# Chapter 311

# My Turn

In the houseboat, Erika pulled up Jason's number on her phone.

"I would recommend against calling Mr Asano at this moment," Shade's voice came from behind her, making her jump.

"Why not?" Erika asked as she turned to look at the nerve-wracking figure. Jason's bizarre yet ever-courteous shadow monster friend was very high on the list of bizarre things she needed to adjust to.

"Mr Asano just received some important news."

"More important than his mother, brother and sister in law trying to get their heads around magic being real?"

"Yes," Shade said. "I have seen Mr Asano walk into battle knowing that death was more likely than not. I've seen him walk alone into a town that has been taken over by bandits and kill them all. I've seen him fight with thousands of lives on the line and watched him sacrifice his life to save them. I have never seen him as agitated as he is at this moment."

"That's all crazy," Erika said. "You saw him die?"

"I see that you wish to be a good sister," Shade said. "You see how damaged he is and you want to help but his experiences are outside of your understanding. I too, am concerned and would like to help you remedy this shortfall."

"How so."

"Mr Asano has vouchsafed certain recordings with me, that your daughter does not see them."

"He told me. She's already tried to convince me to let her watch them."

"I think, perhaps, that you should be the one to watch them," Shade said. "I hope it will build a bridge between you. Mr Asano has shown you the fantastical and wondrous, while avoiding the suffering he has experienced. I have seen that you want to be good family to him, but what he's been holding back lays between you. I would like to help you bridge that gap, for his sake."

Shade held out a hand made of shadow, dark as an arm-shaped void. On the palm rested a small cluster of recording crystals.

"Begin with these," he said.

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Jason was pacing back and forth in front of the bench, clenching and unclenching his fists as shame and rage warred on his face. Asya looked on in silence, picking up the dropped folder. She took a closer look at the photographs in the folder. A naked woman in a concrete room. A close up of her face, with the shaved head and the suppression collar. Clearly, Jason had not realised who she was until he saw the pictures.

"We're doing our best to get her out," Asya assured him, which was the truth. The international committee had been convinced by the reports of Jason's contribution to the incursion event and were willing to make heavy concessions for his voluntary cooperation.

She strongly suspected the International Committee's global executives had already looked the other way at the Lyon-branch's promises of torture-extracted dividends. She believed that had changed once Jason presented both a more reliable and a more palatable option.

"You're doing the best you're willing to do," Jason said, still pacing.

"Jason, we've essentially finalised our agreement at this point."

Jason stopped moving as she spoke. She could feel the unsteadiness of his aura where she normally couldn't sense it at all. It was stifling, like being in the middle seat of a car between two overweight people. He turned his gaze on her, filled with fury.

"The agreement doesn't matter," Jason said. "As of right now, I have one priority: protect my family, whatever that takes."

He marched over and jabbed at the photograph in her hand.

"She is family," said in a voice that poured ice water down her back. "If I have to burn your Network to the ground to get her back, then I will."

He winced, then shook his head as if throwing off befuddlement. His aura settled until she could no longer feel it pushing uncomfortably against her. His eyes softened from angry to hurt and vulnerable.

"I'm sorry," he said in a tired voice, backing off from her personal space. "My first reaction is always to fight, these days. To be willing to go further and do worse than the other guy."

He rubbed his temples.

"I'm not the Incredible Hulk," he said, more to himself than to her. "I know that my anger doesn't make me stronger, as much as it feels like it should. All it does is cloud my judgement and stop me from making the considered choices that will actually get me what I want."

"Who is she?" Asya asked.

"When I went to the other world, she was a teacher and a friend. She taught me to wield my aura but also just how to live in that world. The stronger I grow, the more I realise just how much she set me on the right path. Even after we lost her, it's like she's still teaching me."

"Lost her?"

"She died," Jason said. "Like me. And she came back to life here, also like me. Now it's my turn to help her in a strange new world but while I'm having family barbecues and going on jet ski rides she's being tortured in a concrete hole!"

"We're working on it," Asya said.

"That's not enough, anymore," Jason said. "I know you have no incentive to help her other than the benefits I'm offering in return, so let me be plain: There is no agreement until Farrah is safe and here. The only things I need from the Network are definitive assurances and a definitive timetable. If you can deliver that, I'll do my best to stop her from taking revenge on you all. We have no other business until that is done, and here's my timetable: You have until I come up with a better way to get her back myself, at which point, I will."

Jason didn't wait for a reply, calling up a portal and stepping though, after which it descended into the ground and vanished. Asya looked around as Yarranabbe Park had a lot of long sightlines. No one seemed to have noticed.

She let out a long sigh, setting down the folder and running her hands over her face. She took the folder and put it back in here briefcase and pulled out her phone.

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Jason portalled to Hiro and Taika, and then back to the houseboat. There was a ten minute wait between portal uses and it didn't have the range to reach Casselton Beach in one hop. This meant a ten minute layover half way. Hiro, Jason and Taika emerged amongst trees on a small hillside that led down to a sandy beach.

"I think I'm getting used to that," Taika said as they emerged from the portal.

"At least I've stopped throwing up," Hiro said, although he was leaning against a tree with a pale face.

"It's kind of trippy," Taika said, slightly wobbling in place. "And I think it makes me hungry."

Jason pulled out a cardboard food carton and handed it to Taika, who opened it up to see pieces of crumbed and fried meat, still steaming hot.

"Is this chicken?" Taika asked.

"Blood-seeker pheasant," Jason said. He had cooked it from meat he looted from the incursion space and had been happy with how it turned out.

"Never heard of it," Taika said and took a bite. "Oh, that's super good. Where are we?"

"Just up from Tuncurry," Jason said.

"It's nice. I'm going to go check out the beach."

As Taika wandered down the slope and out of the trees, Hiro was watching Jason.

"Are you alright," Hiro asked.

"I'm fine."

"Bollocks you are," Hiro said.

Jason let out a groan.

"I just found out that I've been failing someone very important to me very, very badly."

"What are you going to do about it?" Hiro asked.

"I don't know. If I go off on a tear like I normally would, throwing around as much weight as I can bluff people into thinking I have, that will only make things worse. I have all this power but it's not enough."

"Is there ever enough power?" Hiro asked.

"I don't know," Jason said. "There are people who are basically demigods but I don't know if I'll ever be that strong. Very few ever get there, or so I'm told. For all I know, they have just as many problems, but on a scale that would crush me underfoot in an instant."

"Perhaps you should focus on what you can do for now," Hiro suggested, "with the power you have today."

Jason nodded.

"I need time to stop and think," he said. "I haven't been doing enough of that but I can't mess this up."

He released his frustration by fiercely kicking a tree, sending leaves tumbling to the ground.

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In his spirit vault, meditation helped Jason deal with the storm reeling through his brain. Farrah. Alive and in his world, but caught up in circumstances that filled him with white hot rage. His body was almost twitching with the need to roar off and start tearing his way through everyone who could get him closer to her. Instead, he pulled out a bronzerank suppression collar, snapped it around his neck and went back to meditation.

In Greenstone, when Jason felt frustrated like this he would go on a monster hunt. Moving from town to village in the delta, clearing out every adventure board notice and

moving on. At least there he could channel his pent-up aggression into something that helped people.

Until he had access to the proto-astral spaces, that was not an option. Opening an aperture would not be a challenge for his current understanding of astral magic, but he would need to tap into the Network's detection grid. For the moment, seeing the Network people was not a good idea.

He'd snapped on Asya, who had done nothing more than exactly what he wanted and deserved none of his ire. She could not mask herself from his aura senses and he had felt both her sincerity and her attraction, although he only needed one of them. His life had complications enough.

Only when he thought he could see a member of the Network without dangling them from a building and demanding answers did he emerge from his spirit vault, although he did not leave his cabin on the houseboat. Shade was waiting to report.

"Your brother, your mother and your sister-in-law all wish to see you, Mr Asano. They have many questions, although your sister felt that now was not the time."

"That doesn't sound like her."

"She has been watching some of the recording crystals you redacted from the main collection. I believe she has a greater appreciation of what you have been through and how you have been affected. She had the others direct their questions toward your uncle and your father, who is also aboard, as well as herself. She has now left, however, to pick up Miss Emi."

Jason frowned and left his cabin.

"Where are they?" he asked.

"The media room."

Jason took the elevating platform down and went into the media room, where Hiro, Cheryl, Kaito and Amy were in a heated discussion. When the mist door evaporated to admit Jason, they fell silent.

"I know you have a lot of questions," Jason said softly. "Unfortunately, this is not the time for answers."

"Not the time?" his mother exclaimed. "If you think..."

Cheryl was quieted by Amy putting a restraining hand on Cheryl's arm, but Amy's gaze was locked on Jason, searching his expression and body language.

"We'll come back another day," Amy said firmly.

"Amy, are you kidding?" Kaito asked.

She turned to her husband.

"I don't know what's going on with him, Kai," she said, "but today is not the day to push."

"Thank you," Jason said as Kaito gave his wife an unhappy look. "Shade, please show our guests out."

Ken had been elsewhere, playing with his granddaughters. The children were delighted by the spongy cloud house, which was also pleasantly child safe. As they left, Jason returned to the elevating platform and back into his cabin. A cloud chair rose from the floor and he fell into it.

"Alright, Shade. What have you managed to turn up?"

"Still very little, I'm sorry."

"Should I have had you send more bodies?"

"I would need to send most of them to have a significant impact," Shade said.

"Sending them all to France would hamper my ability to react to events locally. In any case, the problems I've encountered over the last several days are not ones that numbers could solve. I need to be wary of the magical protections around Network facilities, as well as being careful of their silver-rankers. It means I have to primarily seek information from the lower-rank members, largely outside of their work hours."

"Which has limited value," Jason said.

"Indeed," Shade agreed. "The Lyon branch practices excellent operational security. While I have heard mention of the site in which I believe your friend is being held, the location seems to be closely guarded, even amongst branch personnel. I believe that with persistence, I will catch them moving staff to the site. It is likely to take more time than you are willing to accept, however."

"I figured as much," Jason said. "I need to get stronger, Shade. Strong enough that no one would even think of acting against me."

"There is no strong enough that no one will defy you, Mr Asano. The Builder possesses power beyond your ability to conceptualise, yet you defied him and you won, because he confronted you in a world of limits."

"Speaking of great astral beings," Jason said, "why would the Reaper let Farrah go? Doesn't that directly contravene his agenda?"

"All the great astral beings are allowed to make exceptions with their power," Shade said. "It is the only currency they can trade with one another, for what else is denied them? It may seem, from a limited perspective, that this world and the events you are caught up in are important, but there are more universes than you have names for numbers. There are countless strange events and exceptional circumstances. At every moment, each of

the great astral beings is taking countless actions. The Reaper making an exception like this has never happened in all the time humans have existed on your planet. If you looked across the cosmos in its entirety, however, you would find The Reaper is releasing souls at every single moment of every single day."

"Why?"

"For his greater purpose. Individuals do not matter other than as representatives of larger trends. I believe that your friend was returned as part of a bargain with the World-Phoenix. She makes sure that you don't become a revolving door of resurrection and he provides you with someone to aid you in whatever agenda she has in mind."

"I don't think I'm that important," Jason said. "And coming back from the dead isn't a dance craze. People can't just start doing it because they saw me."

"You are a small piece in a machine so large that you will never see its mechanisms in action," Shade said. "A brick cannot hold back a flood, but a wall can. But I would advise against trying to see through the actions of beings whose scope and age may not even have limits, be that into the future or into the past. Except for the Builder."

"What's different about the Builder?"

"He is an ascended mortal," Shade explained. "For reasons unknown to me, the original Builder was sanctioned. I do not know what that means, other than that the old Builder is gone and the great astral beings raised a mortal to take the vacated position."

"Wow," Jason said. "That might explain some of the behaviour. Still, he was awfully Thadwicky for an immortal being, raised up or not. Did the vessel impact his decision making?"

"It's possible," Shade said. "While I cannot speak with knowledge as to the Builder's own circumstances, I am, myself, multifarious in nature. I occupy multiple bodies, which perhaps allows me some insight. On rare occasions, one of my bodies has become partially isolated and subject to conditions that have altered its behaviour. Each time I have reincorporated such bodies, I endured a period in which I would consider my judgement compromised. I cannot speak to a great astral being experiencing the same as a regular astral being like myself, however."

"So, the Reaper just taped Farrah to my soul on the way through the astral?"

"Yes," Shade said.

"And that's a normal thing?"

"On a cosmic scale," Shade said. "On the scale of even the two worlds you have inhabited, it is exceedingly rare."

"But it's happened before."

"Yes."

Jason was about to ask another question when his phone rang. It was Annabeth.

"I hope you're contacting me with good news, Mrs Tilden," Jason said.

"We haven't got her out yet, Mr Asano, but the International Committee has agreed to form a contingent to press the Lyon branch in person, after their encroachment into our territory. That means some of our people, plus some IC heavy hitters. And you, if you want in."

"When?"

"How quickly can you get to Bankstown Airport?"

"Very."

"Then I'd say pack a bag, but I understand that bags aren't really your thing. Once you reach the airport, call me and I'll give you more specific directions."

"I'll be there."

"Oh and Mr Asano?"

"Yes?"

"Miss Karadeniz went to bat for you in a very big way, today. I just thought you should know that."

## Chapter 312

# **Visually Distinctive Henchman**

After deliberating, Jason decided to only leave one of Shade's bodies behind, in order to keep tabs on things in his absence. He had no idea what he would face in France but when things inevitably went wrong, he wanted his options as full as possible. Before leaving for Sydney, he portalled to his sister's house. As he emerged from the portal, Erika gave him an unhappy look.

"Uncle Jason," Emi scolded.

He noticed that the family was sitting on the floor around his portal, puzzle pieces scattered everywhere.

"Did my portal arch come up under your puzzle?" he asked.

"Yep."

"Sorry. Maybe you can redo it at my place. I'd like you to stay there for a few days."

"Why?" Erika asked suspiciously.

"I'm going away for a little while. Probably a few days, if it goes well. I'd feel better if you were staying somewhere more secure."

"Back to the other universe?" Emi asked.

"No, Moppet," Jason said. "If only it were that easy. I'm going to France."

"What's in France?" Erika asked.

"A friend in need," Jason said. "I'll tell you all about it when I get back, but I'd feel a lot better if you moved into the houseboat until then."

"We're not just going to abandon our daily lives and hide out in your magic houseboat because you aren't here, Jason."

"I know," Jason said. "But knowing you're there, at least at night, would give me some peace of mind."

"I wouldn't mind sleeping in one of those cloud beds," Ian admitted, after which Emithrew up her arms and cheered.

"Cloud bed! Cloud bed!"

Erika groaned her reluctant capitulation.

"Fine," she said. "Under the condition that you answer the damn phone."

"I'm taking most of Shade's bodies with me," Jason said, "but I'm leaving one with Emi, just in case. He can reach me where phones can't."

Erika wrapped her brother in a hug.

"Are you doing something dangerous?" she asked

"Probably," he admitted.

"Just come back to us faster this time, okay?"

"I'll do my best."

"I'd rather you get someone better to help you and have them do their best," she said.
"You can be kind of hopeless."

"Harsh," Jason said with a chuckle. "As it turns out, though, that's exactly the plan."

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In the underground parking structure of the Network's Sydney branch, Miranda and Kylie were in Miranda's car. Miranda handed Kylie an envelope and a packet.

"The envelope is your instructions in detail," Miranda said. "Make sure you destroy it when you're done. The packet is for him."

"Is letting him out really the best way?" Kylie asked.

"What we're doing here requires a patsy," Miranda said. "He's gone after Asano before and if he's in one of our holding rooms that's a solid alibi. Don't worry, Kylie. You don't need to do anything to any of our people. You just need to let the Frenchman go. He is still network, after all."

Kylie nodded, although she still looked uncertain.

