

## Chapter 287

### Uncontrolled Factor

Annabeth's eyes snapped open. As a category one, her senses were only slightly heightened, but something had triggered an instinctive reaction and awakened her. Straining her aura senses, she couldn't detect anything that might have set them off.

Next to her, Susan remained in blissful slumber. Anna silently slipped out of bed, taking a pistol and a flask from her nightstand. She took a swig of the flask, the stamina potion kicking her senses fully awake. She would have preferred a spirit coin, but the Network insisted on using the whole stockpile to make bullets or use in rituals. Her pistol was loaded with exactly those magical bullets, as well as being enchanted itself.

Wearing only her underwear, she slunk downstairs, spotting a light from the kitchen. Moving into it without a sound, she found someone peering into the fridge, which was the source of light.

"You broke into the wrong house, mate," she said, levelling her gun.

"Tell me about it," Jason complained, turning to the kitchen island and putting down a plate holding a sandwich. "Your condiment selection is terrible. Susan clearly didn't marry you for your culinary skills."

He looked over at her, standing in her underwear with a gun pointed at him.

"Still, I can see the appeal," he acknowledged. "I mean, a beautiful woman in her underwear pointing her gun at me?"

He took a big bite of his sandwich.

"I love my life," he mumbled through the food.

"You're Jason Asano."

"Yep. Have been for a while, which makes it easy to remember."

He frowned at the sandwich in his hand.

"With what you had in the fridge," he said, "I could barely assemble an above average sandwich, and I do not appreciate being reduced to mid-tier sandwiches. I'll add it to the list of things the Network needs to answer for. Did you get this bread from a supermarket?"

"What are you doing here?" Annabeth asked. "How are you here? You were kidnapped, drugged and collared."

"Silver-rankers kidnap me from time to time. It's kind of my thing. You should just go to a bakery. You'll be supporting local business and you won't get bread that tastes like sadness."

"Silver-rankers?"

“Right, uh, tier three? Category three? Is that what you call it? If I hadn’t spent the last six months in a pocket universe fighting evil, I’d at least have a decent sauce on hand.”

“What about the people that took you?”

“The three French guys? You don’t need to worry about local authorities stumbling into them. I’m more interested in the fourth one, Sebastian. You do have him, right? He and I never got the chance to talk.”

“What do you want with him?”

“My needs are many and varied; he’s just a part of it. Craig Vermillion seems to think that you and I can help each other. I’m hoping that he’s right.”

“So you broke into my house?”

“I wanted a meeting on my terms. If I wandered into your headquarters, you might start thinking like your counterparts from Lyon.”

“You know about that?”

“I had a little chat with the blokes who took me for a drive. If you’re looking to dig deeper, these might help.”

He took out two mobile phones and placed them on the counter.

“One of these belongs to Sebastian, the other to one of his flunkies. I reset the unlock codes to 0-0-0-0.”

“You can hack phones?”

“I know a few simple unlocking rituals. One of the more esoteric ones got the job done. One of the cheaper ones, which was nice, although I don’t have any shortage of iron-rank spirit coins. That’s category one, I guess. Like you. And that gun. Magic guns are a thing, I guess. You do have spirit coins, here, right?”

“Yeah. What’s with the iron-rank, silver-rank thing? Is that what they call the categories in the other world?”

“Yep. They named the ranks after the colours of spirit coins. They’re all crystal, but the category ones look like iron, twos like bronze and so on. It’s the same colour that shines out of you when your attributes advance or you get a gift evolution. You do understand these concepts, right?”

“We call it minor threshold advancement.”

“See? We’re learning from each other already. That gun isn’t conjured, right?”

“No.”

“One of the French blokes kept conjuring guns. Is there a gun essence?”

“There is.”

“No kidding. I have this mate who theorised that different worlds had different essences.”

“You really were over there, weren’t you?” she asked, finally lowering the pistol she had been holding on him the whole time. “What was that you said about a pocket universe?”

“Oh, I spent about a year in the other world, then another six months a small side-reality. To be honest, I was only fighting evil at the end. Mostly it was just monsters.”

“I can’t imagine the kind of experiences you must have had.”

She looked down at his t-shirt, emblazoned with the text I WENT TO A MAGICAL ALTERNATE UNIVERSE AND ALL I GOT WAS VAST COSMIC POWER.

“I’m not entirely sure that I want to,” she added as Jason flashed her an impish grin.

“Look,” Jason said. “I have a lot to offer your organisation. Knowledge, insight. Smouldering sensuality. You know it; the French certainly know it. I’m sure you recognise the potential of someone who’s been where I’ve been. On paper, your Network and me are a good fit, but the relationship has started out very poorly.”

“We would like to work with you, obviously,” Annabeth said. “You have a demonstrated penchant for public chaos that troubles us, though.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “But since you have a demonstrated penchant for kidnapping me, I wouldn’t go claiming the moral high ground.”

