

## Chapter 301

### I'm Mysterious Now

On the way back from picking Emi up at school, Jason suggested they take advantage of the warm day. Casselton had pleasant winters as it were and the afternoon temperature had climbed into the high twenties. The unseasonable heat was begging the beach town's residents into the cool waters of the Pacific.

On hearing that Jason didn't have any swimwear, Emi had insisted on stopping to pick some up. CB Surf and Bike sold mostly surf gear in the summer and mountain bike accessories during the winter. Most of the winter tourism was from mountain bikers taking advantage of the mild weather and preponderance of bush trails that snaked through the Casselton region.

That left a limited selection of surf wear, given the season, but it was not an issue to pick up some boardshorts. He also grabbed rash shirts for himself and his niece, which would cover up his scars as well as protect them from abrasions if they took a spill during the surprise Jason had planned.

On reaching the houseboat, Emi's own swimwear and a change of clothes was retrieved from her house via portal. She and Jason were soon skimming across the water on a pair of black jet skis, heading away from the marina. They moved parallel to the shore, past the big houses with small private docks and the scraggly stretch of bush where kids were playing in the creek outlet. The kids looked up as Emi whooped and hollered at them from the back of her jet ski, returning Emi's wave.

Jason and Emi continued on, out in front of the small town's eponymous beach. It looked like they weren't the only ones taking advantage of the heat after school, with the white, sandy shore full enough that the Surf Life Saving Club had people out on full patrol. They rode their jet skis into the shore, leaving them as they wandered up to the caravan park tuck shop across the road and Jason purchased them an ice cream each.

Emi was approached by some of her friends who were also at the beach. Emi had lived in Casselton Beach for a year and, like both of her uncles, was quick to make friends. She happily showed off the jet skis, which rapidly cemented Jason as the cool uncle. Emi and Jason took off again, Jason steering them back toward the houseboat when Shade informed him that Erika was wrapping up at work. Jason and Emi each claimed a bathroom to shower in, emerging not long before Erika's arrival.

"You need to talk to Mum," Erika told him as she stepped from the pier onto the lower deck.

"I'm fine, thanks for asking," Jason said. "Yourself?"

"She's been calling me constantly since yesterday," Erika said. "If she weren't dealing with all of Nanna's stuff she wouldn't leave me alone at all."

"When can we go see Grand Nanna?" Emi asked emerging from the houseboat to join them on the lower deck.

"Tomorrow," Erika told her. "I'll pick you up from school and we'll go straight out to Great Uncle Robbo's farm."

"Can't we just teleport?" Emi asked.

"Sorry, Moppet," Jason said, ruffling her wet hair. "I've got an important meeting tomorrow."

"Uncle Jason," Emi complained, straightening her hair with her fingers.

"Erika, I'm a little surprised you didn't send Mum here," Jason said.

"Oh yeah, to the magic houseboat made of clouds," Erika said. "As if springing your resurrection on her at the hospital wasn't bad enough. I know you and Mum have issues, but dragging this out is just being a dick."

"Mum, you said a bad word," Emi said.

"Emi," Erika said. "What did I tell you about swearing?"

"That it's an arbitrary assignment of negative value to words with no inherent negative value based on outmoded moral strictures," Emi groaned.

"Good girl," Erika said.

"You know my teachers don't see it that way," Emi muttered.

"That's why you have to use your judgement," Erika said. "Social context is important. At Uncle Robbo's farm you hear all kinds of words not appropriate for the school setting."

"Uncle Robbo keeps trying to get me to drink beer," Emi said. "I'm not sure that's a healthy educational environment."

"He used to do that to me too," Jason said, then switched to a gravelly voice. "Go on, Jason, just a sip. It'll put hair on your chest."

"He said the exact same thing to me," Erika laughed.

"I don't want hair on my chest," Emi said. "Also, beer definitely doesn't do that."

"Alright, Emi," Erika said. "I need to talk with your uncle for a bit, so go get a start on your homework."

Emi grumbled but retrieved her school bag and made her way up to the top deck while Erika and Jason went inside.

“I’ve curated the next set of recording crystals to avoid things Emi isn’t ready for,” Jason said. “I’ve set the crystals out in the media room, so once Dad and Ian get here, you can dive straight in while I go see Mum.”