"Just remember the threat that Asano poses," Miranda said and Kylie's dull gaze grew sharp. "Good girl. Just remember, your envelope has a key card and door codes, none of which are tied to you. Memorise the codes and the security protocols and then destroy the envelope before you begin. Once you release the Frenchman and give him the packet, get out and destroy the key card as well."

"What will you be doing?" Kylie asked.

"I'm stuck with the rough end of this operation," Miranda said. "I need to deal with Asano without any of our people getting hurt."

"How?" Kylie asked. "He's so powerful."

"We've done a tactical analysis based on your recording," Miranda said. "Your contribution has been critical to protecting us from him. Now go; we need to move."

Kylie nodded and got out of the car and Miranda drove off.

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Jason portalled as close as he could get, not having been to Bankstown Airport before, then drove the remaining distance.

"Why didn't she arrive with me?" Jason asked Shade.

"You were delivered using the Word-Phoenix Token," Shade said, "and subject to its specific properties."

"So I was reborn on the same spot I was born," Jason said.

"Precisely," Shade said. "Given the results, it seems probable that your friend, Miss Hurin, was delivered into the world as a normal outworlder. Without a geographically specific inciting incident, such as the failed summoning that triggered your becoming an outworlder, she was likely delivered into this world at random."

"I guess my return wasn't a sufficiently impactful event to glom onto," Jason said.

"And here I thought I was special."

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The Bankstown airport was better suited to discreet private charters than Sydney International, which suited the Network's needs. Annabeth had sent Jason directions to avoid the passenger terminal and approach a small, quiet entrance to the airfield. She was startled to see his approaching car explode into darkness, only for him to stride out as the swirling darkness was sucked into his shadow.

"That's a little more flashy than other vehicle conjurations that I've seen," she said.

"My driver understands the most vital aspect of being an essence user," Jason said.

"Of all the things I learned in the other world, it stands above all the others."

"And what's that?" she asked.

"It's not about being good," Jason said. "It's about looking good."

"I'm going to regret having to deal with you, aren't I?" she asked.

"Very frequently."

Jason could feel Annabeth's worry about his attitude in her aura. When he forcibly set the tone light, he also felt her relief. Asya, unsurprisingly, had warned her colleagues about his reaction.

She led him toward one of the private hangars, pointing out one made of tan-painted aluminium. The sign listed it as belonging to the generic-sounding GDR Services, which was the corporate face of the Network's legitimate operations. Since involving the government, almost all of the Network's activity had been brought under that umbrella.

"You're coming to France?" Jason asked.

"Just seeing you off," Annabeth said. "I'm Operation Director for the Sydney branch. Heading up the coast to your hometown is one thing, but traipsing off to France is another. Keith Culpeper and Asya Karadeniz are committee level representation, which is over my head anyway; I just supplied some staffers. Michael Aram you met briefly."

"The guy I was talking to when the Frenchman ambushed me," Jason said.

"Yes," Annabeth said. "He's quite intimidated by you, so please don't make things hard on him. There's also Ketevan Arziani, who you've yet to meet. She's my right hand,

which means she gets to run off to France while I stay here and do the actual work. It feels like it should be the other way around. We're also sending a unit of four from Tactical Division. We can't spare any category threes, but these are category twos with experience in personal security."

They entered through the open hangar doors, where ground crew were loading luggage onto a private jet. Jason recognised Asya and Keith chatting with another pair, while the obvious security locked eyes on Jason and Annabeth as soon as they came into view.

Jason's attention was more arrested by the plane than the people. His magical senses revealed that magic was incorporated into the construction from the frame out.

"I'm glad to see that we can still impress someone who's been to a magical world,"
Asya said, watching his gaze linger over the plane. He turned to her, his face apologetic.

"I'm sorry about earlier, Asya," he said. "You did something to help me and I responded like a savage and I apologise. Also, thank you, which I should have said earlier instead of snapping at you. Not my finest hour."

"It's alright," she said.

"It's not, but I appreciate you saying."

"Maybe I can hold it over you the next time the Network needs a favour," Asya mused.

"Deal. How about we make some introductions and then you tell me about this plane? It's nice to meet you in the flesh, Mr Aram."

Jason offered his hand and Aram shook it. He had only spoken to Aram through Shade in the past, as a precaution against an ambush. It hadn't helped, since Jason had been ambushed be someone else entirely. Channelling his senses through his familiar was a distraction his enemy had used against him.

"I'm sorry I couldn't intervene that day," Aram said. "I saw them bundling you into the car after the category three left."

"You don't go fighting category twos when you're only a one, Mr Aram," Jason said. "Not unless you have a gold spirit coin and they're stupid enough to let you get real close."

"Gold?" Aram asked. "Is that the colour of a category four coin?"

Jason took out a gold spirit coin and flicked it into the air, the other essence users watching it like cats tracking a toy being dangled in front of them. Jason snatched it out of the air and held it up for them to see.

"I don't have a lot of these," he said, returning it to his inventory.

"We don't have any," Annabeth said. "The British have some from looting a category four ADE a few years ago."

Jason was introduced to the remaining people and then they boarded the plane.

Along with the Network's contingent were the plane staff, made up of the pilots and a pair of flight attendants.

"Fancy," Jason said, looking around at the lavish interior. There were only a handful of seats, along with a couch and a television on a low, long cabinet. Doors led to the cockpit in one direction and more of the plane's amenities in the other.

"Shade," Jason said. "How long until you can turn into one of these?"

"I imagine silver rank," Shade said, the others sharing looks as the voice came out of Jason's shadow. "The best I could manage right now would be ultralight aircraft."

"That's still pretty good," Jason said.

"This plane is a product of my department," Asya said as they took their seats. She claimed one directly facing Jason. "Research Division has been divorced from specific branches and brought under the umbrella of the International Committee. That way, breakthroughs are shared by the entire Network."

"It's part of a gradual progression by the Network away from the factionalisation of the past and towards truly becoming one organisation. This very trip demonstrates that there's still a long way to go."

"Unsurprisingly," Ketevan said, "The main resistance comes from the branches with the most power in the existing framework. The Americans, the Chinese, some of the older European branches."

Ketevan's formal title was Assistant to the Director of Operations, Sydney branch. Jason guessed that she was around thirty, with an athletic build, broad shoulders and short brown hair. Her features were more handsome than pretty, Jason suspecting that she would be deeply striking should she ever reach higher rank.

"So, what does your magic plane do?" Jason asked. "Can it shoot lightning?"

"No," Asya said with a laugh. "We went for more common use upgrades. It may not shoot lightning, but it can absorb it to help charge the batteries."

"That's pretty sweet," Jason said.

"The big advantages are general performance increases and the hybrid magicelectric power plant." Asya explained. "This plane is capable of low supersonic speeds, cruises at fifteen thousand metres and can circumnavigate the globe without stopping to recharge, all with zero emissions."

"And you harvested the materials from proto-astral spaces?" Jason asked.

"That's right," Asya said.

"What does it use for fuel?" Jason asked. "You don't have a lot of spare spirit coins, right?"

"A mix of regular electricity and lightning affinity gems," Asya explained. "One of the keys to efficient magical technology is to lean on the magic as little as possible. Let the technology do the work and use magic to skip over the places where the tech would otherwise bottleneck."

"Lightning quintessence and no lightning gun? Talk about your missed opportunity."

While Jason distracted himself with light banter, his insides were roiling. He was one of the few people for whom Farrah's return from the dead was not the most arresting point. His failure to be there for her as she was captured and subjected to ongoing suffering and indignity filled him with shame. The idea of failing to liberate her now filled him with fear.

These feelings were a cancer eating him up from the inside, even as he plastered on an unconcerned smile. Asya went along with his façade, although he could tell from her aura that she saw through it. She was doing her best to keep him distracted, which he appreciated.

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Miranda's satellite phone rang right on schedule.

"Well?" Adrien Barbou asked without a greeting.

"It's in motion," Miranda said. "Your man is being liberated as we speak. Just make sure that portal is ready to go."

"Just make sure you rendezvous with Sebastian first," Adrien warned. "If he isn't there, no portal."

"That wasn't the deal," Miranda said. "I've put everything in motion and there's no going back, now."

"Then I suggest you hope that your arrangements for Sebastian are sufficient," Adrien said. "What about the plane? Are you certain they won't detect anything?"

"The explosives are completely conventional," Miranda said. "They can sense all the magic they like and they'll get nothing. Are your people in place?"

"The EOA's people are on the water right now," Adrien confirmed. "So long as the flight path you gave us was accurate, they're where they need to be."

"I gave you everything you need to track the transponder," Miranda said. "In case they somehow mess up and don't detonate, I also had a timer placed. Even if your people don't come through, the Indian Ocean will do the job for us."

"While I appreciate the inclusion of a contingency, Ms Ellis, that attitude does not fill me with confidence," he said with rising scorn. "Trying to kill someone and walking away, assuming everything went to plan is the quality control of a Bond villain. I suggest you either learn to embrace thoroughness or find yourself a visually distinctive henchman and start building a death ray."

"Coming from the guy whose category three assassin couldn't kidnap one category two, even when he got the drop on him."

"I chose discretion," Adrien said. "There were only so many resources I could deploy unnoticed.

"Keep telling yourself that," Miranda said. "You just worry about your end of the plan and make sure that portal is ready."

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High above the Indian Ocean, the occupants of the Network's plane were relaxing into the twenty-two hour flight.

"And the waterfall just started up again?" Ketevan asked.

"Blasted me right out of the mountain," Jason said. "It felt like being shot from a cannon. It wasn't just water spewing out, either. A bunch more of those monsters came out but most died on impact with the ground."

"But you were fine," Asya said.

"Slow fall was the one power I'd actually used enough to have a decent handle on," Jason said. "Good thing, too, because I was all tangled up in arms and legs with the other guy, plus I'd just been fired out the side of a mountain. It's quite disorienting. Only a handful of the monsters survived by landing in the water and they still took some bad hits from that height, so we managed to finish them off."

"And they were shark crabs?" Ketevan asked.

"It's not a great monster," Jason said. "Tough carapace, and rough if it gets a hold of you with that mouth, but it's slow and clumsy. There's a sand variant that's even bigger and buries itself in sand. I fought one of those later, once I knew what I was doing."

"What's the biggest monster you ever saw?" Asya asked.

"Oh, this is a good one," Jason said, "I came across this one thing. It wasn't actually a monster but a magical, carnivorous plant. I never actually saw the whole thing because it was a giant root system. Shade, what was that thing called?"

"A blood root vine," Shade said.

"That's it, yeah. Blood root vine. It had been growing for centuries and was the size of a small town, but completely underground. You didn't realise you were over it until its tentacles burrowed up for you."

"That big?" Ketevan asked.

"Oh, yeah," Jason said. "You hadn't signed on at that point, had you Shade? You were still running the contest."

"The trials were not a contest," Shade said. "The contest was Mr Bahadir's contribution to the proceedings."

"True," Jason said. "I should explain from the start; it's not like we're going anywhere." Suddenly an explosion ripped through the plane.

## Chapter 313

#### Of Course It Was Him

Jason came to his senses, which were an incoherent storm of sensations as he tumbled wildly through the air. His head was ringing, wind roaring over his body and through his ears. All the could see was a spinning blur of sky.

His starlight cloak manifested and he righted himself with a jolt as he moved from a tumble to a controlled glide, the cloak spreading out to either side like wings of night. Getting control of his descent was far from a smooth process as he was so far above the clouds that the very concept of up and down was elusive in the blue expanse and the chaos of the disintegrating plane.

He could only have been out for a few seconds, since the plane was still falling out of the sky around him. It had broken into two main pieces but was also a cloud of loose debris. The cloak started intercepting stray shards of metal but his body was already a roadmap of cuts and bruises, along with two more significant injuries.

One of those injuries was from a scrap of twisted fuselage impaled into his abdomen. He was largely unconcerned, no longer having internal organs there. The scar the metal was digging into was proof he'd suffered worse and he paid it no more mind than the time it took to yank the chunk free of his body.

The other major injury was a deep slash to the side of his neck. If not for the combination of his exotic physique, bronze-rank power attribute and Colin's healing, it would certainly have killed him. The confluence of those factors made what would otherwise have been lethal an inconvenience at most. The magic imbued into the plane had already allowed it to inflict damage like an iron-rank weapon, and without his bronze-rank damage reduction, it may have taken his head clean off.

The remaining bruises, abrasions and lacerations were inconsequential to him, although not to his suit. It did not self-repair anywhere near as quickly as his armour and would be out of rotation for a while. His injuries would heal much faster, Colin's regenerative power already hard at work. It was most likely the reason he regained consciousness so fast after being knocked senseless by the blast.

Dark mist appeared around his body, clinging tenaciously to him even through his downward glide. When it vanished a few moments later, Jason was garbed in his full battle attire. Rather than the loose outfit dragging, the magic shifted it to act almost like a wing suit as it recognised the conditions and adapted. Once more he was delighted by the care Gilbert had put into the bespoke garb.

Grabbing a healing potion vial from his belt, he shoved the whole thing in his mouth and crunched down, the healing potion trickling down his throat. He didn't want to spill it and his bronze-rank damage reduction prevented the glass from cutting the inside of his mouth. He felt the healing power flood his system, supplementing Colin's efforts as the two major wounds started closing.

Spitting out broken glass and the small stopper, he pushed his aura senses to the limit as he looked around. There had been thirteen people on the plane, including himself, but he was only sensing four other auras. He had awakened immediately, so they should all be within his sensory range. The ones he couldn't sense were most likely dead.

He couldn't sense any normal-rank auras. The pilots and the flight attendants had probably died in the initial explosion. There had been six bronze-rankers, including himself, Keith and the four-man security team. Ironically, all but one of the other bronze-rankers seemed to have died, while all the iron-rankers survived.

Jason guessed that the source of the explosion was close to where the security team had been sitting on the plane. The other bronze-rankers, himself and Keith, were with the iron-rankers in different section of the plane.

Jason looked closer at the auras. At fifteen kilometres up, the air was freezing and it would be hard to breathe, if that was something he needed to do. The iron-rankers who did would have a harder time of it.

He sensed the only other bronze-rank aura close by. It was one of the security people, against Jason's expectation, which probably meant that Keith was amongst the dead. That man was in a similar position to Jason, having survived the blast due to his powers and luck. The atmosphere didn't appear to bother him and he was now using a slow fall power.

The three iron-rankers had fared much worse. He could tell from their auras that they were all injured and unconscious, plunging uncontrolled through the air. At least their incredible altitude gave Jason time to act.

"Your cloak's slow fall drains your mana exponentially as you include more people," Shade reminded Jason, who was angling his glide descent in the direction of the closest iron-rank aura. The parameters of Jason's weight-reduction power was something he had tested extensively in the course of his ongoing training to explore the limits of his abilities.

The wind roaring past his ears should have made Shade's words unrecognizable but Jason heard him clearly. His bronze-rank spirit attribute enhanced his perception enough that he could pick up the sounds before the high-altitude winds and their rapid descent

carried them away. No only that, it could filter out the extraneous noise, allowing Jason to ignore it and focus on what he wanted to hear.

This was not something anyone could do and was a result of sensory techniques that Farrah had taught him during his initial training. They had not had any real effect at the time, but his trust in her led him to diligently practise until he reached bronze rank and the results spoke for themselves.

Since he had found out she was alive, he had found himself constantly reminded of everything she had done for him. Much of it was groundwork he never understood the value of until months after her death. Even as he was falling from an exploded plane, he couldn't help but think of what he owed her. He was going to make sure that no one stole his chance to show his gratitude, regardless of what they put in his path.

"You have a suggestion?" Jason asked.

"I can help them arrest their fall," Shade said. "I cannot fly as fast as they are falling, however. You will need to get my bodies to them."

"On it."

