

Chapter 365

Warmth and Levity

As the plane flew north over Queensland, Asya looked to where Jason was sitting on the floor, meditating, as he had been since reaching cruising altitude. Akari stepped up next to her.

“I know he seems frivolous,” she said, “but I've discovered that he devotes much of his inactive time to training. His diligence in that regard surprises even me, and I was raised in a life of training.”

“I rejected cores because I wanted to learn the right way,” Asya said, “but I have other responsibilities. I've been through the tactical training program but crewing Kaito's helicopter hasn't given me the chance to confront monsters that I need. I see people who gained their essences long after me hitting category two because they use cores. I'm the only one on the flight crew still category one.”

“There is no shame in using monster cores to grow,” Akari said. “The danger is in letting them be the only source of your strength. You must be vigilant that you do not let your capability flounder and make sure that you grow not just your essence abilities but your mastery of them.”

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you,” Asya said. “You're a core user and so much stronger than me.”

“I understand,” Akari said. “Like you, I have seen core users whose skill fails their power. There are more of them than there are of those who reach their potential. The training programs Miss Hurin instituted have been helping but you can't turn a culture of decades around overnight.”

“The current crisis is finally showing people what Jason and Farrah said from the beginning,” Asya said. “Of course, not everyone needed teaching. Finding out just how many of the American network members don't use cores has been revelatory.”

The monster wave crisis had every Network branch pulling out all the stops, and with that came the revelation that the US and the Chinese had been using some variation of Farrah's training program for as much as a century. They had inserted themselves into her instruction programs not to learn but to refine their techniques.

This was paying off as China and the United States demonstrated that, like Jason and Farrah, they had people capable of operating independently of teams. They avoided it where possible but in emergency situations, they could deploy people capable of facing groups of monsters alone. Both countries had silver-rankers who were not the failures

Jason had so far encountered but were clearly around his level of skill. Given that they were also a rank higher, they were also demonstrably stronger. Some were even powerhouses on the level of Farrah.

Jason had become something of the face of magic internationally, but both China and the United States were pushing their own people. They weren't the only ones, but they were having the most success, courtesy of powerful rosters of essence users. This meant that, like Jason, they could overshadow the generic supers put forward by the League of Heroes.

Jason had been asked about his US and Chinese counterparts during his interviews, where he openly stated that many of them were more powerful than him. It was another tool he used to highlight the legitimacy of the Network over the EOA.

The two women felt a surge of magic come from Jason, who was still consolidating his development from the long, desperate intensity of the Broken Hill battle. He opened his eyes, which were sparkling with triumph.

"I'm so close to silver I can taste it," he said.

"Another ability reached category three?" Akari asked.

"My cloak. Combining it with Shade's bus form really gave it a workout."

Ability: [Cloak of Night] (Dark)

- Conjunction (darkness, light, dimension).
- Base cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures a magical cloak that offers limited physical protection. Can generate light over an area or absorb light to blend into shadows. Cloak can reduce the weight of the wearer, allowing reduced falling speed and water walking. Cannot be given or taken away, but the effect can be extended to others in close proximity, with an ongoing mana cost rising exponentially with each affected person.

- Effect (bronze): Cloak reflexively intercepts projectiles. Highly effective against rapid, weaker attacks, but less effective against powerful, singular attacks. Cloak allows gliding.

- Effect (silver): Cloak passively manipulates physical space, slightly shifting the trajectory of incoming attacks. Manipulation can be actively managed for more directed effect or to allow passage through spaces normally too small to physically traverse. Cloak allows flight for a low ongoing mana cost, increasing to a moderate ongoing mana cost while in direct sunlight.

- Ability [Cloak of Night] (Dark) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached silver rank.
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Looking over his upgraded ability, Jason noted that the wording had changed from earlier iterations of the ability. Partly that was due to mana costs for lower-rank effects being removed. He couldn't help but wonder, however, if the changes were purely due to ranking-up or whether his perception of his own powers was impacting the description. His thoughts turned to Clive and how excited he would be to figure it out.