“What is it that you’ve taken out?” Erika asked.

“Some of the things I did. And were done to me. The real nasty stuff isn’t until later, but I don’t think Emi is ready for my ruminations on the ethics of killing people. Especially since those early ones are me being foolish and naïve about it.”

Erika frowned.

“Then you really did...?”

“Yeah.”

“A lot?”

“Yeah.”

The brother and sister looked at each other in silence for a long time.

“With everything going on around you after coming back,” Erika finally said, “I’m not sure if I asked you how you’re doing. Are you okay, Jason?”

“Being home helps,” he said. “I had a good talk with Dad. I spent a few hours out at his hill.”

“You visited the dirt pile,” Erika said. “You can see how many years it’ll take to get that into any kind of reasonable shape.”

“It’s certainly ambitious,” Jason said. “I think it might go faster than you think, though.”

“You’re talking about magic?” Erika asked. “I can’t believe I’m talking about magic like it’s a regular thing. You know you’ve turned my life insane, right?”

“I know.”

“When will you tell Kaito everything?” Erika asked.

“I’m not sure. I’m hoping to get a much better understanding of the local situation tomorrow, after which I’ll be in a better position to make decisions going forward.”

“Alright,” Erika said. “Jason, about those crystals you didn’t want Emi to see.”

“Shade has them,” Jason said. “Just ask and he’ll give them to you.”

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Jason sat in his mother’s darkened apartment watching a crystal recording that heavily featured Farrah. Her guidance had been so important to him in his early days in the other world, although it wasn’t until after she died that he realised how often she had been right and he had been wrong. It hadn’t stopped him from running his mouth, as projecting confidence had never been an issue for him, even when he had none.

Shade told Jason that his mother was arriving and he shut off the recording, returning the projector to his inventory.

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Cheryl trudged from her car into the elevator, her head swirling with revelations and stress. She hadn't been into the office in two days, which was completely unlike her, even over the weekend. After her mother's miraculous recovery, she had been spending her time at Robert's farm, helping her mother get settled.

As if that weren't enough, her dead son had returned to life, only to vanish on her all over again. After the shellshock revelation at the hospital, she had been trying to get more information out of her other children. Kaito didn't seem to know any more than Cheryl herself, while Erika was being obstructionist. Her own daughter refused to tell her where she could find the son impossibly risen from the grave, with their last few phone calls devolving into screaming matches.

She tapped the key card to access her apartment.

"You don't need to bother with the alarm," a voice said as she stepped inside. "It's already off."

Her son's voice was deeper than before. She looked at the silhouette sitting in the dark in one of her arm chairs. She flicked on the light, revealing him in full. She had only seen him briefly in the hospital, but now she started cataloguing the changes. Along with his voice was the beard and the small scars on his face. The eyes were the same, dark and hostile.

"Son."

"Mother."

"I thought I lost you."

"You did," Jason said, getting up out of the chair.

She moved forward to hug him, only to be struck by a wave of dread that sent her staggering back. Her hair stood up on end as her instincts screamed danger, until the sensation passed. Looking around, there was no indication of what had caused the sensation, yet she was certain it had come from her son.

"What was that?" she asked, rattled.

"Explanations will come," he said. "Not tonight."

She was unsure of what to do with herself, standing in the middle of the room but not willing to try moving forward again.

"How did you even get in here?" she asked.

"Mysteriously," he said. "I'm mysterious now."

She was having a hard time recognising her own son, but she caught a glimpse of the boy she remembered in the moment of silliness.

“Jason, after you died...”

“You still had the son you liked, so no big loss.”

“How can you say that?” she asked.

“Years of observational evidence. Kaito and Amy I get. We made choices that hurt each other. Their choices a lot more than mine, but we were all young and stupid. It took me a long time to get there, but I’m ready to try forgiving them. It’s not as easy as I thought it would be – I haven’t moved past it as much as I thought – but I can do it.”

He shook his head.

“But you,” he continued. “You weren’t young. You weren’t mired in hormones, love and friendship all tangled up in a rat’s nest. You were meant to be the detached one. I know parents have favourites, Mum, but you could have tried to hide it at least a little.”