One of the advantages of Jason's cloak obtaining a gliding power was an instinctive grasp of how to navigate a fall through the sky. Otherwise, he'd have been reduced to skydiving technique he'd picked up from watching action movies.

He angled himself to plunge down, employing his cloak just enough to impart the control he needed, along with deflecting tumbling debris. Compared to the insensible flailing of the unconscious iron-rankers, he was able to easily outpace them.

His first target was the most injured, which was Annabeth's assistant, Ketevan. All of the iron-rankers were in a very bad way, but he could sense her aura dim as her life teetered on the edge. She had a chunk of fuselage stuck in her gut, like Jason had suffered, but worse. She also lacked his rank and other advantages, making her wound far more dangerous than his.

He was careful in his approach, so as not to slam into her, getting a tap in the unmentionables from a wind-thrashed arm for his trouble. Pulling her close, he shoved a bronze-rank potion into her mouth and clamped it closed with his hand, smashing the vial as he'd done in his own mouth. The glass might cut her, but it was damage that would soak up very little of the potion's healing strength.

He kept his hand in place over mouth until he sensed the magic start to reinvigorate her waning life force. One of Shade's bodies crawled from Jason onto Ketevan, taking the form of a black parachute pack.

"Nice," Jason said. "Can you control the parachute while they're unconscious?"

"Of course."

"Wait until she recovers some more before pulling the chute," Jason said. He himself waited a little longer for the healing potion to do some repairs before reefing the chunk of debris from her abdomen. She woke with a scream, eyes confused as she gasped in the thin, rushing air.

"Go for it, Shade," he said and a black parachute opened up, yanking her away from Jason who continued to plummet downwards. He spotted Keith, who had suffered a similar slash to the neck as Jason but didn't enjoy Jason's advantages. He was a third of the way to decapitated, his clearly dead body trailing blood as it fell.

Aram and Asya received the same potion-parachute combo as Ketevan, except that Jason gave them iron-rank potions instead of over-ranked ones. Their injuries were not as life threatening, so a bronze-rank potion that would prevent them from using more potions for a good while was a poor choice. The stronger potion had helped pull Ketevan out of immediate danger, but until her body processed the residual magic, potions would be unable to heal her further.

Jason fed potions to each of the three iron-rankers and equipped them all with Shade parachutes. By the time he was done they still had not yet descended to the cloud layer. Shade controlled the parachutes to keep the iron-rankers close, while the bronze-ranker used his slow fall power to match their descent speed. He had strong lateral control that reminded Jason of Sophie's gliding power and he suspected the man to have a wind essence.

While the three iron-rankers recovered their senses, Jason sent the bronze-ranker a party invitation so they could communicate over the rushing wind. He didn't bother with the others because even though they had regained consciousness, they were too disoriented to accept the invitation. The bronze-ranker had participated in the incursion event with Jason, so he wasn't surprised by it.

## [Bruce Corwin] has been added your party.

Jason and Bruce discussed what to do next.

"That was a conventional explosive or we would have sensed it," Bruce said through voice chat. "If I was hitting someone without using magic, I'd have a follow-up team with magic aplenty to make sure the job was done."

"Sounds reasonable," Jason agreed. He was far from his field of experience and was willing to defer to the trained expert, even if they had missed the bomb.

"My guess would be a second aircraft, someone on a boat, or both," Bruce said.

"They may have even been tracking our transponder and triggered the explosion remotely."

"We should hope for a boat," Shade said. "I don't have enough bodies to make a boat viable for the open ocean if we hit rough weather. If our antagonists have chosen to supply one, then you will need to pacify them and seize it."

"I like that plan," Jason said. "Bruce, you keep an eye on this lot. The parachutes will take care of themselves, so you'll just need to handle any airborne threats. Is that in your skill set?"

"I have the powers for that," Bruce said confidently. "Should I be the one to go, though?"

"Can you take on a boat full of magical hostiles alone?" Jason asked.

"Can you?"

"I've dealt with sand pirates before," Jason said. "The water variety should be about the same, right?"

"Sand pirates?"

"Alright," Jason said. "I'm going to drop down and see if I can't secure you a landing zone."

Jason turned off his slow fall and angled his body down.

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Jason's sharp eyes picked out the yacht as soon as he dropped below the cloud layer.

"We've got a boat," he told Bruce through voice chat. "I'll probably drop out of voice range before I reach it, given the low magic. Seriously, though, who takes a luxury yacht to shoot down an aeroplane?"

"The French?" Bruce suggested. "We can't be certain that the boat you're seeing is involved, though."

"True, but I'd take those odds. I'll check it out before I do anything drastic."

He descended further as the ocean below and the boat floating in it became clearer to see. As he dropped down to a low altitude he spotted a swarm of small objects rising from the yacht. As they rose up to meet him he realised the they were drones.

They were not just technological objects but also magical, lighting up to his magic senses. As they drew closer, he spotted the shimmering magical bubbles around them and the glowing sigils carved into their surface.

"Are they little, magic attack drones?" he wondered. "That's kind of cool. Still, can't be having that. Pop out, if you would please, Gordon."

Gordon manifested beside Jason, keeping pace with Jason using a continual series of magic dashes. As Jason suspected, the drones moved up and started attacking, projecting rapid-fire streams of tiny needles imbued with lightning magic. The drones were, impressively, bronze-rank constructions, but their inundation of attacks proved a poor tactic against Jason. His cloak sheathed itself around him and his descent was not slowed at all as the attacks were expended harmlessly against his cloak.

The drones were steel wrapped in protective bubbles, on which Gordon went to work. His disruptive-force breams cracked the magical shields while his resonating-force beams made short work of the reinforced drones underneath. The four beams swept through the drone swarm in pairs, efficiently wiping out what Jason hoped was an outrageous wealth of magical devices.

As he drew closer to sea level at a rocket pace, more attacks launched from the boat below. These were not light attacks but a trio of shoulder-mounted rockets imbued with silver-rank magic. At first, it looked like they were going to fly right past him, and not even that closely. It seemed like they were quite carelessly aimed. Then they locked onto not Jason but Gordon.

Jason immediately recalled his familiar, not trusting Gordon's intangibility to endure the silver-rank magic he sensed from the rockets. As soon as Gordon was gone, the rockets stopped adjusting their trajectories and flew straight, making them easy to dodge. He was worried that they would go after the people above, but was out of voice range to warn them.

"Gordon, see if you can't grab the attention of those rockets and dog fight them down. Their tracking systems can't be that complicated."

Gordon reappeared and started dashing up after the rockets. Jason pulled out his old non-magical telescope. Slowing his descent into a glide for stability. He eyed off the yacht below, which he realised was even bigger than he originally thought. It was the class of profoundly expensive super yachts that even all his gold might not be enough to buy.

He picked out a shadow on the sun deck made by an awning, then used his cloak to shadow jump directly onto the yacht. He immediately reconjured his cloak, which blended him into the shadows as he listened to voices coming from the deck below.

"Where did he go?" one voice asked. "Why didn't the rockets go after him? They have magically enhanced tracking systems."

"How would I know?" a second voice asked. "You made a big deal about these weapons to the Network man and they don't do a thing."

"They're powerful weapons!" the first man insisted.

"Then maybe you got broken ones because these didn't do a thing," a third man said.

"You're taking his side? You told me just this morning how impressed you were with the drones."

Jason recognised that the three men were arguing in French. It was the result of his practise at actively listening to people to recognise the languages his power translated for him. It had been a reason to watch some of the foreign films he always told himself he should be watching instead of trashy action films. He ended up compromising by watching trashy, foreign-language action films.

The three men talking were silver-rankers, but not essence users. Their magic had the same feel as the EOA thugs that Vermillion had once talked him out of fighting. There were others around the yacht, which was no smaller or less well-appointed than his houseboat, at least from a non-magical perspective. The yacht was an ordinary vehicle, unlike the plane that had been taken out.

The bulk of the auras were bronze-rank, except for the three silvers continuing to argue on the deck.

"Where did he go?" one of them asked.

"You think I know? Maybe he turned invisible or teleported onto the boat."

"We need to find him before the boosts wear off. We shouldn't have taken them so early."

"We needed to fire the rockets."

"For all the good they did! I don't want to come back down in the middle of a fight. They said he was dangerous."

"We don't even know it was him."

"Of course it was him. You think we got lucky and he died in the plane explosion? If that was going to kill him, they wouldn't have sent us out here to finish him off with all these weapons that don't do a damn thing. Now we do it our way, so get everyone to start searching."

The three split up and started yelling orders to search the yacht to the other dozen crew Jason could sense, but it was unnecessary as Jason emerged from the shadows and dropped lightly to the lower deck, landing in front of the three men.

## Chapter 314

# The Price of Transgression

Jason had just dropped lightly down to the lower deck as the boat rolled under his feet on the open ocean. The three men were startled as the object of the search they just ordered alighted right in front of them. He pushed the hood of his cloak back off his head to reveal his face and they looked each other over.

Jason saw that the magic flowing through them was complicated and felt more like the magic of an item than a living thing. Essence users, vampires like Vermillion and true magical creatures like Stash and even monsters had a magic that felt alive. In these men, the magic was more like their body parts had been used as the material for inert magical items while those body parts were still attached.

Most intriguing to Jason was that the three men were flooded with a power that was artificially raising their rank. It felt very much akin to someone using a spirit coin, but the power was not draining out of them after only a few moments.

More people were arriving to form up behind the first three. They were all bronze-rank, with less complicated magic and without the power boost flowing through them. Their magic felt like the EOA thugs he hadn't fought at Vermillion's café. They were a variant of converted, which were magically modified people he had seen the Builder cult use. The Builder's examples had been more improvised, using a modified core with extremely negative side effects. The Builder's forcibly-implanted cores essentially hijacked the body and trapped the soul, leaving mindless drones.

The ones he had seen on Earth had critical differences. For one thing, his aura senses revealed that the soul was empowered, like an essence user's, rather then sealed away to serve as little more than a magical battery. The Earth converted were also more holistically imbued with magic, rather than it all stemming from a central core. He could sense the distinct magic in their flesh, their bones and even their skin.

There seemed to be two grades of converted. One was simpler, which was the bulk of the people he could sense on the yacht. The three leaders had more sophisticated magic inside them, along with whatever power was artificially raising them to silver rank.

Jason spoke to them as the group eyed him off. His voice was sober and almost soft, with none of its usual bombast. It nonetheless carried over the noise of water slapping into the boat, a trick of voice projection that he had picked up while learning to speak without using air from his lungs.

"My name is Jason Asano," he said, "and you've come here to kill me. You won't."

He subtly employed his aura to hold their attention without provoking them, although they were clearly on the verge of launching themselves at him.

"Here's what's going to happen instead," Jason continued. "You're going to try and kill me. I'm going to make an example of one of you and then offer the survivors the chance to surrender which, to be clear, means answering my questions and handing over this boat."

"You seriously think you can intimidate us into just giving up?" one of the three leaders asked.

"Not yet. I'd like it if I only have to kill one of you, but I imagine it will take all three of you before the others fall into line."

Jason mentally dubbed the three leaders as numbers One, Two and Three. He could learn their names if they were smart enough to surrender. They wore heavy seaman's clothes, heavy, warm and topped off with woollen beanies. Everyone on the yacht was a man and, aside from Jason, a heavily muscled one. It looked like someone had found a fishing crew at a gym with lax steroid abuse policies.

Under the clothes of the man Jason had mentally dubbed number one, a sigil of light started glowing. It looked to Jason exactly like a magic tattoo. Jason felt magic surge from the tattoo and into the man, who was suddenly propelled forward into a magical charge.

A second tattoo lit up on the man's arm, which was wreathed in fire as it passed through Jason's empty cloak. Jason had already shadow jumped through it, moving the moment he sensed the surge in magic. In another shadow a freshly conjured cloak hid him as he examined the man more closely with his magical senses.

Unlike the body-horror converted of the Builder, the Earth converted seemed to have the power to accept multiple magic tattoos. Normally one was the limit and the ability to have more could turn these converted into second-rate essence user knock-offs. They would have few and less sophisticated powers, but if they could be produced in high numbers it would be an incredible force.

He could only sense a few tattoos on each of them, though, and he knew from experience that magic tattoos had much longer cooldowns that essence powers. Of course, it was possible that limit had been broken as well.

The three were looking around for where Jason had vanished to, shouting at their subordinates to spread out and search.

"So much for making an example of us," said Number One. "He flees at first sign of trouble."

A line of darkness snaked from the shadow cast by the deck above, an arm holding an ornate black and red dagger. It made two shallow cuts on Number One's leg and tried

to withdraw, but was grabbed by the silver-rank reflexes of Number Two. Despite the shadow arm's intangible nature, a small tattoo on the back of the man's hand was glowing and the hand had no trouble gripping Jason's shadow arm. The arm and the dagger both vanished as Jason relinquished the conjured items.

"He can hide in the shadows," Number Three said. "Enhance your vision."

"That will cost us boost time," Number One pointed out.

"Which gets us nothing if we spend it poking uselessly into corners," Two pointed out, supporting Three. The eyes of Two and Three started glowing bright blue, as did the previously invisible tattoos around their eyes. One's eyes reluctantly lit up after. Looking around again, they spotted Jason standing casually in the shadows.

Once their gaze locked onto him, Jason ducked through a nearby pair of sliding glass doors that opened at his approach to reveal the yacht's main saloon. It was a larger version of the bar lounge on Jason's houseboat, which Jason dashed into while casting a spell on Number One.

"Bleed for me."

The doors slid closed behind him, only to open as the trio rushed past their onlooking subordinates.

"Should we help?" one of the henchmen asked.

"Don't get in our way," Number Two warned them.

Inside the saloon, soft lights and the tinted windows made for few shadows and Shade's bodies started moving around the room to give Jason shadow jump options. The saloon furniture would give Jason the advantage when he could just shadow-jump around it. Combined with the room's extravagant size, he decided it would make a good place to face off with the trio of converted.

They chased him in and he cast a second spell on Number One, before jumping from one of Shade's bodies to another and casting a third. The trio were clearly used to working as a team, spreading out for maximum coverage and limiting Jason's room to manoeuvre. When Number two started using his ability to strike intangible objects to attack Shade's bodies, Jason decided to switch it up again.

His primary goal was achieved, with the affliction suite in place on Number one, so it became a matter of waiting. Recalling Shade's bodies, two of which were a little ragged from taking hits, he went through a door and deeper into the yacht.

The trio chased him through the door, up stairs and out onto the top deck, where he leapt right off and out over the water. Using his shadow arm and slow fall, he reached out to the lower deck and pulled himself back aboard, continuing the merry chase.

The trio pulled their subordinates into the pursuit with shouted orders, sending them scattering across the yacht to keep an eye out. In the mean time, Number One was increasingly suffering from the afflictions Jason had locked in place.

"Why aren't I healing?" he asked out loud. His veins and flesh were increasingly becoming deathly black as the necrosis claimed his body at an accelerating rate.

"Because you don't get to heal anymore," Jason said reappearing in front of them.
"You're dead and you just don't know it yet."

"Fix him," Number Two demanded. His body language screamed that he was itching to leap after Jason once more but he held himself back. He clearly understood that Jason was more likely slip away than hold still to have a remedy shaken out of him.

"I can't help him, now," Jason said. "He's dead, whatever I do."

"If I die, you're coming with me," Number One snarled.

"We both know that isn't true," Jason said. "Those of you still alive have another chance to surrender."

"Keep chasing him," Number One snarled, fearless even in the face of death. "All that teleporting has to cost him. His mana can't last forever."

Two and Three did as instructed, resuming the pursuit as Jason went back to fleeing all over and through the huge yacht. At one point, two of the bronze-rank henchmen chased him through a door to a dead end and he used his aura to suppress theirs, debilitating them with a soul attack. As he rushed past them, they each pulled out an injector even as they doubled over in pain and jabbed themselves in the legs.