“That was the Lyon branch.”

“And why should I think you will act any different than the people who sent that French prick to kick my arse?”

“You kicked back pretty hard. If we didn’t have a category three healer, he would have died.”

“You’ve got a silver-rank healer? Nice.”

“She’s more subtle than roaming the halls of a hospital playing faith healer,” Annabeth said.

“She does help regular people, then?”

“Of course. What’s the point of having healing magic if you can’t help the people that need it most? We run a private clinic that allows us to find and help needy people without the news talking about angels made of stars. We can quietly find patients and clean up any troublesome hospital records. Do you realise how much what you did has hurt the operation of the children’s hospital? There’s investigations, oversight, the media debacle. Yes, you helped some people that really needed it, but you hurt people, too. Do you have any understanding of consequences?”

“That’s... traditionally been a weak area for me,” Jason said, head bowed in contrition. “I like that clinic you mentioned. I’d like to get in on that, if we end up working together.”

“That’s one of the things you have to offer,” Annabeth said. “What is it that you want from us?”

“If you’re not smart enough to figure that out, I don’t want to work with you,” Jason said.

“The Lyon branch,” Annabeth said. “We’re pretty sure they have an outworlder. You want that outworlder.”

“Bang on,” Jason said. “I’m not what you’d call happy with the Network right now.”

“We’re not over the moon with you, either,” she said. “Killing people on the news. Playing angel at a children’s’ hospital.”

“The latter was to draw you out so I could investigate you,” Jason said. “As for the bikers, I did go overboard, there.”

“Overboard? Six innocent bystanders were killed and we still don’t know how many were injured.”

Jason paled.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I really am. I didn’t think when they attacked. I just fought. I’m not used to worrying about collateral damage.”

“It’s why we have rules.”

Jason nodded.

“I’m not going to work for your organisation,” he said, “but I will work with you, if we can hammer out an arrangement. Including rules. I think that some boundaries might be good for me, right now.”

“Then we need to have a conversation somewhere other than my kitchen,” Annabeth said. “While I’m wearing clothes.”

“Do you sleep in a bra?” Jason asked. “That can’t be comfortable.”

“I just kind of crashed out,” Annabeth said defensively. “Someone’s antics didn’t leave me time to sleep for two days. Finally I get to bed and you pop up in my damn kitchen.”

“Sorry,” he said, plucking a fistful of spirit coins from his inventory and placing them on the table. “By way of apology.”

“So, what now?” she asked.

“Now, I’m taking my uncle and getting out of Sydney for a while. If your people come after me, I know that a deal is off the table and we go to war. If not, we can work something out.”

“War?”

“If the Network is going to keep coming after me,” Jason said, “I’m not just going to sit back and wait.”

“You lost to one category three. You can’t take us all on.”

“I don’t need to fight you to beat you,” Jason said. “I just need a press conference. If I go public, you’ll have bigger problems than me to deal with. Also, I can start flogging Starlight Rider merch. That’s a whole thing.”

“I can talk cooperation,” Annabeth said. “I have people that I answer to, though. They don’t like uncontrolled factors, and you’re an uncontrolled factor in an absurd shirt.”

“I do have a way of frustrating authority figures,” Jason admitted. “I’m not what you’d call sorry about that, but I do recognise that my personal proclivities make things more difficult. Talk to your people and ask what they’d like to see as a gesture of good faith. I’ll see what I can do.”

“You’ll want a similar gesture from us, too right?”

“Of course. I want everything you know about this outworlder in France.”

“What do you know already?”

“Nothing,” Jason said. “All I know is that when I came back, someone came with me.”

“We don’t know anything ourselves.” Annabeth said. “We’re working on that. I’m pressing Sebastian and my boss is pressing his boss. They haven’t even admitted to having an outworlder yet. In the meantime, how do I contact you?”

“I left my phone number on the whiteboard on your fridge. I also added some things to your shopping list. Get your kitchen in order, lady. Your pasta sauce selection alone is a travesty. Buy some damn tomatoes.”

“Your sister’s a TV chef, isn’t she?”

“Yeah.”

“Does she know you’re back?”

“I wanted to get some things settled before I come back from the dead. I don’t want to bring my mess down on my family. Will your people come looking for trouble?”

“I think everyone will be happier if our interactions are civil,” Annabeth said. “There’s been far too much action going on. What do you think of Craig Vermillion as a middleman for the moment.”

“You’ll use Cabal personnel?”

“They owe us big, and they know it.”

“Alright,” Jason agreed. “I’m going to work under the assumption that I can walk down the street without the Network trying to drag me into a van. But don’t think that I’ll keep

letting your people keep coming after me without reprisal. I'm going to let you get back to bed. Keep in touch."

He closed the fridge, which was the only source of light. Annabeth found the light switch in the dark but he was gone by the time she flipped it.

"Go to bed, right," she muttered.

Flicking the light back off, she trudged back upstairs, not for her bed but for her phone.