“What I was trying to do was hold the family together through what was obviously going to be a crisis.”

“And how did you do it? The same way you did everything: by stepping on me.”

“It’s not like that, Jason.”

“I know you loved me, Mum,” Jason said, voice dropping soft and low as he bowed his head. “But I also know that you really didn’t like me.”

“That isn’t how it was, Jason.”

“You think I’m pulling that out of thin air? You spent twenty years showing me how you felt.”

“You weren’t the easiest child, Jason.”

“Oh, I didn’t realise it was hard,” Jason said. “That’s egg on my face, I guess. Sorry, just forget everything I said, then. Good seeing you, Mum.”

She skittered out of the way as he made for the door and opened it.

“I came back home for reconciliation,” he said softly, pausing in the doorway. “I know I haven’t helped, here, but there were things I needed to say before I had any chance of moving forward.”

Cheryl steeled her nerve and rushed at her son, grasping him tightly in a hug.

“My boy has come back to me,” she whispered, sending a shudder through his body.

“You need to stop bothering Erika,” he said softly as he extricated himself. “I’ll be around for a while, so look after Nanna. We’ll see each other again soon.”

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Ken and Ian left the houseboat after another session of watching recording crystals, Ian taking Emi home with him. Erika remained behind, watching one of the recording crystals she retrieved from Shade. The recording was of Jason in what she had come to recognise as his lodgings in the strange, magical city he had been living in.

"I killed some people today," image Jason said. "They weren't the first, and they were coming to kill us. I was on a job, escorting a shipment of magic coins."

He laughed, shaking his head in disbelief.

"This is my life, now. We were in these amazing sand skimmers, which is like an airboat, but for sand. Then we got attacked by – get this – sand pirates! Crazy right? They swept in and we fought them off. It was awesome."

He hung his head.

"It wasn't until after I got back that it occurred to me that I'd just killed eight people. And it was fun. Fun. Even now, I have trouble feeling bad about it. It's not like they were going to let us live, but protecting ourselves should be a grim necessity, right?"

He sighed.

"I'm starting to become afraid of what I'm turning into. What happens when I stop caring about human life altogether? I'm dangerous now. If I ever get home, will you even recognise the person I've become?"

The recording came to an end and Erika sat staring into the space it had been. Caught up in her thoughts, she was startled when Shade appeared at the door.

"Mrs Asano, your brother will shortly be arriving in the lounge."

She was waiting for Jason when he appeared through a portal arch.

"You saw Mum?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"You didn't show her the crazy teleport door, did you?"

"Of course not."

"Because I'm still processing all of this," Erika said. "Emi's young and she adapts quickly, but Ian and I are feeling pretty adrift."

"I know," Jason said. "The world is a different place, now."

Erika thought back to the troubled boy on the recording, afraid of what his family would see in him. The man in front of her was certainly changed. For good or ill, she didn't know.

"How did you cope in that place?" she asked. "You were completely alone."

"I wasn't," Jason said. "There were friends to help me. True companions, life and death. Rufus, Gary, Jory, Humphrey. Did you get to the recordings with Clive, yet?"

“You didn’t mention Farrah,” Erika said. “That seems odd given that she clearly was a mentor, even if you were the same age. Did you and her...?”

“No. She was very important to me, a teacher and a friend. Neither of us wanted more than that.”

“That Cassandra woman seems to pop up a bit. You didn’t mention her, either.”

“That we wanted,” Jason said. “She dumped me, eventually. Spoiler alert.”

“You want to talk about it?”

“Actually, yeah,” Jason said. “I’d like that.”

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After Erika left, Jason sat on the top deck, reading from one of Farrah’s more basic theory texts on magical formations. The heat of the day had cooled with the coming of night but it was still a pleasant evening. In any case, Jason’s bronze-rank body would take a considerable amount of cold to be uncomfortable. His phone rang and he looked at the listed caller.

“Anna,” Jason greeted as he answered. “Last minute scheduling conflict?”

“I wanted to talk about the other outworlder,” Annabeth said and Jason sat up in his chair.

“What about them?”