The magic of their bodies advanced immediately to silver rank, as if they'd both just consumed spirit coins, but there were also differences. Their auras remained at bronzerank and felt divorced from the magic of their bodies. Jason's soul attack was not repelled but ignored, as if their bodies were now operating independently from their souls, operating on animal instinct. The men were slack-faced with empty eyes, more like the converted the Builder used.

They stood up straight with no indication of pain, even as wild magic coursed through their bodies. Whatever boost they injected themselves with was clearly less stable than what the trio of leaders had taken, and with far greater side effects. Jason quickly got himself away from the spooky, zombie-like henchmen.

The pursuit eventually brought Jason back to the body of Number One, who had expired on the lower deck. Two and Three arrived to see Jason draining the remnant life force from Number One's corpse.

"As your life was mine to reap, so your death is mine to harvest."

"You have the choice," Jason called out to them as the corpse at his feet withered to a dried-out husk. "Surrender, or one of you is next. With you guys as my mana supply, I can do this all day. Can you say the same about those boosts you're on? How long will they hold out, exactly? Is there blowback afterwards?"

Number Two snarled but Three grabbed his arm.

"He's not wrong," Three said fiercely. "We aren't catching him and we used our boosts early so we could use those rockets."

"You want to surrender?" Two asked incredulously. "After what he just did to Henri?" "He'll do the same to us."

"No, he'll die."

Two yanked his arm free and rushed at Jason, who didn't run. He held up his hand, his palm slick with blood as leeches started spraying like water from a garden hose. Shade appeared behind Jason, who stepped back, rising up from Number Two's own shadow and making two shallow cuts with his dagger. Two was madly yanking leeches from his face as he yelled more in panic that pain.

Three and henchmen following the noise watched in horror as Two staggered around while Jason added more spells. Rather than run them around again, Jason was using Colin for a more brutal approach, rapidly overloading Two with afflictions. Some of the henchmen moved to go after Jason but Three ordered them back. Two's gaze fell on the ocean water and he had a revelation, launching himself toward the edge of the yacht.

"Drop," Jason commanded and the leeches fell instantly to the deck as Two threw himself over the side.

"Come back," Jason commanded. The seawater splashed onto the deck by ocean swells was already having a negative effect on his leeches, killing off a decent number of them. A bloody strip emerged from the pile of Colin and flew over to Jason's hand. The leeches melted into a ball of blood and were drawn along the bloody rag as if sucked through a straw.

Jason then went to the side of the boat where Two was treading water, glaring at him with a face already blackened with necrosis. At bronze-rank, just as at iron, Colin remained the most powerful weapon in Jason's arsenal.

With killing number one, Jason had wanted to drag it out, to show the others his suffering. With number two he wanted to close it out quickly and demonstrate the threat he posed, so he cast another spell.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

Two screamed as Punition piled on damage for each of the many afflictions on him.

"We surrender!" Three called out. "Can't you let him live?"

"When I warned you," Jason said without turning around, "it was not because I would refuse to stop. It was because I didn't have the option. When I fight, I fight to kill. My powers offer me no alternative."

He turned around to face Three.

"There is a price for transgressing against me. How many more of you are willing to pay it?"

He glanced back at the man suffering in the water, rising and falling with the ocean swells.

"Feed me your sins,"

Jason drained Two's afflictions and left new ones in their place, which glowed as the started annihilating him from the inside out. Two was strong and resolute, but the transcendent damage was where the screaming began.

"We surrender, damn you!" Three called out. "Stop it!"

"I can't stop it," Jason said, his voice devoid of mercy. "I can only finish it. *Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death.*"

Behind Jason transcendent light shone down on Two. When it faded shortly thereafter, nothing was left by empty ocean.

- [Elite Converted] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.
- 413 [Euros] have been added to your inventory.
- [Satellite Phone] has been added to your inventory.
- [Cellular Phone] has been added to your inventory.

Jason turned his gaze on Number Three.

"It's time for us to have a talk."

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"How did you do that?" Bruce asked, looking at the EOA thugs lined up on the deck. Most were on their knees, although two were on their backs looking decidedly unwell.

"We had an amicable chat," Jason said, "and they decided the most prudent course was to come quietly."

"Amicable," Bruce said, looking at the black stain on the deck. He knew the smell of death and the black residue stank like the Devil's armpit.

Bruce had been anxious about what they would be dropping into after the powerful rockets had come their way. He'd been able to shoot them down before they struck the semi-conscious iron-rankers but it left him with trepidation about what awaited them below.

Once he dropped back into range of Jason's voice chat, he was told to land directly on the top deck. His wind gliding power let him do so without trouble and the strange, self-guiding parachutes did so almost as easily.

Both sides had people in recovery. The Network's iron-rankers were given another round of potions, except for Ketevan who remained the most badly injured but was not yet ready for another. On the EOA side, their leader was clearly exhausted, while two of his men couldn't even stand, their auras flickering unstably.

"I told you at the start what surrender means," Jason said to Three. "I take the boat and you talk. If I think you're holding back, we go back to the other thing."

"I'll talk," Three said. "Just leave my people alone."

"Your people?" Bruce snarled. "You killed our people. My team. My friends. I should execute the lot of you."

"Don't vent your rage on the snake's body," Jason said. "Save it for when you take the head. Which Number Three here is going to tell us all about."

"Number Three?" Bruce and Number Three asked simultaneously.

"Sorry, I was just calling you that in my head," Jason said. "What's your name?"

"Reynaldo Agostinelli."

"Alright, Reynaldo," Jason said. "I have a lot of questions. Bruce, use the sat phone on the table there to check in with your people so we can figure out our next move."

Bruce picked up the phone, only for it to start ringing.

"Expecting a call?" Jason asked Reynaldo.

"It will be the man who sent us," Reynaldo said. "The Network man, Adrien Barbou. We should have checked in by now."

Jason knew that Barbou was the Operations Director of the Lyon branch, Annabeth's direct counterpart. Shade had not managed to spot him in the time he had been watching the Lyon branch.

"The Network set this up?" Bruce asked, disbelievingly. "Why would he work with the EOA?"

"I don't know," Reynaldo said. "They tell us what to do, not why."

Jason took the phone from Bruce and answered it.

## Chapter 315

# The Time For Bold, Decisive Men

"Twelve hundred kilometres is the best you can do?" Miranda complained. "And you have to wait an hour between portals? That's pathetic."

"Pathetic?" Remy asked incredulously. "Let's see your portal power, bitch."

"Remy, calm down," Sebastian said, then turned on Miranda. "And you keep your damn mouth shut. You don't like it, go catch a plane."

"I though we'd be portalling straight to France," she said. "Where even are we?"

"Kakadu National Park," Remy said. "We're in one of the most beautiful places on Earth and you complain. One of the most iconic locations in your own damn country and you don't even recognise it. How self-absorbed are you?"

They were atop a high rock formation, overlooking a river forest gorge. In the far north of Australia it was still scorching hot despite the season and the winds blowing across their high vantage offered pleasant relief.

"There isn't an essence user in the world that can portal sixteen thousand kilometres," Sebastian told Miranda. "There's only a handful of people that can do a tenth of that."

"I've heard the Chinese have someone they're trying to get to category four who can do a few thousand at a time," Remy said, "but that might be just a rumour. Maybe a category four could do sixteen thousand, so feel free to leave and go find one."

"So much for the great portal master Barbou promised," Miranda said. "Nothing but excuses."

"Ellis," Sebastian warned. "One of us is going to keep your mouth shut. I recommend it's you."

"I got you out of that place and this is how you treat me?" Miranda asked.

"You got me into that place.," Sebastian said. "When you told us about the outworlder, you failed to mention that he was a god damn monster."

"It's not my fault a category three can't take out one category two. You even had the jump on him and you messed it up," Miranda said. "I'm starting to think I've joined a ship of fools."

Sebastian and Remy shared a glance. Remy nodded and Sebastian shrugged, before raising his arm in Miranda's direction. Tiny metal hummingbirds were conjured all around him, buzzing forward to plunge their needle beaks into Miranda's flesh. Sebastian followed up by dashing forward and kicking her square in the chest, sending her sailing over the side of the rock formation, bouncing off it time and again as she tumbled.

"She was right," Sebastian said. "It is easy to take out a category two."

"It's for the best," Remy said. "No way we're hopping all the way across Asia and Europe without killing her. A personality like that is practically a suicide note."

"Adrien won't be happy about losing her contacts still in the Australian branch if the outworlder survives," Sebastian said.

"You think he will? The EOA sent a dozen guys, armed up with drones and those silver-rank tracker rockets. And that's for after his plane gets blown out of the sky."

"That little prick is a survivor," Sebastian said. "A hundred says he lives."

"I'll take that action."

"We should let Adrien know about Ellis," Sebastian said.

"I don't think he'll be worried," Remy said, pulling out his phone. "The only thing he really wanted out of her was getting you free."

Remy held up his phone, peering at it.

"No signal," he said. "Can you give me the sat phone?"

Sebastian looked at the spot Miranda, who had the satellite phone, had gone over the edge.

"Uh..."

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When Jason answered the satellite phone, he didn't have a chance to speak before the person on the other end started speaking in French.

"Why haven't you checked in?" the voice on the phone end demanded.

"I'll tell you all about it when we meet in person," Jason said.

There was silence on the other end for a long time until the same voice spoke again.

"Am I speaking to Mr Asano?"

"You are," Jason said. "Am I speaking to Mr Barbou?"

"So you got them to talk. I would have much preferred you just slaughter them all."

"We don't have to take such drastic action, Mr Barbou."

"Is that so?"

"It is," Jason said. "Now that I'm alive, your prisoner is of little use to you, if any.

Whatever you might force from her, the Network will get from me quite freely. I'm going to make you an offer, which I hope you take."

"And what's that?"

"Give her up to me, as soon as I arrive in France. I won't retaliate and I'll make sure that the Lyon branch doesn't get shut out from all the things I'll be providing the Network."

"That doesn't sound like something the other branches or the International Committee will sign off on," Barbou said.

"I don't care," Jason said. "I have what everyone wants, which means I get what I want, so long as I'm willing to share."

"That's a peaceful offer from the man who killed a bunch of people on television."

"I'm trying to do things better. Less killing, more diplomacy."

"What's to stop you from coming after my head the moment you have her?"

"My need to make a deal ever again. However all this plays out, word is going to get around about what happens between you and me. If I turn on you immediately, my word becomes worthless. That puts my arrangement with the Network under threat, along with any other deal I might want to make in the future."

"So, you offer forgiveness?" Adrien asked.

"Call it what you like. I've been trying to teach myself to let go of the past so it doesn't poison my future. You and I can go at it, but I don't care about taking you down. I care about getting her away from you. If letting you go gets me that and coming after you just endangers her, I'm happy to take her and never see you again."

"You do remember that I tried to have you kidnapped, then I tried to have you killed. Minutes ago."

"You're not the first on either count," Jason said. "I'm still alive and have a new boat, which is how it usually goes. It's not always a boat, just whatever valuable stuff they have on them. Look, give her up. She has no value to the Network while I'm in play, which is why you're trying to kill me but that isn't working out. I can't speak for the Network, but as you said, you've come at me twice now and you've seen the results. I think you're beginning to understand what happens if you don't turn her over to me."

"I have to say that your timing is unfortunate." Adrien said. "The truth is, Mr Asano, that if you made me this offer as little as three days ago, I'd probably have taken it. Unfortunately, the pressure coming down from the International Committee forced me to take steps I can no longer walk back. Otherwise, I never would have risked making these arrangements personally and you and I would have never had this scintillating chat. The Network won't let me go, even if you do, and I've made promises I need your fellow outworlder to keep."

"There's no place you can hide that I won't find sooner or later, Barbou. There's no place you can run that I can't follow."

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure," Adrien said. "Some things are beyond even your abilities, as wondrous as I'm sure they are."

"There are still ways we can settle this," Jason said. "I know you don't think so, but you actually can still walk this back."

"Mr Asano, I think you're about to find that even you have limits."

"Pushing my limits is kind of my thing. If you continue on this path, then you will be the means by which I demonstrate that to the magical world at large. Don't become the example for the next person."

"And I thought I was arrogant," Barbou said. "Good hunting, Mr Asano."

Jason looked at the phone in his hand after Adrien ended the call, resisting the urge to crush it in his hand. He handed the phone to Bruce.

"Unless he was lying," Jason told him, "Barbou is going rogue from his own branch.

Contact your people. This is going five kinds of sideways."

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Adrien was standing on the roof of the abandoned water treatment plant that sat above the subterranean black site. Asano's continued survival was a frustration but a result he had accounted for in planning his contingencies. The extra days that Paul had bought him with the International Committee was enough to move his loyalists from the black site before Paul realised he was turning on the Network altogether. Once they extracted the asset securely, he could leave it behind.

He made another call on his phone to his EOA contact. The head of the cell he was working with absurdly insisted on going by the code name Heron.

"Heron, your people failed," Adrien said without preamble.

"Your phone etiquette is very poor," Heron said. "Perhaps it was not me that failed but the weapons you supplied."

"We can ascribe blame later," Adrien said.

"Says the man who's idea of saying hello is to accuse my people of failure."

Adrien rolled his eyes.

"I apologise, Heron. Right now, we need to focus on what comes next. Asano survived, which means the IC will come down on us so that he doesn't break the deal with them."

"You mean come down on you," Heron said.

"He took at least some of your people alive, Heron, and they're talking. If they know about me, you can be certain they know about you. Look, we've been working on this for a long time and the outworlder is just a bonus. You want the knowledge and expertise of my people on essence magic for the Engineers of Ascension."

"If we can bring the secrets of essence magic to the EOA," Heron said gleefully, "we'll be propelled to the top levels of the EOA power structure. So long as you hold up your end. Access to the network's grid. The means to enter incursion spaces. The ways to use essences."

"My bridges are burned, Heron," Adrien said. "Our fates are connected, now. Only by making you thrive will I thrive in turn."

"Alright," Heron said. "What do you need?"

"I need a team of your elite people to move the asset. She's a security risk and not all of the personnel here are loyal to me over the Network."

"Sending them right to the black site is an overt move," Heron said.

"The time for secrecy is over," Adrien said. "It's the time for bold, decisive men to take action."

"Do we really need her?" Heron asked.

"My people can give you everything the Network has," Adrien said. "She is the key to the things the Network doesn't. Yet. The other outworlder is alive and the Network is realising the potential he offers. If we don't have her, the EOA falls behind all over again."

"Very well," Heron said. "I actually have a strong team on standby, close to your location."

"Heron," Adrien said. "Did you have a strike team ready to take me out if I double crossed you? I respect that."

Adrien frowned as he sensed magic from below. It shouldn't be possible for him to sense the painstakingly contained magic unless something went very wrong with the magical array.

"Heron, I think you should tell your people to hurry."

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A disgruntled-looking Sebastian reached the top of the outcropping after climbing all the way back up.

"Are you sure you couldn't portal down?" Sebastian asked.

"I have never been to the bottom of this outcropping," Remy said. "You cannot portal where you have never been. This is a rule of portals. You know this."

"Then couldn't we have both gone down and portalled to our next destination from there?"

Remy though it over for a moment.

"Yeah, that could have worked. Did you get it?"

Sebastian took a fistful of smashed electronics from his pocket.

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Farrah hadn't quite completed her mental map of the facility's magic array, but once they started prepping to move her to another facility she knew she had to act. The first part was the hardest, taking out a pair of bronze-rank guards. Fortunately, one panicked when she made her move and unleashed his strongest attack and she shoved the one she was choking out with her handcuffed arms into its path. Her arms were burned a little but she ignored it. Fire wouldn't have hurt her if her powers were active.

