

## Chapter 386

### First Priority

In Switzerland, the resort town of Interlaken and the lakeshore villages around Lake Brienz had been evacuated during the monster waves. Determined an insufficiently populous area to warrant its own safe zone, the locals had been sent to the closest established safe zone, in the city of Thun.

A month after the last monster wave, people were cleared to return to their homes. Buses started shipping residents back to their villages, where they would be left to assess the damages. There was a lot of destruction, as the evacuations had been done promptly but the scent of people had been left behind. Monsters denied their prey had taken their frustrations out on the buildings.

The act of god claim made by insurance companies was currently under attack from around the world, on multiple fronts. In the wake of the monster waves and now the transformation events, many countries were already ramrodding legislation to render the claim invalid, along with a barrage of lawsuits. No few of them were attacking the act of god claim on the grounds that with magic at large in the world, although such grounds were not considered to have a high chance of success.

For the immediacy, none of these events helped the people on the buses moving around Lake Brienz. In one of them, a passenger pointed out an isolated building by the lakeshore that seemed untouched.

“Was that large chalet there before?” she asked her husband.

“Of course it was,” he said. “You think someone came here and built a chalet with monsters running around everywhere?”

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Inside what looked like a chalet in the Swiss alps, Jason languidly stretched out in a cloud bed, Asya moulding herself to his body almost as well as the cloud-stuff the bed was made of.

“If I didn’t have to go fight evil,” he said contentedly, “I could stay like this for a long, long time.”

“Lazy,” Asya teased, kissing his neck. “Since we will, eventually, have to get out of this bed, there’s something I’d like to talk to you about. Something important.”

“Is it the hot chocolate?” Jason asked. “Shade promised to stop letting Colin help anymore. He means well but doesn’t understand that not everyone needs that much protein in their diet.”

“No,” she giggled, a tinkling water sound. “I’m talking about when you leave. For the other world.”

“Oh?”

“I know you’re taking your sister and her family by stashing them in your spirit vault. I want to go with you.”

“Ah,” he said. “Please tell me I’m not the reason you’re asking.”

“I like you quite a lot, Asano, but not enough to leave my family and everything I’ve ever known. I want to go to the other world because it’s another world. A whole new universe, full of magic and miracles. Literal miracles.”

“That’s true,” Jason said thoughtfully. “You can just hang around in the local worship square for a bit and some god will show up and do something flashy.”

“I want to see things that aren’t possible here. To do things that almost no one from our world has ever done.”

“I see,” Jason said with a grin. “Magic and wonders. That is a good reason.”

“So you’ll take me with you?”

Jason could feel her anxiousness in both her body and aura as she waited for his reply.

“I’ll tell you what I told Erika,” he said. “There’s still time until I go back. Think it over. Ask me any questions that come up. We can talk about it again when the time comes and as many times as you like before that.”

“Is that a provisional yes?”

“It’s provisional yes,” he confirmed with a chuckle. He felt her body move next to his as her tension melted away and he pressed his lips to hers.

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The Los Angeles Network branch’s plane was no small private jet but a full-sized plane the size of a passenger jet. Based off a corporate jet variant of a passenger liner, it was build to include magic from the frame out and could serve as a mobile command post for Network operations. Amenities included the shower facility from which Jack Gerling emerged, rubbing his bushy beard unhappily.

“That gunk doesn’t come out easily,” he growled like a bear. With his towering bulk and hirsute body, he didn’t just sound like a bear but also looked like one.

The other Network members on the plane looked at the brutish man with trepidation. Even disregarding magic, he looked like he had shambled out of the woods in search of food. Once magic was taken into account, it became even worse.

The US branches of the Network had been pooling resources for years, giving up enough monster cores to raise countless essence users to category three. Finally, they managed to get two people across the threshold of category four. Jack Gerling was one of those chosen, due to his rare and powerful essences.

His might essence was common but no one would complain at its inclusion. His potent essence was extremely rare and the vast essence was so unheard of that they had to go through records hundreds of years old to identify it. The result was the onslaught essence and Gerling's powers turned him into a walking bomb. Now that he was category four, he could down the plane he was on and everyone in it with no more effort than it took to snap his fingers. This fact was not lost on the Network staffers currently onboard.

One of the network staffers approached Gerling.

"Sir, Deputy Director Cleary has asked that you join him for a meal."

Gerling scowled.

"What kind of meal?"

"His exact words were 'an ass-load of fried chicken and hot sauce,' sir."

"Yeah? I like the sound of that."