“I know that getting them out of the Lyon branch’s hands is important to you. We’ve managed to get the international committee to agree to pressure the Lyon branch, but the Network isn’t one large hierarchy. It’s a network of old secret societies and the international committee is more like a United Nations than an overlord. The branches are members, not subordinates, so they can only put as much pressure on Lyon as the members are willing to accept.”

“I get it,” Jason said. “You’re looking for a demonstration that my cooperation is valuable enough for this committee of yours to go to bat for me.”

“That’s exactly what I’m looking for,” Annabeth said. “If you have something like that for us tomorrow, we can get the ball rolling.”

“As it happens, I did prepare something,” Jason said. “I’ll send you a cloud drive link.”

Moments later, Annabeth had her phone on speaker as she scrolled through a file on the screen.

“Is this what I think it is?” she asked.

“Thousands of known essence combinations, plus some basic notes on the general tendencies of those combinations.”

Jason's living documents of Magic Society knowledge on monsters and essences wouldn't update while in another universe, but the information already recorded was more than enough to be going on with. In preparation for the meeting, Jason had Shade transcribe the contents of the magic tablet into a digital document.

"Is that the kind of gesture you're talking about?" Jason asked.

"Yeah," Annabeth said. "This will do nicely."



## Chapter 302

### Hardline Position

Jason woke early, did his weight training and then went through his combat training. Now that Shade was able to exert an amount of physical force, he could leverage his knowledge of Jason's martial art style to use multiple bodies and spar as part of advancing Jason's skill set. As Jason's skills progressed, Shade was moving into more big-picture aspects of the training.

"You need to develop your skills in a different direction to Miss Wexler," Shade said. "She uses the versatility of the style to develop what is essentially a specialty variant tailored directly to her proclivities and capabilities. There is no way she can remember the vast breadth of techniques that the style includes, but her focus gives her a specialised expertise."

"She's been practising since she was a child," Jason said. "I can't match that experience with anything but time, skill book or no."

"Indeed," Shade said. "Your personal advantage is that you are learning the style more in line with the original intention."

"Oh?" Jason prompted.

"As should be clear from the skill books retrieved during the Reaper trials, the Order of the Reaper's techniques are designed foundationally to include skill book use. Developing that many techniques to a useable state simply isn't possible without the memory-enhancement that comes of a high-rank spirit attribute. At your rank, skill books are the only way. Of course, incorporating those skills requires a specialised training regimen in and of itself, which Mr Remore was serendipitously able to provide."

"So I should be leaning into the breadth of techniques, rather than nailing down favourites like Sophie?"

"Precisely," Shade said. "Versatility and adaptability should be your watchwords. As we continue to practise, I will endeavour to bring out your full range of techniques."

After combat training, Jason went for a run. His bronze-rank speed and stamina attributes allowed him to set a relatively distant destination like Castle Bluff. Making his way out of town, he was pounding along next to the highway when a car passed in the other direction before it turned around and drove up to him. Jason's enhanced perception had allowed him to recognise the driver as his old friend Greg, who he hadn't seen since heading for university in Melbourne, while Greg had gone to Sydney.

"Jason?" Greg asked disbelievingly after pulling over and getting out of the car.

“G’day Greg,” Jason said. “It’s been a while.”

“Since you left for Melbourne or since you died?”

“Both, I guess,” Jason said. “How’ve you been, mate?”

“Alive. Consistently. What is a dead guy doing running along a highway in the middle of nowhere?”

“Fitness and wellbeing,” Jason said. “I’m bit of an exercise nut, now.”

“Where are you going?”

“Just running out to Castle Bluff and back.”

“That’s something like thirty kilometres.”

“Why do you think I was running fast?”

Greg rubbed his temples.

“This is insane,” he said to himself. “I’m going insane. I got in a car accident and now I’m in some weird purgatory with my dead friend and his surprisingly toned calves.”

“Okay, Greg, just calm down, mate. Take a deep breath.”

“Says the revenant from beyond the grave!”

“Okay, look. I’ve got an important meeting, later, so I need to get going, but let’s swap digits and I’ll give you a call. We can hang out.”

“Oh, we can hang out,” Greg said. “HOW ARE YOU ALIVE?”

