longer a secret, even his mother-in-law had stopped telling his wife she could do better.

Franz knew that many of the Network's tactical members were annoyed at being left out of the hot new action, but he knew them to be fools. It wasn't like participating meant anyone involved would get a taste of whatever power the higher-ups deigned to let trickle down. More likely was that even if one of the events did take place in Austria, what waited for them was death.

It wasn't monsters they would be facing at they fought over reality cores. The so-called superheroes of the EOA weren't a grave threat but he had heard strange stories about the Cabal. Even worse, he'd heard about Network branches fighting one another, although any talk like that was quickly hushed up.

Franz was leading a team about to enter a dimensional incursion space, work he was more than happy to get back to after being sent to a series of little mountain towns littered with dead. One of his people pointed up and Franz used the telescopic vision of his perception power to spot a helicopter, high in the air. It rapidly descended but made oddly little noise. Franz's magical senses told him it was a category two conjured object.

The helicopter was large but sleek, with tinted glass making up a large portion of the fuselage. It dropped down to hover above the street, where more than two dozen guns were pointed at it. A side door opened, revealing a figure they all recognised.

With his blood-red robes and dark cloak, Jason Asano was a red lightsaber away from being the next disappointing Star Wars villain. He dropped lightly from the helicopter and walked over to Franz, somehow knowing that he was in charge.

Franz looked at the bright silver eyes in the otherwise impenetrable darkness of the hood. Jason then pushed the hood back off his head to reveal a face with sleek black hair

and the too-polished handsomeness of a category three. The man gave him a friendly smile.

"Hello, Franz. Can I call you Franz? I know there are standing orders not to let me into any dimensional spaces, but you know that's just the Network wanting me to haul off on one of their teams so I look bad in the press."

"You don't know what I think," Franz said.

"I don't? It's what you told Maria. You shouldn't lie to your wife, Franz."

"Are you threatening my family?"

"No, Franz. I just want you to know that I came here knowing exactly what I was walking into. If I have to go through someone, it'll be you, straight up."

"I appreciate that."

Franz looked at the others leaving the helicopter.

"You have four category threes, including yourself," Franz said. "I have twelve, including me. Are you confident with three-to-one odds, Mr Asano?"

"Actually, it'll just be me, so twelve-to-one odds. Also, yes. And call me Jason."

Franz looked at Jason, whose expression and body language was completely relaxed, except for the silver eyes locked onto Franz like sharp, pointed icicles. Franz relied on his aura senses to guide him in uncertain situations but he couldn't sense Jason at all. He couldn't read the other category threes behind Asano either, the one he guessed was Farrah Hurin was even using her aura to prevent him from reading the category twos. It was a skilful demonstration of aura control.

With Asano, who wasn't just hard to detect but a ghost to his magical senses, invisible to all but his eyes.

"Mr Asano, how do you see this going if I tell you no?"

"Franz, I'm asserting right now that I'm going to go through that aperture and that you can't stop me. Either you assume that I'm right and let me through, or don't and you'll find out for certain."

Franz looked into Jason's unflinching eyes again and slowly nodded.

"Alright, let them through," he announced.

"Boss, the standing orders are—"

"I know what the standing orders are. If this guy wants to clear some of the monsters for us, I'm going to let him. You don't like that, Baumgartner, feel free to try and stop him."

The hood crawled back over Jason's head on its own and Jason slowly turned to look at Baumgartner, his silver eyes seeming disembodied in the darkness of the hood. Baumgartner looked back nervously, frozen on the spot.

“I’d say that’s a no,” Franz said. “Any chance you could leave a guy some loot in there?”

“I think I can manage that,” Jason said. “You made a wise choice, Franz.”

Shade’s bodies emerged from the shadows of every one of Franz’s silver-rankers, including Franz himself. As Jason strode toward the aperture, the bodies returned to his own shadow in a swarm.