While the second guard was aghast at killing the first, Farrah took advantage of his shock and moved in, making a weird standing jump because of her leg chains. She grabbed his face, yanking his weight onto one leg as she hooked her own leg behind it and pushed forward. He was slammed into the concrete floor with a jolt and she smashed his head repeatedly into it until she was sure.

That gave her clothes and the keys to her manacles, but not her suppression collar. Forcefully removing it would most likely kill her, so she would have to get a key. The man in charge of the facility, Barbou, had been the one questioning her and kept the key on his person at all times. She would either need to find him or some magical resources to knock out a skeleton key, but she had never found a magical workshop in either her fact-finding escape attempts or as they had dragged her around the facility.

She found some tools in a maintenance storage cupboard and claimed a hammer and chisel. They allowed her to start making small but critical changes to the magic engravings on the walls, carefully altering the flow of magic in the facility's whole magical array. The magical flow was accumulating and redirecting in ways it was not designed for, and enough small changes would get big results as the excess magic stacked up.

It was a delicate balance as she needed to avoid just breaking the array and having the power drain out. The goal was for magic to gather at roughly the same rate in various points around the facility. That is was working was impressive, given the simple tools at her disposal.

Fortunately, this type of magic was her speciality and before the alarm went out and they realised she was loose, the facility was experiencing areas of dangerous magical build up. Even as security personnel started pounding through the halls, explosions started reverberating through the underground facility.

Personnel were rushing through corridors filled with concrete dust from the repeated explosions. The staccato flickering of the lights was inducing panic; each moment of darkness was a reminder of how far underground they were. Whole chunks of floor, wall

and ceiling had become rubble underfoot. In the chaos, her stolen uniform and cap allowed her to blend in, just another panicked staffer.

After setting in motion the chain reaction of blasts from the magical array, she had no more control. She was even caught in the periphery of a blast and slammed into the opposite wall, almost falling unconscious.

She wanted to evacuate with the actual staff, but the exits were the one place security was making strict checks. Instead, she managed to find her way to Barbou's office, in which she had been questioned several times as he tried carrot over stick. She didn't expect the key to be present but she spent a few precious moments searching the desk, just in case.

After unsurprisingly not finding it, she made for the strange room that held the non-magical elevating platform. She knew she wouldn't get it to operate and didn't try, instead chiselling the lock on the ceiling hatch and pulling herself up and through. There she found a metal rungs set into the concrete that led up the long shaft and started to climb.

At the top she used the chisel to pry open the doors and then forced them open with raw strength. She felt weak without her strength-enhancing ability but she still had the power attribute of an essence user at the peak of bronze.

Shoving open the doors, she staggered into the light. She was in some kind of abandoned building, which was surrounded by a metal mesh fence and then forest, with only one road leading away. Unfortunately, she was not alone.

Barbou was standing with a dozen heavily muscled men and women in dark clothes. "Well," Barbou said. "Aren't you industrious?"

## Chapter 316

#### **Technical Issue**

The transport helicopter touched down at a small airstrip in Sri Lanka. It was small and set amongst an expanse of grassland. The air was hot, thick and heavy with a tang of fuel, although the helicopter stirred it up. There was one hangar and a small, prefab office building. The runway itself was a line of hard-packed earth rather than asphalt.

Jason and the other survivors of the plane attack disembarked the helicopter and were met by Chathura, a local Network agent. He started leading them toward the smaller building.

"We're still prepping your plane," Chathura said loudly over the noise of the windingdown helicopter. "You'll be wheels up in twenty-five."

"We were negligent and only looked out for magical threats," Bruce told him. "I hope you'll be more thorough than we were."

Bruce did not hide from his failure, being part of the security team which had failed to detect the bomb. Their oversight had gotten his team and a committee member killed, along with the crew of the plane. Once things calmed down enough that he had time to think, guilt had overtaken Bruce. He didn't shy away from it, instead owning the shame and letting it feed his resolve to do better in the future.

Jason did not feel guilt at having been the impetus for the trip in the first place. He was ready to pay the price to get Farrah back, be that a fresh stain on his conscience from a killing spree or sacrificing some pride and giving up on vengeance. Unfortunately, he wasn't the one paying.

The Network was at a body count of eight. While Jason felt responsible, as the impetus for the trip, he did not assign himself the blame. That, he placed on the people that took Farrah and planted the bomb; Adrien Barbou, anyone that worked for him and anyone he worked for.

Jason admitted to himself that he was glad his offer to let Barbou walk away in return for Farrah had been refused. He knew that he shouldn't be. Intellectually, he understood that if the offer was accepted, Farrah would be free and clear. But inside him was a visceral instinct that urged him to kill everyone between him and Farrah until she was free and all the people that hurt her were dead.

That, however, was an implausible power fantasy. He'd indulged in them before, to the cost of himself and others. He thought he could outplay Elspeth Arella and Lucian Lamprey, both seasoned politicians. The reality was that he got himself tortured and

Sophie almost condemned to a life of exploitation and depravity. He'd only escaped through luck and protected Sophie by hiding under the skirts of Emir. He'd caused the problems and failed to be the solutions.

He was determined to avoid the same mistakes with Farrah. He was going to play it straight and clean, doing whatever it took to get her free. No tricks, no shortcuts. Any sacrifice he had to make personally, he would. His concern was the people around him. The aircrew hadn't deserved their fate, just for flying him.

He had a burning desire to make Barbou suffer everything done to Farrah ten times over but schooled himself to keep focused on the actual objective. Freeing Farrah took precedence over everything. His desires, his pride and his emotional satisfaction were nothing compared to that. He was still willing to let Barbou go if it guaranteed Farrah's safety and freedom.

First, he needed to reach France. The airstrip did not inspire confidence. The lush, tropical surrounds were gorgeous, but not what he wanted in an international airport.

"Seems a little out of the way," Jason said.

"Strictly speaking, this airstrip doesn't exist," Chathura explained. "It was built as part of a poaching operation but the poachers are long gone."

"Are you sure?" Bruce asked.

"Very," Chathura said. "Before we started working with the government, this place was a way station for us for dodging customs. We still use it when we don't want the government dogging us with questions. They like to be involved, which means slowing everything down."

"We appreciate the alacrity," Asya said. She had regained her senses on the yacht while awaiting the helicopter and all the surviving Network members had been healed up, at least physically. Emotionally, they remained shaken from the ordeal.

"Your Director of Operations is waiting to talk to you," Chathura said. "We have a video conference set up in the office. It seems that you weren't the only ones to experience some excitement."

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Farrah didn't fight like Sophie or Jason. Their power sets encouraged agility and speed. Farrah's powers gave her enhanced strength and heavy stone armour, which lent itself to a very different style, more akin to Humphrey's. That was not to say that she was any less skilled, at least than Jason. What might seem like a crude, brawler style at first glance made expert use of weight, leverage and strength.

Constrained by the collar Farrah did not have her full, power-driven might, nor the mass of her stone armour. That was not enough to invalidate her fighting style, though. Her peak bronze attributes were superior to those of the EOA thugs, and even if they weren't, she'd fought monsters and people both that met or even matched her strength and weight.

There were more ways in which Farrah was unlike Jason. She didn't stop to banter, immediately leaping into action. She hurled herself forward, charging toward the closest thug like a freight train. Dropping her centre of gravity right before impact, he tumbled over her like she'd hit him with a car, the impact barely slowing her down. As he fell to the ground behind her, she was already crashing into the next thug. It was a glancing blow as she spun around and behind him, with an elbow to the ear as a going away present.

Her goal was Barbou and the key to her suppression collar. She knew that if she didn't get it off, there was no overcoming this many enemies. Breaking through the two thugs opened a path and she made straight for him, who raised a hand and blasted air in her direction.

Recognising the shimmer of a compressed air attack, she juked left. If it had caught her square she would have been sent tumbling back. As it was, it still arrested her forward momentum. It was enough time for the rest of the thugs to charge in for the attack while Barbou launched himself into the air and started hovering out of her reach.

Farrah was not a large woman, but she was stronger than the burly men coming at her. Where Jason or Sophie might dance around them, Farrah met offence with offence. The first thug was left staggering off, clutching an elbow now bending the wrong way. The next collapsed with a knee in the same condition while the third one hadn't guarded his face well enough and had a pair of thumbs dig into his eyes.

Despite her good start, Farrah was fighting against the inevitable. The leader of the thugs ordered half his men to dose up and they injected themselves with a boost that ramped them from bronze-rank to false-silver while the rest kept her occupied.

This was a special purpose squad, made up entirely of elite converted. They did not lose their rationality when they boosted and they had magic tattoos, adding a handful of magical abilities to their options. One used a power to conjured a rope that he used to catch one of Farrah's arms it. Once Barbou was out of reach the fight was already over. She made them pay a blood price for victory, though.

When she was finally unconscious on the ground, Barbou descended back down.

"Thanks for your help," the leader of the EOA said sarcastically. His name was Pavel and his French was lightly accented with Russian.

"Your elite team leaves a lot to be desired," Barbou said, looking around. "One small woman with her powers suppressed took out half of your team."

Fully half of the thugs were sitting or lying around, being tended by the rest. One of the ones that hadn't boosted himself had been killed outright.

"If only we had an essence user to help us," Pavel said. "I lost a team member because you lacked the courage to fight one power-suppressed woman. The survivors of my team will heal in time, but I think you need to supply some of those famous magic potions the Network has."

"You think I just carry a bunch of healing potions around?" Barbou said.

"A self-serving prick like you?" Pavel said. "Yeah, I think you do."

Barbou gave Pavel a flat look, then broke into a chuckle.

"Yes, very well."

The abandoned water treatment plant had the two large vans that the EOA team had arrived in parked just inside the gate. Barbou moved over to a storage shed that looked like it hadn't opened in decades, but the door slid open on a perfectly lubricated rail with barely a rumble of ball bearings. Inside was Barbou's own car, a high-end Mercedes. He retrieved a padded box from the glove compartment containing a rack of vials, which he handed over to Pavel.

"Get your men on their feet and we'll head straight for the fortress."

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"...we have her in custody," Annabeth continued, "but Sebastian was out of the building before anyone was the wiser. Miranda was quite thorough in her preparations. Miranda herself was long gone before any of it happened and we have no idea where she is. If she's smart she'll stay under whatever rock she's crawled under and never come out. If I get my hands on her I'm going to tear her hair out and strangle her with it."

"So, what now?" Ketevan asked.

"Asano," Annabeth said. "I assume that your intention is to continue to France?" "It is," Jason said.

"A plane is being made ready as we speak. The good news is that the Lyon branch had contacted the IC and is ready to fully cooperate. The bad news is that their operations director has gone rogue. The international Committee is assembling a response force to hunt him down; a multi-branch group from across Europe. If he's defected to an EOA cell then he will potentially hand off dangerous secrets. Not just those of an Operations Director, either."

"He's trying to pass my friend off to the EOA since she has limited value to the Network?" Jason asked.

"That may only be the beginning, from what I'm learning," Annabeth said. "You'll be briefed further on landing. For now, get on your plane and go. If the rest of you would go, I'd like a word with Asano."

Chathura led the other out, leaving Jason alone with Annabeth on the screen.

"Thank you for getting our people out," Annabeth said. "Mr Corwin said that if it weren't for you, you and he would have been the only survivors."

"I'm sorry I couldn't do anything for the others," Jason said. "And don't let Bruce sell his contribution short. My familiar was only able to stop one of the rockets that went by me. If Bruce hadn't stopped the others, they would have found targets. Without him, there really wouldn't have been other survivors."

"Thank you for saying," Annabeth said. "There was one other thing I wished to discuss, which was the security of your family. It's unlikely but not impossible that Miranda, Sebastian or both will attempt to use them as some kind of leverage. I've dispatched a security team to watch over them and I suggest you enact whatever measures that you have in place."

"Thank you, Anna. I set things in motions the moment you told us that Sebastian was loose."

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Emi arrived in front of her mother's Castle Heads restaurant on a jet black motorised scooter. As she was taking off her helmet, she was approached by a pair of uniformed police officers.

"Miss, I'm afraid you can't ride a motorised scooter in New South Wales, especially at your age. I know that a lot of stores are claiming it's legal, but that isn't the case."

Emi absently meandered with a thoughtful expression, placing the officers between herself and the scooter. They turned to watch her.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, officers," she said, scratching her head with one hand while the helmet was tucked under the other arm.

"The scooter you were just riding," one of the officers said.

"What scooter?" she asked, the picture of innocent confusion.

"This scoo... where did it go?"

While the two officers were looking at the spot the scooter had vanished from, Shade took the helmet from Emi and placed it into his storage space before snaking back into her shadow. The officers turned back to Emi.

"What happened to the scooter?" one of them asked.

"Are you alright, officers?" Emi asked. "Has it been a long shift?"

"Where's your helmet?" the other officer asked.

"What helmet?"

"Young lady, what's your name?"

Emi pulled out her phone and started recording video.

"Put that away," one of the officers said.

"If you're going to fine me for riding an imaginary scooter," Emi said, "then I'm going to film this interaction for the hearing where I contest it. Would you please point to the scooter that you allege I was riding?"

"You little..."

"It's not worth it," the other officer said, putting a restraining hand on her partner's arm. Just let it go."

"You could have handled that in a much less provocative manner," Shade told her.

"You seemed to go along with it quite smoothly," Emi said.

"I know a man with similar proclivities. We should go talk to your mother."

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Behind her restaurant, Erika was talking to Jason through Shade while Emi was inside, devouring a panna cotta.

"This might take some getting used to," Erika said.

"Well, there's some stuff going on, so you'll need to raise the bar for how quickly you can adjust to things. Talking through Shade is like using a phone, except he's way, way better. Also, could you give me a panna cotta too?"

"Aren't you on a plane to France?"

"I'm in Sri Lanka right now," Jason said. "There was a technical issue with the plane and they're switching us to a new one. Just give one to Shade, who can store it there, and bring it out here. It's super handy."

"You can teleport a dessert to Sri Lanka?"

"I have the power. Like He-Man, but with desserts instead of startling homoeroticism."

"Jason, I'm doors open in less than two hours. I don't have time for you to be you. What's this about?"

"You promise not to freak out?"

"No. Tell me anyway."

"Okay, so this didn't really come up in conversation, but last week I got a little bit kidnapped."

"What?" Erika exclaimed.

"It's fine. I unkidnapped myself almost immediately, and the guy responsible has been locked up ever since."

"You were kidnapped?"

"I know," Jason said. "It's a whole thing, but we need to push on to what's happening now. The guy escaped, which is not great, obviously. It's just a precaution, but some security people will be arriving very soon to make sure he doesn't come after you."

"Why would he come after us?"

"I don't think he would," Jason said. "He may even think I died when my plane blew up."

"WHAT?"

## Chapter 317

#### The Long Game

In the time it took Jason's plane to arrive in France, circumstances on the ground had gone through significant changes. The Sydney Network team was met by a driver who took them in the direction of the Network's Lyon branch to participate in an operational briefing.

"It's a beautiful city," Jason said as they drove.

"It'd be a nice posting if the local branch wasn't a nest of vipers," Asya said. "We've come a long way from debate club. Back then, I never would have anticipated a mid-air rescue from an exploding plane."

"Are you sure the local branch has been taken in hand?" Jason asked.

"Quite certain," Asya said. She had been briefed by the International Committee while they were still in flight, passing the information on to Jason and the members of the Sydney branch.

The Lyon branch had discovered that their Operations Director had gone rogue and sold them out to the EOA. Their Steering Committee realised that unless they came very clean, very quickly, their branch was going to be purged. That was a rare event, given that the International Committee itself did not have the authority. Only by agreement of the majority of the Network's member branches could one of those members be acted on punitively. Scrambling to avoid that fate, the Lyon's branch had invited the International Committee in, giving them free reign to sweep in and administer operations until local affairs were back in order.