“Because of the mystic powers I obtained in a magical alternate universe.”

Greg shook his head.

“I see you haven’t changed. Except for the beard. That does a really good job of breaking the lines of your chin. Or did you have some work done?”

“I did not have any work done!”

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Annabeth was making final preparations to leave when a woman in her mid twenties knocked on the open door. She was wearing an elegant pantsuit, which stood out considerably more than the bland, off-the-rack varieties the Network typically mandated. It was not an outfit that would be mistaken as the garb of a mid-level government worker. Her Mediterranean heritage had left her with a swarthy skin tone and dark hair, which were set off attractively by the maroon of her outfit.

“Miss Karadeniz,” Annabeth greeted, continuing to transfer items from her desk to her briefcase. “What brings you back to Sydney from the vaunted heights of the International Committee office?”

“The IC wants a representative in this negotiation. And please, Anna, since when is it Miss Karadeniz?”

“But you’re all fancy now,” Annabeth said with a smile.

“I was always fancy,” Asya said, causing Anna to chuckle.

“It seems odd that they sent someone from magitech research,” Annabeth said.

“I’m just an administrator,” Asya said. “My job is to keep the people doing the real work happy and funded.”

“Don’t you come from the Mid North Coast?” Annabeth asked.

“That’s why I requested the slot,” Asya said. “I actually went to school with Jason Asano.”

“Seriously?”

“Oh, yes. I even had bit of a thing for him, but he was obsessed with some basic white girl. There’s no accounting for taste.”

“You can offer us some insight, then,” Annabeth said. “Contrast him with his pre-magic self.”

“That’s why they approved the assignment, although it has been a number of years. I went to his memorial service, so I was quite startled to hear his name in relation to the Sydney incident.”

“You’ve read the reports?”

“Oh yes,” Asya said. “His showing up in your kitchen was interesting. I wouldn’t be too worried about reading it as a threat. He always did like to unbalance others for social advantage. Also, he’s unlikely to despoil a kitchen.”

“Glad to hear it. About my wife; I don’t particularly care about the kitchen.”

Asya laughed.

“I’m more interested in the paintings he obtained from your wife,” she said.

“You think they matter?” Annabeth asked. “I figured it was just a power play, to show us we aren’t untouchable.”

“Jason prefers having more than one reason to do a thing,” Asya said. “Both paintings were by the same artist, as your wife no doubt told you.”

“Yeah, some kind of wannabe Banksy, playing it all mysterious.”

“I’d appreciate if you could task some people with looking into the artist more closely.”

“I can do that,” Annabeth said and fished out her phone to make a call.

“Aram,” she greeted. “Do a deep dive into the artist whose paintings Asano purchased from my wife. Dawn, that’s the one. Thanks.”

Annabeth returned her phone to her pocket.

“Done,” Annabeth said.

Keith arrived outside the office.

“Miss Karadeniz, always a pleasure.”

Annabeth’s office had been Keith’s when Asya was still a member of the Sydney branch.

“Mr Culpeper,” Asya greeted.

“Anna,” Keith said. “How would you feel about riding up the coast with Miss Karadeniz? The contingent has grown sufficiently that an extra car might not be a bad idea.”

“How many people are we up to now?” Annabeth asked.

“There’s us three,” Keith said, “plus the government liaison.”

“Who did they send?” Annabeth asked.

“Gordon Truffett,” Keith said.

Annabeth and Asya both groaned.

“He’s not that bad,” Keith said, at which both women gave him a flat look. “Okay, he’s a little pushy.”

“Why would they pick someone like him?” Annabeth asked.

“I heard he’s close to the Prime Minister,” Asya said.

“The Prime Minister chose him personally,” Keith confirmed.

“Then I will ride with you, Asya. If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

“Who else?”

“Gladys is coming along,” Keith said. “She’s going to check in on Asano’s grandmother. We’re also bringing Nigel.”

“What for?” Annabeth asked.

“We suspect Asano has a means to advance without monster cores. I thought bringing our own non-core obsessive might prompt Asano to open up.”

Annabeth and Asya had also never used monster cores, but that was a matter of policy. All executive-level Network personnel were given essences to raise them to category one, but cores were mostly saved for the lower-ranked enforcement team members who served on the frontline of Network activity. Only committee members like Keith were raised up to category two with cores.