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Greg stepped onto the upper-floor balcony of the chalet. His hands were wrapped around a mug of hot chocolate, warming them against the crisp morning air. His bronze-rank body could easily endure the cold but he still enjoyed the comfort of its warmth. He moved next to Jason, standing at the balcony to take in the view of the lake.

"See the village across the lake?" Jason asked. "It's empty."

"Evacuated?" Greg asked.

"Yeah. They're coming back, though, even as we speak."

"Maybe that means the world had turned a corner from the monster waves."

"I hope so," Jason agreed. "If we can shut down these transformation events, it really will have. I'm so tired of dark days, but at least we have the power to do something about it. Most people are stuck hoping that people like us will get it done."

"Not a good time to feel powerless."

"No," Jason said. "My first night, in the other world, my friend Rufus told me that I had a choice. I could let other people protect me or take the power to control my own fate."

"Meaning essences."

"Yes. There's a responsibility that comes with that, though. When the bad things happen, we have to stand between them and everyone else."

"I'm not sure everyone sees it that way."

“Rufus does,” Jason said. “He carries it around like a weight. I try to follow that example.”

“I know. Farrah says you shouldn’t.”

“Farrah doesn’t lead,” Jason said. “She’s smarter than anyone on her own team and she’s smarter than me but she doesn’t lead. I’m responsible for all of you and she’s smart enough to avoid carrying that. She might tell us to let go of that burden but she knows we won’t. She just wants us to not carry so much of it that we break.”

They stood in silence for a long time, looking out through the pristine air. Greg didn’t drink from his mug, letting it sit on the railing, nestled warmly between his hands.

“Was it on the news?” he asked Jason.

“Was what on the news?”

“That people are bussing back into the local villages.”

“I can feel them. Buses full people, working their way around the lake. Auras full of hope and trepidation. Uncertain of what they’ll find but yearning for home.”

Greg panned his gaze around the lake, not spotting any movement. If there were busloads of people out there, he couldn’t see them.

“You can sense them from here?”

“Yes.”

Greg looked at Jason, frowning.

“You’re worried about me,” Jason said, smiling as he continued to look out over the lake.

“Sometimes I wonder if you’re getting a little too far from human, Jason.”

“I’m not human.”

“I don’t mean human as a species,” Greg said. “I mean the experience of being a human.”

“Same answer. I’m not a human. If I keep looking at the world as if I were, I’m not sure I can do the things I need to. I hope Makassar is the worst thing I ever experience but I have to assume it won’t be. I need to be able to handle the next thing, and the thing after that.”

“So you just become detached from everything?”

“No,” Jason said, turning to his friend with a smile. “I just pick my attachments carefully. I’ve seen what I’ll become if I don’t have them. As time goes by, I’ve been missing my friends in the other world more and more. I’m starting to realise that monsters aren’t the only things we’re meant to protect each other from.”

Greg looked down into his steaming mug.

“Stopping you from turning into a spooky murder machine is a lot of responsibility,” he said.

“You should try needing to save the world.”

“Oh, please,” Greg scoffed. “A drama queen like you? You’re loving it.”

Jason let out an affronted laugh.

“Is that how it is?”

“You know it is,” Greg said with a grin then sipped at his hot chocolate, before spitting it over the balcony and peering into his mug.

“What is in this? Is that beef stock?”

“I apologise,” Shade said, emerging from Jason’s shadow. “It seems I had not excised all the cocoa that Colin supplemented after all. I shall fetch you a fresh cup.”

“Thank you,” Greg said, still making a face as Shade floated away with the cup. “Am I imagining things, or is Shade getting quite butlery?”

“He’s become fascinated by the profession,” Jason said. “He likes the quiet, dignified competence of duty. It hasn’t made trying to get him to be more relaxed any easier.”

“You always try and turn everyone into you,” Greg said. “Maybe instead of trying to pull everyone into your pace, you should appreciate them for what they have to offer the way they are. If Shade wants to be Alfred to your Batman, let him.”

“I wish I had a secret cave lair. Behind a waterfall.”

“We’re standing in your magical, shape-changing, chalet that turns into a hovercraft tour bus. There was also mention of turning it into a palace?”

“Haven’t tried that, yet. I’ve never actually needed a palace for anything.”

“No one has ever needed a palace, Jason. They just wanted a lot of golden sconces more than they wanted poor people to have food.”

“Still a dirty socialist, then?”

“Aren’t you?”