The Network office was not located in one of Lyon's gorgeous buildings but a disappointingly plain office park. As with the Network's Sydney branch, Jason could detect a magical array protecting the core sections of the building. They were taken to an area on the ground floor that did not contain sensitive operations and was not within the array's protective magic.

In a briefing room full of milling people, Jason was given several introductions. One was to Hector De Lange, a Belgian man from the International Committee who was in charge of proceedings. Another was to the leader of the International Committee's assembled tactical response team, Acting Director of Tactical Operation Karen Espinoza. She was introduced to him by Bruce as the acting Ditto.

"I've heard that you can fight like a category three or better," Espinoza said to Jason. "It takes the right circumstances," Jason said.

"Well, we've put together a multi-branch platoon of three nine-person sections, with four category threes to a section," Espinoza said. "I'm willing to take you on, if you want it. I'd like you see what you can do for myself."

Espinoza was a bullet of a woman, all no-nonsense capability. Most of the silver-rank tactical personnel Jason had seen looked like models for a line of military-style fashion. Even with the beautifying effects of silver-rank, Espinoza was every-inch the soldier.

"I'd like that, Acting Director," Jason said, "but I'm not sure you want me. Whatever objectives you might have around Barbou and whoever he's with, my only objective is getting my friend back. Most likely that puts us on the same team, but if it comes down to getting her back or catching Barbou, there are circumstances that could put us at odds. You're probably better off without that kind of liability in your ranks."

Espinoza gave Jason an assessing look.

"I appreciate your forthrightness," she said. "if you're not part of my tactical operation, what do you intend to do, exactly?"

"Whatever it takes, to get my friend back," Jason said. "I'm hoping that what it takes is letting you and your team do your thing, but I get a feeling that it won't go that smoothly."

"It never does," Espinoza said. "Alright, Asano. I don't want you running around rogue if I can help it, so how about this: attach yourself to my team, and if you're going to go off the reservation, let me know."

"You're being awfully accommodating, Acting Director."

"Just call me Espinoza," she said. "My information is that you're the solution to our escalating monster level problem."

"That's the idea," Jason said.

"That's why I've been told to keep you safe and happy. Frankly, I'd rather keep you where I can keep an eye on you. If you're going to cause me problems, I at least want to see them coming."

"That sounds fair," Jason said.

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Hector and Espinoza called the room to order and began a briefing into the upcoming operation. Everyone was seated, Jason at the back with the Sydney branch, with Asya sitting next to him.

"The Lyon branch, as it turns out," Hector said, "had been hiding more than an offthe-books black site. We knew of the existence of this black site, although not its location. That, as it turned out, was just another layer of misdirection, designed to keep us from realising a deeper secret. A member of the Lyon branch's Steering Committee will explain. Mr Abreo, if you would?"

A haggard-looking man moved from the side of the room to take Hector's place behind the speaker's podium. He had a core-fused bronze-rank aura and being in a room full with more than a dozen silver-rankers wasn't serving to reduce the stress that looked to have kept him from a good night's sleep.

"My name is Paul Abreo, and as Mr De Lange said, I am part of the Lyon branch Steering Committee. Unfortunately, many of the decisions that led to us all being here today were, at least in part, mine. I've been asked to provide some context before Mr De Lange goes into the detail on upcoming operations."

He tapped the touch screen on the podium and a map appeared on the wall monitor behind him.

"In 1948," Abreo said, "local Network operatives discovered a number of anomalous factors with an incursion space dimensionally coterminous with an area near Saint-Étienne. Not only did it have multiple apertures in the region, which is unusual in and of itself, but the incursion space remained stable past the normal window. In short, it had become a permanent dimensional space."

Jason had wondered if earth had any proper astral spaces from the moment he learned about the proto-astral spaces. Now he had his answer.

"The Steering Committee of the Lyon branch at that time," Abreo continued, "made the decision to monopolise the dimensional space and any potential benefits it offered. Which meant hiding it from the rest of the Network. At the time, the Network was much more fractious than..."

"Justifications can come later," Hector interrupted. "Relevant details, Mr Abreo." Abreo sighed, clearly reluctant.

"In order to monopolise the space," he said, "it was required to hide the astral space from the Network. Obviously, the fact that every branch has access to the Grid was a problem, given that the Grid's express purpose is to identify and monitor dimensional spaces. As this predated computer monitoring, there was some leeway. The initial action was to disable the grid in that local area, claiming that there was an infrastructure collapse. While the branch told the International Committee that they were working to fix it, they were, in fact, developing the means to falsify the Grid being active."

Abreo paused, looking around the room with trepidation.

"They were successful," he said. "That sector of the grid has been offline for the last seventy years."

That statement triggered a susurrus of murmured disbelief.

"The prevailing wisdom of the time," Abreo spoke loudly over the noise, "was that with a dimensional space already in place, another one was not going to appear, rendering the Grid pointless in that area anyway."

Abreo's excuses only fuelled the fire as the room full of Network members exploded with outrage. Asya, sitting next to Jason, leaned over for an explanation.

"We Network members may be prone to inter-branch politicking," she said, "but we're united by a sense of duty to protect our world. None of us are too good to be at least a little self-serving, but this violates the core tenets of our unifying purpose. There's no way they don't purge the Lyon branch after this."

Hector stood up to calm the group down.

"There will be time for recriminations later," he said. "Right now, there's work to do. Mr Abreo, please continue."

Hector once again ceded the podium to Abreo, who was now faced with a deeply hostile audience.

"Over time, our branch developed the dimensional space, which came to be referred to as the dimensional fortress. It was named as such both for the nature of the dimensional space and for its purpose as an ultimate fallback in the case of catastrophic events that seem more likely now than even then."

Jason leaned closer to Asya.

"Catastrophic events?" he asked.

"There's been growing concern that the escalation in dimensional incursions may outstrip our ability to intercede," Asya said.

"You're talking about a monster apocalypse."

"Something like that," she said and Jason turned his attention back to Abreo.

"...came under the influence of each succeeding Operations Director," Abreo was continuing. "Which brings us to Adrien Barbou. I considered this man a friend, so I was betrayed as much as anyone by the revelation that he was working with the EOA. Once I realised this, I naturally contacted the International..."

"Thank you, Mr Abreo," Hector said, standing up. "I think I can take things from here."

He replaced Abreo at the podium while Abreo stood to the side, flanked on either side by bronze-rankers who did not look to be his subordinates.

"Adrien Barbou," Hector said, "was part of the highly secretive and highly selective group of Lyon branch staff who knew of and worked in the so-called dimensional fortress. We now believe that he has been cultivating loyalists from within the Network's ranks and

that he stepped this activity up after being made Operations Director. It is highly likely that anyone and everyone in the dimensional fortress is one of his, not one of ours."

"What's the big deal about this dimensional space?" someone asked from the front. "What's so important about an incursion space that doesn't go away?"

"The key feature of the permanent dimensional space," Hector said, "is that it appears to have a naturally heightened level of magic. That means the environment is beneficial for essence users, as well as producing magical materials. More importantly, dimensional entities manifest directly into the space. Primarily category ones, but also category twos on a regular basis and on two occasions, category threes."

It sounded to Jason like the magical density of the space was similar to that of Greenstone.

"The dimensional fortress is a DE hunting reserve," Hector continued, "and over the last seventy years the Lyon branch has stockpiled resources. Most critically, they have figured out how to use the space to generate spirit coins."

"Spirit coin farm," Jason murmured to himself in surprise.

"The dimensional fortress is possibly the most important strategic asset on or adjacent to the planet Earth," Hector said. "Right now, Barbou is holed up inside it, having sealed the apertures from the inside. He clearly recognised that he was tipping his hand in being so overt in his attempt to kill Mr Asano, who we have with us here today and is the second most important strategic asset we know of. Or, Barbou possibly tried to kill him because he was ready to make his move. Whatever the case, it precipitated some kind of incident at the Lyon branch black site. We're still figuring out exactly what happened."

"What about the outworlder he was holding at the black site?" Jason asked.

"We have confirmed that she was a prisoner of Barbou and the EOA when they entered the dimensional fortress," Hector said.

"What does he hope to achieve?" a person down the front asked. "Can't we just guard the apertures so he can't come out?"

"That is what we're doing right now," Hector said. "We have teams that we know Barbou hasn't compromised, preventing his escape from the dimensional space. Calling it a dimensional fortress is not just for show, however. He has sealed the apertures from the inside and we can't get in. We have ritual specialists working on it as we speak, but they aren't optimistic. Right this second, none of us can do anything but sit on our hands and wait."

"What's the point?" the person at the front asked. "If he's stuck in there, why bother with it at all?"

"Barbou has been recruiting from within the Network," Hector said. "He's been working towards the entire staff occupying the dimensional fortress being personally loyal to him. He most likely has full control of the space. Our current thinking is that he's playing a long game. Either he believes that the EOA will come into conflict with the Network and liberate him or that the dimensional space escalation problem is far worse than is generally accepted and the dimensional fortress will become a key refuge that he can leverage. He has the resources there to remain inside without external supply. In fact, the dimensional space was a major source of resources for the Lyon branch. He simply doesn't need to come out."

Hector tapped the podium touch screen and four points lit up on the map.

"These are the locations of the apertures to the dimensional space," he explained.

"As we speak there are people attempting to breach the seals on those apertures. We are on standby until one of those apertures is opened."

The back and forth of the briefing continued but the details mattered little to Jason. He spoke up again when Hector called for questions.

"Where does the outworlder fit into this?" he asked. "How did she end up involved?"

"For that, you'll have to ask Mr Abreo," Hector said, gesturing for Abreo to return to the podium.

"We first became aware of the outworlder when the twin anomalous signals appeared on the Grid simultaneously, in Australia and here in France. Our signal was right near the edge of the Saint-Étienne dead zone, close to one of the apertures. Our original suspicion was that it was somehow related to an attempt to investigate the dimensional fortress by another branch that went awry. Our people were stationed close, near the aperture, and we moved quickly, finding the woman unconscious. We secured her with a suppression collar and moved her to the black site."

Jason kept his aura restrained but everyone in the room felt it boil like a witch's cauldron.

"Once we realised what she was and the potential she represented," Abreo said, "we were already past the point of diplomacy. In any case, we were used to having resources the rest of the Network did not and knew that if we were open about it, the International Committee would remove her in order to improve the general capacity of the other branches to resist the incursions."

The room was once again unsettled at the naked betrayal of their core purpose.

"We realised that the Australian signal was likely another outworlder. As we hadn't heard anything, this meant that either the local branch there was hiding him, like we were

with ours, or their outworlder was still at large. Adrien advocated for having the Australian outworlder captured or, failing that, eliminated. The Steering Committee reluctantly agreed, under the stipulation that we send a stealth specialist, rather than the more aggressive team Barbou wanted. The goal was to remain unnoticed, or at least unidentifiable, even in failure."

"Which went out the window when I left your guy limping to the local branch while I killed his support team," Jason said. "Sorry, allegedly killed his support team. I totally didn't do it."

"You're the outworlder?" Abreo asked, turning pale.

"Yep," Jason said, standing up. "So, just to be clear. You found my friend unconscious, slapped a collar on her, realised she wasn't what you thought but you'd already screwed her over too much to cooperate and decided to torture what you could out of her. Would that be an accurate description?"

Abreo stood trembling, too scared to answer.

"Mr Asano," Hector said. "I understand that you're emotional, but please restrain your aura."

Jason turned a look on Hector that made him flinch before he got himself under control.

"Somebody show me one of these apertures," he growled.

#### Chapter 318

#### A Moment For Drastic Measures

The aperture was in a tent that had been set up around it, with a makeshift military camp assembled around that. The story was the usual terrorism readiness exercise. The tent was almost of circus proportions, easily fitting a Network ritualist, Hector, Espinoza, plus Jason, with Asya as an escort and Abreo, with a pair of burly bronze-rankers as an escort. On top of that was the ritual circle around the aperture.

The aperture normally would have been invisible, but the ritual circle drawn under it was causing it to crackle with energy, revealing its circular shape.

"Sir," one of the Network's ritualists said, "we just don't have a way in. I don't see a means to break a ritual on the other side of the aperture from this side."

"How long will it take to change that?" Hector asked.

"How long did it take to go from dial phones to cellular phones?" the ritualist asked.

"Unless you have a whole new field of magic sitting around somewhere, we're done here."

"Mr Asano," Hector said. "You're meant to be the great font of knowledge from another world. Do you have a whole new field of magic sitting around somewhere?"

"Yep," Jason said, not moving his eyes from the aperture.

"Then by all means, proceed."

Jason looked down at the purpose-built wooden boards with the ritual circle drawn onto them. They were tightly slotted together so as to not break the ritual circle drawn onto them. Jason broke the ritual himself by drawing his foot through a chalk line in the magical diagram and the visible magic it contained faded and dispersed.

"Turn off those mana lamps until I need them," Jason instructed. "I'm going to have to start with a harmony ritual to balance out the ambient magic, which I won't need them for."

The harmony ritual was one of the few lesser rituals that didn't require iron-rank magical density. It served the same function as Clive's Mana Equilibrium racial gift, except it took more effort, more time, some lesser spirit coins and wasn't as effective.

Clive could level out the ambient magic with a snap of his fingers, doing such a thorough job he never needed to adjust his ritual circles. Even after performing his first ritual and having the mana lamps turned back on, Jason still needed to use powdered lesser monster cores to gauge how his second ritual was interacting with the ambient magic.

"This will open up the aperture?" Hector asked as Jason's ritual become more and more complex. He was constantly referencing Clive's notes, which Jason was lucky to have access to. Clive had kept them with Jason's books on astral magic, which was beneficial to Jason after losing Clive as a resource.

"It won't," Jason said. "The purpose of this ritual is to figure out what we're dealing with."

When he enacted the ritual, it seemed at first like the one the ritualists had used, leaving magic crackling over the invisible aperture.

"So much for that," the ritualist said, happy not to have been shown up.

"Wait for it," Jason said, eyes still locked on the aperture. Slowly there was a shift in the magic and the crackling energy started forming into distinct shapes. Eventually the aperture was covered in floating, glowing runes that shifted, merged, split and transformed in complex patterns.

Shade emerged from Jason's shadow to stand next to him, to the surprise of the other people in the tent except for Asya.

"What do you think?" Jason asked him.

"I have little grasp of ritual magic," Shade said. "To my eye, however, it does seem less sophisticated than the seal locking the Order of the Reaper's astral space."

"It is," Jason said. "By a lot. That said, Clive and Emir's team took months cracking that seal. Testing, analysing, retesting. Even if I wasn't reliant on mana lamps for that, which I very much am, it will be time consuming. It may not be months, but I'm not Clive. Unless I get lottery win lucky, it'll be weeks."

"You're saying you can open it?" Hector asked.

"Very eventually," Jason said and turned to Abreo. "If you're holding anything back, Abreo, now is the time to talk."

Jason walked over to stand in front of Abreo, who shrank away only to bump into one of his unmoving escorts.

"If I discover that you could have helped me here and you didn't," Jason told him, his voice low and resonant, "the Network can't protect you from me. I will do to you what your men failed to do to me and take you away. The subsequent final few weeks of your life will be an experience that cannot be described, only felt. Do you know what it's like to have your soul scoured, Mr Abreo? It changes you. Marks you. No healing potion or magic power can undo it."

Abreo's gaze lingered on the scars on Jason's face as he trembled, almost shaking. Fear stained his aura like a poison, even as Jason's aura ground Abreo's into nothing, pressing on his soul like a knife to the throat.

"I can't do anything, I swear! don't know a way in. That was all Adrien's to manage. Oh god, please believe me!"

Abreo's guards were wide-eyed at the display of aura power, but when they glanced at Hector he shook his head, signalling them not to intervene. Jason relaxed his aura suppression and turned back to the aperture.

"Taking weeks to get through is better than not getting through at all," Hector said.