"I should have shot him."

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In Hiro's apartment, Hiro clasped Jason in a hug.

"We heard some kind of explosion outside and saw those men pile you into their car. I didn't know what to do, so I contacted Vermillion. He said to hold tight."

"Sorry to worry you, Uncle. I'm fine."

"That's good," Taika said. "You're our guide to all the crazy stuff that's happening."

"Well, I shouldn't be dragged away any time soon," Jason said.

"You were literally just dragged off," Taika said. "What happened, bro?"

"It's political. Some people from France wanted me and weren't too worried about it being on a voluntary basis. They've been handled, for the moment, at least. Has anyone bothered you?"

"Vermillion brought the EOA people around and we came to a preliminary agreement."

"They gave you good terms?"

"Very. It seems like Vermillion talked Victor around and the EOA are feeling generous now they're looking at a smooth transition."

"How did he get Victor on board, do you know?"

"He said that the EOA can give Victor something that he's always wanted but Vermillion was never permitted to give himself."

"That makes sense," Jason said.

He knew that Victor wanted to learn more about the magical world, but the Cabal had always kept him at a remove. From what Vermillion had told Jason, the EOA had no such qualms.

"Alright," Jason said. "I've made contact with certain people and, for the moment, we should remain unmolested. In the morning, we're going to pack it up and head for home. Have you made your arrangements, Taika?"

"Yeah, bro. I talked to my family. I don't want them anywhere near this."

“Good call. We’ll be on the road for a few hours tomorrow. I can give you a proper introduction to the world I’ve landed you all in.”

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In front of Hiro’s apartment building, Jason looked at the cloud flask in his hand with dissatisfaction. Instead of the cloud stuff emerging when he opened the stopper, he received a system message.

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- Cloud constructs cannot operate in zones of barren magic.
  - Add vortex accumulator to cloud constructs to allow operation in zones of barren magic.

#### Vortex Accumulator requirements (bronze rank):

- 1 [Magic Essence].
- 1 [Gathering Essence].
- 100 bronze-rank [Vortex Quintessence Gems].
- 1000 [Bronze Spirit Coins].
  
- Bronze-rank vortex accumulator will allow for cloud constructs of up to current rank (bronze) forms to function in zones of extremely low magical density. Higher-rank materials will be required for higher-rank forms to function.

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“That’s suspicious,” he muttered to himself.

“What is?” Hiro asked.

“My magic item here needs a bunch of very expensive materials for an upgrade. Materials I just so happen have on hand. I’m starting to wonder if it took a look at my supplies and decided to scam me.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Hiro said.

“I get that a lot.”

Jason had fed a lot of materials into the cloud flask to enhance its utility, mostly varieties of quintessence gems, but also crystal wash and various kinds of magical metal, stone and fabric that helped create surfaces that were not just soft and malleable. It was difficult to chop vegetables when the knife just pushed them through a countertop made of nice, soft clouds. Emir had warned him that the most powerful upgrades would require full essences, such as his current circumstance, but the specifics were a little coincidental.

A magic essence wasn’t an oddity, as they were common and Jason had several on hand. The gathering essence, on the other hand, was a rare essence that he also coincidentally happened to have.

In the only instance of it ever happening in his experience, the blood weaver his team fought in the astral space had produced not one but three essences when looted. The spider essence and blood essences were no surprise, beyond appearing together. The gathering essence was, due to being a third essence from the same monster, as well as being the rarest of the three.

As for the vortex quintessence gems, Jason had a goodly amount after fighting dangerous silver-rank monsters called vortex elementals. All his vortex gems were silver-rank, though, rather than bronze.

“Can I set up a silver-rank accumulator before I rank up the flask to silver?” he asked.

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#### Vortex Accumulator requirements (silver rank):

- 1 [Magic Essence].
- 1 [Gathering Essence].
- 100 silver-rank [Vortex Quintessence Gems].
- 1000 [Silver Spirit Coins].
  
- Silver-rank vortex accumulator will allow for cloud constructs of up to silver rank forms to function in zones of extremely low magical density. Higher-rank materials will be required for higher-rank forms to function.

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“A thousand silver coins,” he muttered. “That’ll take a good chunk out of the supply.”

Taika and Hiro looked at each other as Jason continued to mutter seeming nonsense to himself while staring at what looked like a boiling flask in his hand. Then they watched as he started pulling objects out of the air, like a stage magician.

He started with a funnel, which he placed into the end of the flask. Then he started shoving silver coins into the funnel by the fistful, followed by what looked like opals. Then there was a blue, glowing cube, which dissolved into mist, followed by another cube that was black and white that likewise dissolved into the flask. Afterwards, he took out the funnel and replaced the flask’s stopper.

“Sorry about this,” he said to Hiro and Taika. “It needs a few minutes to percolate, but it should be fine now. You can bring down the bags.”

“You’re a weird bloke, bro,” Taika said and headed back inside.