"What are you thinking about?" Asya asked.

"Hmm?"

He looked up, distracted.

"What are you thinking about?" she repeated. "You looked sad all of a sudden."

"I was thinking about a friend," Jason said. "We really could have used him in all this. He's probably the only guy I know as smart as my niece. She'd still eat him for breakfast, though."

Jason narrowed his eyes at Akari, then conjured his cloak around him.

"Punch me in the face," he told her.

"What?"

"I got a new ability I want to try," he said. "Punch me in the—"

Akari dashed forward, supernaturally quick to jab Jason in the middle of the face, sending him reeling and letting out a nasally moan.

"Ah, you hit me in the eye."

"I was aiming for your nose."

"You clipped the nose pretty good," he said, the blocked-nose tone of his voice backing him up as he crouched over, both hands clasped over his face. "Clearly, I'll have to get the hang of this ability. Thank you, by the way."

"You just thanked me for punching you in the face," Akari said.

"Well, I was asking for it," Jason said. "I think I might just focus on the fact that my cloak will let me fly, now. Can't wait until we land and I can try it out, but honestly, I think I'll get more practical use out of flying with Shade. It's weirdly anti-climactic."

He looked at Asya, who was looking back at him with amusement.

"What?" he asked.

"You're kind of honking when you talk," she said with a giggle.

"I got punched in the face!"

"Also, you asked someone to punch you in the face."

Next to Asya, Akari snorted a laugh.

“Girls are mean,” Jason complained.

Asya moved up through the plane and took the phone handset from the flight attendant. Her eyes went wide as she listened to the person on the other end.

“Give me the details,” she said.

A while later, she moved back to the other passengers as the plane changed course. Akari and Jason were sat on the floor, meditating, while Aram was badly losing a game of chess to Dawn.

Jason and Akari opened their eyes, focusing on Asya. Despite the aura-suppression bracelet that helped her mask her emotions from high-rank essence users, Jason and Akari both felt her inner turmoil.

“Why are we changing course?” Aram asked.

“We're shifting west, to Indonesia,” Asya said, looking rather lost as she took a seat. “In Indonesia, there has been something of a balance of forces between the Network and the Cabal. The Network has been protecting the urbanised areas and offering substantial support for the Cabal facing monster waves in remote areas.”

“There's tension?” Jason asked.

“In most places around the world, either the Cabal or the Network is the dominant force,” Asya explained. “There's been unprecedented collaboration, with whichever force is stronger taking the lead, although that is usually the Network. The secondary force acts in support and that's been working.”

“But you said balance of forces,” Jason said. “The Cabal and the Network have been struggling for control in Indonesia?”

“Yes,” Asya said. “Thus far, it's been fine. That's what we thought, anyway. It turns out that the government there has been ramping up their support for the Network. They're trying to establish their authority in the magical community by picking a side, but neither they nor the Network branches affiliated with them realised how much hidden power the Cabal possessed. Some of the Indonesian branches got forceful, only to bite off more than they could chew. A lot of the smaller branches weren't happy, even throwing-in with the Cabal.”

“A Network civil war,” Aram said, his expression troubled. “There's been actual fighting?”

“It's worse than that,” Asya said. “The larger Network branches there knew the International Committee wouldn't stand for what they were doing with the monster waves going on, so they kept the whole thing under wraps. It's not like anyone was going around

to check on them with things the way they are, so long as they kept reporting that everything was fine. None of this has hit the media, so no one was the wiser and they've managed to keep the conflict secret.”

“Surely the smaller branches reported that the main branches were off the reservation,” Jason said.

“They did,” Asya admitted awkwardly. “It was passed-off as the little fish complaining and the usual tension between the Network and the Cabal.”

“Are you kidding?” Aram asked. “What is the International Committee doing?”

“Fighting the monster apocalypse, Michael,” Asya said. “We're all stretched a little thin right now and things are going to fall through the cracks.”