"They're bottled up and not going anywhere."

"Not good enough," Jason said.

"Obviously, we'll be looking for alternatives," Hector told him, "but it's exceptional enough that we can get in there eventually. Getting through right now is impossible. We need to accept that and direct our energies where they can actually accomplish something."

"It's been my experience," Jason said, eyes once more glued to the aperture, "that much of what people call impossible is an unwillingness to accept the price of moving forward."

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "I worry that you are going to make a decision with long-term ramifications in the heat of the moment."

"You're a smart guy, Shade," Jason said. "That's exactly what I'm going to do."

## Ability: [Nirvanic Transfiguration]

- This ability will be evolved from the ability [Astral Affinity].
- Your body and soul will be combined into a gestalt entity both physical and spiritual in nature. This state will grant inherent resistance to effects that utilise the soul-body disconnect.
- ➤ The nature of your new body will render you immune to resurrection effects, including those of high-rank healing magic. If your body is discorporated, your soul will return to a purely spiritual state, unable to reinhabit a physical form or re-enter a physical reality. This prevents the natural formation of an outworlder body on entering a physical reality. These restrictions will change on reaching diamond rank.
- When suffering lethal damage, instead of dying, your new body will undergo a nirvanic rebirth, returning to a state of full integrity. This effect cannot be triggered again until you have increased in rank from the last time it was used. This ability will change on reaching diamond rank.
- The strength of your aura will significantly increase.
- Your resistance to hostile dimension effects and disruptive force damage will be increased. This is an enhancement of the [Astral Affinity] ability.

- ➤ The effect of your dimension effects and your transcendent damage will be increased. This is a legacy effect of the [Astral Affinity] ability.
- Physical reality around you will be more stable. You will be able to sense nearby astral space apertures and proto-astral spaces coterminous to your location.
- You will be able to traverse astral space apertures, including those that are closed or have been sealed.
- You will be able to directly enter proto-astral spaces coterminous with your location or directly leave a proto-astral space to a coterminous location.
- ➤ While within the astral you will be able to create and maintain a small zone of physical reality around you. This does not grant the ability to enter or traverse the astral.

Of the many effects of the strange ability offered to him by the World-Phoenix, the ability to pass through sealed astral space apertures had seemed like a minor consideration. In this moment, it was a more crucial power than coming back from the dead.

"You held well-reasoned reservations about that power," Shade said. "The wiser course would be to take some time to cool down and consider the consequences of claiming this power."

"I already know the ramifications of not taking it," Jason said. "Farrah in the hands of that man for weeks while I pick a lock, when I could have slipped in the window."

"Have you not considered that you may have been offered this power in anticipation of this very scenario?" Shade asked. "The World-Phoenix may well have placed her where she arrived as part of engineering this result."

"Of course it has," Jason said. "But even if that is the World-Phoenix's plan, my knowing that doesn't mean it won't work. This is what I need right now and what did I say, Shade?"

"Whatever it takes," Shade said. "This is not a trivial choice, Mr Asano. Jason, this will change you. Fundamentally."

Jason finally tore his eyes from the aperture to look at Shade.

"You've never used my first name before."

"It is a moment for drastic measures, Mr Asano. I believe that you have the potential to reach the pinnacle of power and throw off the shackles of a mortal lifespan. This is a decision that may follow you for eternity."

Jason looked at Shade for a long time, then turned back to the aperture.

"Shade, do you remember what my Dad said about big decisions?"

"Yes," Shade said. "He advised that you consider the person you want to be."

"If I'm going to live with this forever – and I think that's a much bigger if than you suggest – then I want to be the man who chose to do whatever he could to save his friend."

"Then you have your decision," Shade said.

"I don't suppose anyone wants to fill me in on what you're talking about?" Hector asked.

"No," Jason said.

# ➤ You can accept ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration]. Accept Y/N?

Jason mentally accepted the offer and silver light immediate started shining from within his body. Light started pouring from his mouth and his eyes, shining through his skin to make his veins and even his skeleton visible. The pain began early, not just to his body but his soul, but this was something he had endured in the past.

The other people in the tent looked on, startled, as the light shining from him grew brighter. They backed off as Jason's clothes disintegrated around him, his skin becoming increasingly translucent. The veins and arteries in his body were absorbed, vanishing as his body moved even further from the human norm. Only his bones and the scars on his body remained visible in his increasingly transparent flesh.

The ritual on the aperture was washed away and the onlookers abandoned the tent entirely as they sensed the strange vortex of magic centred on Jason. Shortly thereafter, the tent itself was disintegrated like his clothes. The Network's tactical units scrambled to surround him at a safe distance, a firing line of magical guns pointed in his direction.

Jason's flesh completed the transition to translucency, making his scars standing out all the more. The onlookers watched as the white bones of his skeleton were transformed into silver metal.

Once that process was complete, an amorphous murk appeared within his translucent form, like a stain. It started moving to the surface of his body and splattering out, landing on the ground in gobbets of rancid ichor. The horrific stench of it was something every essence user recognised, having been through their own purges.

"Is he ranking up?" Hector asked.

"I don't know," Asya said, standing beside him. "Is that what ranking up to category three looks like?"

"No," Hector said. "No, it is not."

For Jason, the process rivalled the star seed implantation for pain to both body and soul, his mouth wide open in a silent scream. It felt like his body and soul were being torn apart and then woven back together. He staggered then fell to his hands and knees, mind consumed with nothing but pain. He forced himself back to his feet, defiant.

The onlookers saw three globes of energy inside of Jason's translucent body, circling each other behind his rib cage. One was a sphere of pure darkness while another was a glistening orb of blood. The third was a blue and orange eyeball that gave off a sense of depth and power, as if to probe too close with their magical senses was to risk annihilation on gaining its attention.

Jason's body once more started to take on a fleshy opacity. The crest of his back, which had vanished with his flesh, manifested within him before moving out as his skin once more lost its translucency. The light coming from his body slowly dimmed to nothing. It left him standing naked, surrounded by people pointing guns at him. Most of the ichor had been forcefully ejected, but enough was left to mar much of his skin with the unpleasant residue. The hair from all over his body had once again fallen out.

He was unsteady on his feet, stumbling and almost falling as he took a step. He felt profoundly different both to himself and the people around him. For him, it was like being connected to the universe around him, his magical and aura senses both massively enhanced. He even felt something odd that he suspected to be the dimensional membrane separating physical reality from the astral. The aperture that had once only appeared to his magical senses was plain to see for him now.

For the Network personnel with aura senses, Jason was a transformed being. His aura had always been powerful but now it felt like a solid object, as real as the ground beneath their feet.

He pulled one of his precious few vials of crystal wash and tipped it over his head., cleansing the ichor from his body. He ignored his nakedness and the gun-toting people all around him. Shade emerged from his shadow.

"Might I suggest some of Mr Tillman's pilatory unguent," Shade suggested. "Then, perhaps, some pants."

"Sure," Jason said, pulling out a tin of Jory's hair growth ointment. "Could you?"

"Of course," Shade said, taking the tin. He judiciously applied it to Jason's head and eyebrows while Jason recovered, feeling completely spent. Shade, unlike Jason, could use the ointment without worrying about hair growing out of his fingers.

Dark mist surrounded Jason, and when it disappeared, he was wearing his battle robes and Shade was trimming his unruly hair and bushy, alchemically-grown eyebrows. Hector strode over, Asya trailing behind.

"Mr Asano," Hector said. "What exactly just happened?"

"Something I'll explain later," Jason said, then pulled out a recovery potion and swigged it. "After I deal with your rogue personnel."

He marched over to the aperture and vanished into it.

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"Your Operations Director wasn't kidding when she warned me he was a handful," Hector told Ketevan in the camp's commend tent.

"In fairness," Asya said, "his friend has been kidnapped and it's clear that she's very important to him. Not to mention that the people behind all this fall under our umbrella. You think he cares about which branch they're from or if they've gone rogue? From his perspective, the Network had kidnapped and tortured his friend, then kidnapped and tried to kill him. I'm not sure I'd be putting up with us if I were him."

"He needs us," Ketevan said.

"Does he?" Asya asked. "I don't know what the World-Phoenix is but from what I could tell, it offered him a power I certainly don't understand. With backing like that, even if he's reluctant to accept it, what can he get from us that compares?"

A network functionary burst into the tent.

"Mr De Lange," he said. "We've been interrogating the original aperture monitors, who are all Barbou's people. They bolted after the dimensional space was sealed off but we managed to snag a few and we've gotten one of them to talk."

"Why didn't they go through with the others?" Hector asked.

"Some did, from what we can tell," the functionary said. "The rest had various tasks to perform. One of which was providing a car when Barbou left the dimensional space from a different aperture, just prior to it being sealed. He was alone. No EOA, no prisoner. His people gave him a car and that was the last they saw of him."

## Chapter 319

#### **Foiled Plans**

The pair monitoring the aperture from inside the astral space weren't even iron-rankers. Two of Shade's bodies shot out from Jason's shadow as he emerged from the aperture and used mana-draining attacks, which knocked them unconscious as they had no mana to drain. Jason barely paid them attention as he conjured his starlight cloak and looked around.

The astral space seemed to be an interconnected collection of dilapidated manors and crumbling castles, rising up through an impenetrable fog. They were strung together like a spider's web by a network of bridges, none of which looked safe to walk on. Some were rotted wood, others stone arches, pockmarked by erosion. As for the buildings themselves, half or more of each structure had collapsed in sections, exposing the interiors.

The fog below completely shrouded the ground, if there even was one. Astral spaces obeyed their own rules and the fog might hide nothing but an endless drop into nothingness. The sky was dark and stormy, filling the air with drizzle. There was a wet chill in the air, the unpleasantness of which seemed to ignore Jason's bronze-rank resistance to extremes of temperature.

The aperture emerged into a room in a wooden manor. The exterior wall had collapsed, giving him a panoramic view of the surrounds, although enough roof remained to keep the drizzle off him. On the floor was a magic circle, the seal put in place on the aperture.

"This astral space seems well-suited to your combat style," Shade observed. "Complex environments full of dark corners."

Jason nodded. According to the Network intelligence, there were an unknown number of iron and bronze-rankers, plus ten or more of the EOA's elite converted.

"Are you going to unseal the aperture?" Shade asked and Jason spent a moment considering it.

"No," Jason decided. "A small army of Network jackboots doesn't advantage me. We're here for Farrah, not to bring in the EOA or the Network's rogue personnel. The element of surprise is more valuable than numbers if we don't share priorities."

"We scout the area, then?"

"Yes," Jason said. "Let's go find her."

Jason had reunited with the body Shade had sent to France some time ago, giving him access to six of Shade's incarnations. Five of them went out to explore the astral space, while the last remained with Jason, who set out himself.

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Things had started to go wrong in the astral space when Barbou quietly slipped away. At first it was thought something happened to him and a search was carried out, until they discovered that he had slipped away before the seals were in place. This had come as a surprise both to the EOA and the bulk of the traitorous Network personnel. They had aligned themselves with Barbou in the expectation that he would be leading them during their time inside the dimensional space.

The EOA realised that he had left after interrogating one of the pairs monitoring the seal. They were only iron-rankers and Barbou had not provided them with any direction beyond sealing the aperture behind him after he left.

In the wake of unified leadership, the remaining people split into influence factions to fill the power vacuum. The EOA and bronze-rank Network personnel united to cow the iron-rankers and the normals, many of whom wanted to leave the dimensional space and surrender to the Network. It was not a good start, given that the goal was to settle in for months, if not years before events outside brought the dimensional space into play.

Word started coming in that something had been spotted moving in the shadows, in more than one location. Since no one had been able to pin down whatever it was, it was assumed to be a stealth-type category two monster. Once they realised that there was more than one of them, they started sending out people to find and stop them. The direct manifestation of monsters in the dimensional space was a threat that would cost them to ignore.

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"It appears to be working," Shade said. "They've split into smaller search groups."

"Alright," Jason said. "Keep track of Farrah while I start thinning out the herd. Once she's isolated enough, let me know and I'll move in."

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They didn't see the shadowy arm move up from below the ledge. They only noticed something amiss as one of the category ones was pulled over the edge, plummeting down into the fog with a scream. One of his companions ran to the edge to look, even as the category two leader yelled out a warning. The reckless man was yanked off as well, following the first into the fog below.

The three remaining Network operatives clumped together in the middle of the room, eyeing the edge without approaching. They still maintained a watch on the other directions, guns at the ready, and immediately spotted a figure stepping into a doorway from which the door had long since rotted away. It was only vaguely humanoid in shape, wrapped in bloody, ragged cloth and they opened fire with their enchanted weapons immediately. The bullets hammered into the cloth but were absorbed to minimal effect.

They could sense the category two strength from the entity with their aura senses and as it moved into the room, the leader threw out a power. It was a concussive sphere of compressed air that struck the creature and blasted it apart, far more effectively than they had anticipated. Gobbets of flesh scattered all through the room, only for them to realise they were not the remains of a creature but a swarm of leeches. They now clung the walls, floor and ceiling on the side of the room that held the exits.

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Beams of blue and orange light, as if from some futuristic energy weapon cut down the normal and iron-rankers as they fled. Trailing behind them was a nebulous entity, the orbs floating around it being the source of the deadly beams. It barely shimmered at the occasional magic bullet passing through it as the fleeing victims desperately fired behind them in retreat.

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Four of the EOA's elite converted were moving through the remains of a once-vast castle. They discovered a strange entity stalking them through the shadows, only visible as what looked like a cluster of distant stars in the night sky.

The category two guns Barbou had given them had no effect. The bullets did not pass through the entity to strike the wall behind but stopped dead, silent until they fell harmlessly to the floor. The entity tracked them as they moved, disappearing from one shadow and appearing in the next.

"It won't come out of the dark," one of them said. "Just stay away from the shadows." "Look around, genius. It's all god damn shadows."

"It's not even attacking," a third one said. "Maybe we should just ignore it."

"We're literally here to find whatever monster was snaking around in the shadows," the last one said. "Now that's done, how is ignoring the thing an appropriate next step?"

"Well shooting it didn't do anything," the third one said. "I'm not the one who assigned all the guys with vision tattoos in the other groups."

"So what do we do?" the second one said.

"Uh, guys? Where did it go?"

They looked around, realising that every shadow was empty. After the starlight entity had been dogging them so closely, its sudden absence was disconcerting. Then they heard a scream from nearby.

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The EOA member stumbled over the edge, plunging down with a scream.

"Bitch!" his companion said, swing a backhand blow at Farrah, who had just shouldered the man off the side of the building. Her hands were cuffed but she used her bound arms to intercept the strike and entangle his. She then slung him into a fireman's carry and tossed him off the side after his fellow.

She had picked her moment well. They were leading her through what she assumed was an astral space, given the unusual environment. There were more precarious narrow spaces than not and she had played docile prisoner until one of them got sloppy and moved too close to an edge. She was now free, but the keys to her cuffs and manacles had gone over the edge with the two men

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A group of EOA and Network operative found each other, both having lost members. Many were still in the process of having their flesh blacken with rot.

"You have healers right?" one of the EOA asked.

"He took out the healers first."

"He?"

"It had a man's voice when it was chanting those creepy spells. It's an essence user. Probably the one Barbou warned us about."

"Essence user, nothing. It's some kind of shadow monster."

"Shadows don't use huge scary knives. It looked like a sacrificial dagger and I'm not looking to be anyone's sacrifice."

"It's just a guy. I'm sure I hit him with my barbed spear power. That must have hurt."

"It did," came a cold voice. There was a resonating quality to it that immediately arrested the attention and sent a chill down the spine.

"You're Asano, aren't you?" the man with the spear power asked. He was one of those marked with blackened flesh. "If we can make you bleed, we can make you die."

"You wouldn't be the first. Your blood is not yours to keep, but mine on which to feast."