“I’m not sure how many princes and wealthy aristocrats you can make friends with before it becomes hypocritical. It’s not really a hovercraft, by the way.”

“What?”

“The tour bus from the cloud flask makes. It’s not really a hovercraft. Now that it’s silver-rank, it could actually fly if the magic here wasn’t so thin. It’ll have to wait until I go back to Farrah’s world.”

Jason felt a nervous tremulation in Greg’s aura. Jason waited for his friend to speak.

“So, ah, has Asya talked to you yet?” Greg asked.

“About going to the other world?”

“Yeah.”

“She has. Have you both been working up to ask me?”

“We figured one of us should soften you up by sleeping with you first,” Greg said. “I won’t lie: I’m glad she volunteered.”

Jason burst out laughing.

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“And he’s president?” Gerling asked as he tossed the bone from a drumstick into the large bin Cleary had made sure was on hand.

“Yes,” Cleary said, then bit into a chicken wing. Cleary had replaced his suit with a more casual shirt and pants before joining Gerling in a fried chicken dinner, although Gerling was consuming the bulk of the piled tray.

“The TV guy?” Gerling asked, grabbing another piece.

“Yes.”

“That’s our country you’re talking about?”

“Yes.”

“And he beat Bill Clinton? I bet Hillary would find it weird being back in the White House without being president. I thought they’d get divorced after she was impeached over the intern sex thing.”

“The nineties were a simpler time,” Cleary said.

“You’re alright, Cleary,” Gerling said as Cleary tossed his own chicken bone into the bin. “I appreciate you sitting down and eating with me. My last handler would have thrown me the chicken like I was a monster in a pit. Most people are scared of me.”

“Oh, I’m definitely scared of you,” Cleary said. “I won’t lie to you, Mr Gerling: my job is to make you as amenable as possible to the requests of my superiors. What that means is if you want something, my job is to get it for you, as close to the way you want it as is practically possible. I think keeping things friendly between you and I will make it a better experience for both of us, and if that means eating some delicious fried chicken, I’m willing to take that hit.”

“Good to hear,” Gerling said with a bellowing laugh. “The last guy was a little too much stick and not enough carrot.”

After years of working to get a pair of category four essence users, the US Network branches discovered an unhappy reality: without a supply of gold spirit coins, they would be power-starved, rapidly weaken and possibly die. The Network researchers managed to place both men in magical stasis, itself quite resource hungry, forestalling their demise.

The supply of gold spirit coins was exceptionally small, meaning the category fours could only be temporarily revived for critical missions where overwhelming force was required. It also meant that, despite their world-beating power, the category fours were beholden to whoever could provide the coins to keep them alive. Gerling's previous handler had enthusiastically waved that sword of Damocles, forgetting that it was a lot easier to replace a handler than a category four essence user.

"Things are different, now," Cleary said. "These new reality cores not only mean that we can keep you out of stasis but that we should be able to add more category fours to the roster."

"And you pulled me out to fight for them?"

"Yes. The Cabal is slowly-but-surely gaining an advantage in these transformation spaces. They seem to have some kind of connection to them, which our researchers suspect is related to the origins of the cabal's various factions."

"Bunch of creepy weirdos," Gerling said. "I don't mind kicking their asses back and forth a little."

"We aren't actually certain how effective the reality cores will be in enhancing their power," Cleary said. "We have people looking into it, obviously. We estimate that our essence users will get stronger using cores faster than they will. Reality core power can be directly consumed with a simple ritual, like a supercharged monster core gobstopper. If the Cabal can leverage them effectively, though, we may need to initiate large scale interdiction before they become too powerful."

"Large scale interdiction?"

"War, Mr Gerling."

"Well, damn; count me in. I'm the most powerful thing on this whole goddamn planet, so let me loose."

"That's far from our ideal scenario and, for now, we aren't even pitting you against the Cabal."

"That's not the first priority?" Gerling asked. "If they're sending me, that usually means it's the first priority."

"There is, potentially, an additional source for the reality cores. One that will produce them faster, more reliably and, best of all, exclusively. It might even be possible to shut down the transformation events and leave us with the sole means to reach the highest levels of power in the world."

"That sounds just dandy," Gerling said.

“Yes it does,” Cleary agreed. “We can stop pretending the International Committee has any purpose other than doing what we say, that the governments of the world work with us instead of for us and that the other magical factions have any reason to exist at all.”

“Well, damn,” Gerling said. “We’re looking to take over the damn planet?”

“We already have, Mr Gerling. The goal is to reach the point where we can stop pretending we haven’t.”