“It's a civil war in our own organisation!” Aram exclaimed. “That's a bloody big crack.”

“Blame can wait until we have time to judge with consideration,” Akari said. Despite her still being sat cross-legged on the floor, her calm voice carried an authoritative weight.

“Rather than look back with recrimination,” she continued, “we need to look forward, to the challenges ahead.”

“That's my concern as well,” Jason said. “Asya, please tell me that what I'm thinking is wrong.”

“What are you thinking?” Aram asked, having calmed down a little.

“If there's a problem with patrolling for proto-spaces,” Jason said, “branches are under instruction to report to the International Committee and request immediate assistance,” Jason said.

“Oh, damn,” Aram said, following Jason's train of thought. “If they have a problem with checking for spaces but don't report it to avoid scrutiny...”

“That's exactly what happened,” Asya confirmed. “It's the worst-case scenario. Makassar, in South Sulawesi. One and a half million people. A category-three dimensional space started dumping monsters into it less than an hour ago. Network responders are onsite already but the logistics of evacuating or protecting a population of that size and that density is a nightmarish quagmire. They were a million and a half before it was declared a safe zone. And all that is before even considering a sweep-and-clear operation through a city full of civilians.”

Only Dawn kept her composure at the thought of monsters spilling into a heavily populated city. The others were pale and shell-shocked.

“It still gets worse,” Asya said.

“How?” Aram asked.

“There's another dimensional space, practically on top of the first one. Between them, they'll box the city in. The second space is projected to cross the breakdown threshold within the next hour and start spilling out monsters within two.”

“Twin dimensional spaces,” Aram said. “That's rare.”

“It used to be,” Jason said. “I've encountered it a half-dozen times when sweeping for proto-spaces over the last couple of months. There should still be a chance to shut it down if they've detected it, right?”

“Early responders detected it, but there's no way they can shut it down in time,” Asya said, then paused as if afraid to continue. Finally, she spoke.

“It's a category-four space,” she said.

Silence followed Asya's revelation. One or more gold-rank monsters, surrounded by silvers, was not something that could be quickly readied for, certainly not within an hour.

“I can extend the duration of proto-space stability,” Jason said. “Can we get me there in time?”

“We don't think so but we're trying,” Asya said. “We're on route to Darwin right now. We're going to throw you out of the plane instead of taking the time to land and a portal specialist will meet you on the ground. He's been to Makassar and will send you directly. Forces are being readied to take on a category-four anchor monster, whether we catch it in the dimensional space or not. The Guangzhou branch is already preparing magically-enhanced heavy munitions.”

“It or them,” Aram said. “Multiple anchor monsters are more the norm than the exception, these days.”

Jason turned to Dawn.

“If you have any more tricks or secrets, now is the time.”

Dawn frown, her expression conflicted.

“You know I can't intervene,” she said, “as much I might want to. The most I could tell you is that The United States of America and China branches of the Network have undeclared assets. Those assets are difficult and costly to field but could be critical. Perhaps you can pressure China into deploying them, but most likely they will deny their existence. They will keep them in case what is happening to Indonesia happens to them.”

“What kind of assets?” Aram asked.

“I've already said more than I should,” Dawn said. “I will not speak on it further.”

“People are dying,” Aram said. “This is no time for secrets and games.”

“If she says she won't say more, trying to change her mind will only waste time we don't have,” Jason told him.

“At this point, we'll take what we can get,” Asya said, standing up. “I'll go see what I can do.”

She headed for the front of the plane where the phone was located. Jason looked at Akari, both of them still sitting on the floor.

“Get your mind settled and whatever rest you can,” he told her. “I don't think either of us are ready for what we're about to see.”

It had barely been days since Jason had been desperately fighting to save lives in Broken Hill. In its wake, he had been seeking out warmth and levity while his insides were pulled taut like a bowstring. As he pictured the lives being lost at that very moment, the bowstring snapped.