The man's life force emerged from within his body as a red glow and a good portion of it streamed away to be devoured by the darkness. As it did, the man's flesh was visibly dessicated.

"There!" one of them shouted, pointing in the direction of the stream of life force.

Bullets and powers erupted in that direction, just as the draining power came to an end. A shadowy figure emerged from the other direction, dashing forward to bite into an exposed neck with an ornate black and red dagger.

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Farrah stopped and hid as she spotted a strange figure crossing the wooden bridge in her direction. It looked like a cloaked humanoid, but made entirely of manifested darkness.

"Miss Hurin," a voice spoke. "I have been sent to assist you."

Farrah stepped out from behind the half-shattered wall.

"Assist me how?"

The figure tossed a small object at her, but rather than catch it she dodged out of the way. What landed on the ground was a small key. Looking closer, it was crudely made, but conformed to the common design for a suppression collar skeleton key. She picked it up and pressed it to the collar at her neck, which clicked open.

She snatched it off and threw it over the edge of the building, where it fell away into the fog. She immediately felt the relief of magic flowing into her for the first time in what felt like years. Her mana stores had long dried up, leaving her with a constant pounding headache, but finally they started to replenish. She turned to the shadowy figure, which maintained a respectful distance, halfway across the bridge.

"My name is Shade. May I offer you a recovery potion?"

"You said you were sent to assist me." she said warily.

"That is correct," Shade said.

"Who sent you?"

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Outside the astral space, the ritualist team that had been examining the apertures were reporting to Hector. They were standing in front of the aperture Asano had entered while the logistics team was preparing to assemble another tent.

"We have no idea what Asano did," the lead ritualist said. "It didn't open the aperture for us, though. We've explored every option in our knowledge base and the simple fact is, those apertures are not going to open."

The aperture suddenly opened, a dozen people pouring out of it, looking variously terrified, half dead or both. Moments later they were surrounded by guns pointed at their heads.

"We surrender. Just keep whatever you sent in there away from us!"

On his way to the to Swiss border, Adrien Barbou stopped his car to use a wi-fi hotspot and logged into a private chat room. Soon after, a second person entered and sent a video chat invitation. He accepted and the face of a stern-faced woman appeared on his screen.

"Mrs West," he said. "It's done. My remaining Network contacts have informed me that they accessed the dimensional space faster than anticipated, but things have otherwise played out as you directed."

"The outworlder, Asano?"

"Yes."

"That works in our favour," West said. "The more value he has for them, the more they will believe that our goal was to obtain the other outworlder. Once they believe they have foiled our plans, they won't be looking for our true plot. You did maintain that the outworlder was our goal to everyone involved, yes?"

"Yes, Mrs West. No slip ups."

"Good. You've done well, Adrien."

"I'm surprised you were willing to sacrifice a team of elite converted," Adrien said.

"The category twos will soon be out of date," Mrs West said. "Anything below a category three is expendable for the plan. Now that your part with the Network is done, you'll learn the rest once you arrive here. Your contact will meet you in Zurich, as arranged."

"Thank you, Mrs West."

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In a Los Angeles branch of the Network the Operations Director was standing by the window, her assistant, Cleary, standing next to her.

"Ma'am, we need to accelerate the recruitment of the outworlder. Once he's acquired the other outworlder, Asano may turn his attention to Network activity. If he teaches the other branches how to accomplish non-core advancement, it will erode our advantage. Just having them know it's possible is bad enough."

"They always knew, Cleary. Most branches have someone determined to crack non-core advancement. It's not like the process is hard to figure out. Physical training and meditation are hardly esoteric practices. They just lack the specific techniques to make those practices efficient."

"Which Asano had already agreed to give them."

"Which he won't, because he'll be joining us. Timing is everything, Cleary. He was never going to be responsive until the other outworlder was recovered. Now she has been, the time to take advantage has come. The Sydney branch has failed him and the Lyon branch has made an enemy of him. He is now primed to deal with the people who know what they're doing."

## Chapter 320

# **Quite the Year**

Farrah felt a freakishly strong aura from above and looked up to see a sight that stirred a strong memory. A man was slowly descending through the air using a cloak made of star-filled darkness. He landed lightly on the bridge, in front of the shadow creature. Aside from the cloak, he was wearing dark combat robes and a sword at his hip that she immediately recognised. He pushed back the hood and she saw a face both familiar and alien.

The shadow man, Shade, had said the man's name but she still had trouble believing, even as she looked right at him. The smug, perpetual half-smirk was the same, but was situated over an only slightly immodest chin. That chin had a scar, with another scar bisecting an eyebrow. The most startling physical feature was the eyes, which were silver and faintly glowing. Compared to the aura coming off the man, though, the eyes were perfectly mundane.

She had never felt a bronze-rank aura even close to that potent. It was domineering, indomitable and resolute, with an undercurrent she recognised with a shock as divine. There was the unmistakable feel of an essence user's aura, but also distinctly something else. Like the man's appearance, his aura was at once recognisable, yet also strange and new to her. It was solid in a way she had never felt from any other aura, as if it wasn't a projection of a soul but the soul itself, standing right in front of her.

"What are you?" she asked.

"What?" the man said. "Not even who? Wow, that's rough."

"You're not doing a great job of mimicking him," she said. "It's like you're going by vague description."

"Also harsh. You've missed a lot, Farrah."

"You're too tall," she said. "Your complexion is too clear. I'm not sure what the scars are about, but it takes a lot to scar an essence user. Your voice is too deep, I can't even describe how wrong the aura is and the eyes are way off. You couldn't even get the rank right. It's like you copied him but couldn't help making him more impressive than he really is."

"Well, this is just getting hurtful," he said and turned to Shade. "What's wrong with my eyes?"

"They changed when you took the power," Shade said. "I didn't mention it when it happened because there were other considerations."

"You couldn't have said something when you were doing my eyebrows."

"You were quite focused at the time."

"That's fair. Do they look good?"

"They set off your dark hair quite nicely. You really should grow the beard back in."

"I'll just let it come back on its own. I only have so much of Jory's hair cream."

"Hello?" asked the seemingly forgotten Farrah.

"Oh, you're the only one who gets to be rude?" he asked. "You know you died, right?"

"The memories are hazy, but yes," she said.

"I spoke at your memorial, you know. I was kind of amazing. Rufus said it was worth you dying just to hear my beautiful words. Gary blubbed like a little boy with a skinned knee. Snot got all in his fur, it was a huge mess."

"Is it really you?" she said.

He flashed a familiar grin.

"I knew my charisma would shine through."

"I can't imagine any shape-shifter with so little dignity as to talk that much crap," she said. "What about Colin?"

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As soon as Shade told him he found her, Jason had started rushing through the astral space, chaining shadow jumps to reach her as quickly as he could. He leapt off a castle rooftop, floating downwards as he saw her staring at Shade with suspicion. She sensed his aura and looked up, watching him like a stranger, even as he landed and revealed his face.

She was not looking her best, thin, dirty and hair reduced to a thin fuzz. At least they'd given her some clothes, some track pants and a t-shirt, but she was still barefoot. She looked at him with wary eyes.

"What are you?" she asked.

He realised that for all that she laid the groundwork for who he was, she had missed most of his transformative experiences. It was no surprise she looked at him like a stranger. His personal crest could not be falsified, but she had never seen it. His aura and even his rank were sun and moon to what she knew, let alone his appearance. The cloak of stars certainly helped, but if he was going to convince her he was himself, he needed to really be himself. He started talking.

He watched recognition and hope slowly dawn on her face as he bantered.

"What about Colin?" she asked.

He held up his hand, the palm growing slick with blood that coalesced into a leech with horrifying lamprey teeth.

"I don't need to cut myself to pull him out, now," Jason said. "The benefits of ranking up."

She started at the leech in his hand, which rocked back and forth in a way that was somehow merry, despite coming from a tiny blood-sucking monster.

"I think he missed..."

She rocketed forward with peak bronze-rank speed, almost bowling him over as she threw her arms around him, gripping him like he was a security blanket. Colin was knocked away, deftly caught by Shade. Jason felt her whole body tremble as she sobbed into his shoulder.

"Oh, hey," he said softly, gently placing his arms around her.

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After a bronze-rank spirit coin, a recovery potion, Jason's third-last vial of crystal wash, most of his remaining hair ointment and a surprisingly proficient hair cut from Shade, Farrah was looking more like herself. Not exactly what he remembered, with the jeans, blouse and jacket, but a lot closer than her recollection of him.

Her own clothes were long gone. Her stone chest dimensional space was her human racial gift tied to her earth essence, which would have been empty anyway. Jason had removed its contents a year earlier.

Jason hadn't had the presence of mind to prepare clothes for her. Shade had taken the initiative to procure the ensemble, leaving the appropriate cash in the till of the shop he took them from.

They sat on the edge of a brick rooftop, legs dangling off the side. She leaned against his arm, reassured by the physical contact.

"How long?" she asked.

"A year," he said.

"It must have been quite the year," she said.

"You have no idea. Luckily, we'll have plenty of time for me to explain it all. Also, quite a lot of recordings."

"You kept making those recordings for your family?"

"Oh, yeah. They've even started watching them."

"How?"

"Oh, crap," Jason said, realisation dawning. "Farrah, this astral space isn't attached to your world. It's attached to mine."

"That was your world?"

"Yeah. You didn't realise it was a different reality?"

"I was collared and spent almost every moment either unconscious or thrown in a hole," she said. "So, you got home."

"Yeah. Look, we should really get moving. There'll be more time for explanations on the way home. We're on the wrong side of the planet right now."

Jason had experienced an oddly emotionless clarity in the moments after his own captivity, but when the emotions finally came, they crashed down like a tsunami. He wanted to get Farrah out of the astral space and past the inevitable Network attention before it all caught up to her. He suspected that Farrah was mentally stronger than him, but there was no avoiding the aftermath of the trauma she had suffered. In his case, it had been months before he came up for air.

He got to his feet and helped her to hers. They had only just set off when he sensed a large number of auras spreading out through the astral space, some of which he recognised.

"Looks like the bad guys unsealed the aperture that was securing this astral space," he said. "We're about to run into some people but they're allies. I'll get us past them as quick as I can."

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The Network platoon's tactical leader, Karen Espinoza, was leading the team through the astral space after the inhabitants unsealed it and rushed out. She paused at another cluster of corpses, these ones both desiccated and blackened with rot.

"What the hell kind of powers does this guy have?" her second asked. "Did he seriously do all this alone?"

"This environment is probably as good for him as it is bad for us," Espinoza said. "The more extreme the location, the less effective orthodox tactics are. I've been advising massive expansions to our tactical doctrine for years, and I'm far from alone. We're far too reliant on conventional, military-derived tactics. Hopefully Asano turning up will actually be a spur for change."

"He's only category two."

"Yes. Imagine if we could all fight like him. Category three monsters can soak a lot of damage, even from category three bullets. He's clearly more reliant on powers than weapons, which is what we need at the high end. Thus far we've basically been throwing money at the problem. We may as well be using gold bullets."

They continued to clear the space around the aperture to secure their beachhead, as exploring the kilometres of space within would take considerable time. They encountered Asano as he was on his way back to the aperture, calling out ahead so as to avoid friendly fire.

"You found her," Espinoza said. "That's mission accomplished for you. Thanks for doing most of ours along the way."

"I was in the neighbourhood," Jason said.

"De Lange will want to debrief her," Espinoza said.

"I don't much care, to be honest," Jason said. "She's done being beholden to Network personnel."

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Farrah's eyes took in everything as Shade drove them through Lyon.

"The magical carriages here are better than the ones back home," she said. "And they don't use magic. You know, we all thought you were talking nonsense about your world and what could be done without magic."

"Wait until you see the plane," Jason said.

She turned to look at him.

"Can I use a power on you?" she asked.

"Sure," he said.

"Don't you want to know what it is before accepting?" she asked.

"It's you," Jason said. "I don't need to."

She looked at him in silence for a long time.

"You've changed," she said. "You were so skittish back then. You hid it well but scratch the surface and there was the fear."

"We have a mythic warrior here who uses his fear as a weapon, turning it on his enemies."

"What kind of warrior?" Farrah asked.

"He's this super-rich guy that dresses up like a bat and goes around punching the poor."

"That sounds like a terrible myth."

"He has special boomerangs."

"I don't see how that matters."

"Well if you take this stance with Batman, I am not going to try explaining Zatanna's pants situation."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Farrah said. "What a tragically familiar feeling."

Jason grinned, inwardly crowing as he kept her from dwelling on her ordeal. He'd essentially blasted through the Network, demanding a plane from Hector before dramatically driving away in Shade. His goal was to lean into the strangeness of a world that was new to her to distract her at least until they were on the plane and she had time to sit with what she'd been through, and hopefully get some sleep.

"So, about that power," she said.

"Go for it. Shade's the one driving."

"I've never used this before," she said.

- Farrah Hurin] is attempting to use ability [Power Bond] on you.
- ➤ [Power Bond] will enhance some of your abilities for the duration of the bond and give [Farrah Hurin] access to your knowledge. This is restricted to your knowledge of concepts external to yourself. This ability cannot read your thoughts or access your knowledge of yourself.
- [Power Bond] can be rejected or ended at any time by you.
- If you do not implicitly trust [Farrah Hurin], this ability will fail. Subconscious distrust will prevent this power from working.

Jason was extremely curious about the new outworlder powers replacing Farrah's human abilities but was wary of conversation drifting in a traumatic direction. He had his own strange new power to worry about, as well.

You have been affected by [Power Bond], connecting you to [Farrah Hurin]. You may end this connection at any time.

"So, that power lets you gain knowledge?"

"Yes," she said. "It should glean certain amounts of knowledge from someone, based on what they are thinking about, but not their actual thoughts."

"How does it work?" Jason asked.

"I'm just going by instinct, here," Farrah said. "I'm thinking back to when we met you and learned you were an outworlder. Rufus said that every outworlder gets a power that acts as a guide to their new world. I think this is mine, tapping into the knowledge of someone I trust and turning them into my guide. Try focusing your thoughts on a topic. Any topic, it doesn't matter what."

"I can do that," Jason said. He considered for a moment, thinking of common aspects of his world. Looked around, he picked cars. He started concentrating on the idea of cars and Farrah's eyes immediately went wide and she started jolting in her seat for a few seconds.

"Are you alright?" Jason asked as the fit passed.

"I am," she said although she looked exhausted.

"So, do you know about cars now?" he asked.

"I do," she said.

"Think you could drive one?"

"No," she said. "I think the ability operates similarly to a skill book, although I can't be sure, having never used one. The difference seems to be that a skill book gives specific and specialised knowledge, even skills, while this ability gives more of an overview. I understand what cars are and how they operate, more or less. There's a lot of peripheral information that didn't make sense to me, and won't until I get a lot more knowledge."

"There is a lot to learn," Jason said, concentrating again. Once more Farrah was jolted in her seat.

"That's exhausting," she said unsteadily. "I should be judicious in what I want to learn, because I can only do that so often."

"Agreed," Jason said. "Essentials first."

"Do you really consider Magnum P.I. to be essential?" Farrah asked. "I'm not even clear on what television is, exactly."

"Oh, it's essential," Jason said. "It's going to come up a lot."

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Farrah was astounded at the plane, promptly learning about them from Jason. It left him worried about his own rather sketchy understanding of aerodynamics. If she was going to be learning about his world from him, she might end up with some strange ideas.

Following her initial outburst of emotion when they first met, Farrah had shown almost no signs of distress over what she went though. This started to worry Jason as they boarded the private plane and took to the skies. It was just the two of them, plus the pilot, co-pilot and one attendant who had apparently been instructed to be as non-intrusive as possible. After the plane settled into its flight, Farrah took Jason's advice and went into the sleeping cabin.

Unguarded in her slumber, Jason felt the brutal nightmares through her aura.