“That’s a good idea,” Asya said. “Jason could be quite passionate when he got caught up in something. Nigel might get him to drop some useful nuggets without costing us any concessions.”

“How well do you know him, exactly?” Keith asked.

“It’s been a long time,” Asya said. “I think making too many assumptions based on the way he was seven years ago has the potential to cause more mistakes than playing it by ear.”

“Probably sensible,” Keith said. “Shall we go, then?”

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While Keith’s car was an unremarkable sedan with government plates, Asya’s car had the appearance of a 1962 MGA Roadster. It was another hot day and they had the soft top down, Annabeth and Asya enjoying the coastal drive.

“So you’re from Casselton Beach?” Annabeth asked.

“Definitely not,” Asya. “I’m not poor.”

Annabeth gave her a sideways glance.

“My family didn’t invent capitalism,” Asya said unashamedly. “We just won it. Of course, I know my way around Casselton Beach. It’s where all the interesting boys came from. Children are so often tedious.”

Annabeth gave Asya another look.

“I won’t apologise for being exceptional amongst my peers,” Asya said.

As they reached the outskirts of Casselton Beach, Annabeth started feeling slightly ill. Gladys called her on the phone.

“Are you feeling that?” Gladys asked as Anna put the phone on speaker.

“You too?” Annabeth asked.

“I’m pretty sure it’s worse for me. I think something’s wrong with the magic, here.”

“Was it like this when you were here last time?”

“I didn’t come here last time,” Gladys said. “The hospital is in a different town.”

Annabeth turned to Asya.

“Is there something weird with the magic in this town?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Asya said. “I’ve been here since getting essences, but there wasn’t anything like this.”

“Maybe Vermillion will have answers,” Annabeth said.

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Vermillion’s home was a mansion nestled amongst rich bushland, just a few minutes out of Casselton Beach. The Network negotiation team arrived at his place prior to the meeting and he met them in his wide driveway. Asya parked her car, got out and gave Vermillion a quick hug.

“This is where the Burman family used to live,” Asya said. “The first time I ever got drunk was in this house.”

“Small world,” Vermillion said. “How’s the car treating you?”

“Oh, I love it,” Asya said. “I did have a few modifications made.”

“I could tell,” Vermillion said. “That engine noise is artificial, right?”

“No slipping anything past you,” Asya told him.

“If that were true, I’d still be in Sydney,” Vermillion said. “I am finding this to be a nice change of pace, though, and if it’s excitement I want, I suspect that Jason will provide more than enough, sooner or later.”

“Do you know what’s responsible for the magical deficit in Casselton Beach?” Keith asked.

“That’s Jason,” Vermillion said. “He apparently decided to monopolise the local magic. Fortunately, this place is just outside the field of magic consumption. I don’t want to fall into a torpor like those crusty old world vampires.”

“So, what do we do about the magic?” Keith asked. “It put me through a loop, and I’m only category two. I hate to think what Ms Erstweller will go through.”

“I can tough it out,” Gladys said.

“It won’t be a problem,” Craig said. “While most of the town is magically anaemic, you’ll find Jason’s houseboat to be quite comfortable.”

“He’s concentrating the magic on his house boat?” Keith asked. “How?”

“Magically, I’d assume,” Asya said. “Shall we go?”

For the trip from Vermillion’s place, the government liaison, Gordon, was displaced from the front passenger seat to make room for Vermillion. Despite his protests, he wound up in the middle of the back seat between Gladys and Nigel the combat trainer.

“What exactly is your purpose in this negotiation?” Gordon asked Gladys unhappily.

“I’m here to keep you alive when Asano pimp slaps you across the room,” Gladys said.

“You do seem to lack a basic sense of self-preservation, Mr Truffett,” Vermillion said. “Most people would be wary about offending a category three, given that they could pull you apart like toffee on a hot day.”

“Asano had something that I don’t understand, medically,” Gladys said. “He has scars.”

“Why is that unusual?” Keith asked from the driver seat.

“You don’t get into any fights, so you probably wouldn’t know,” Gladys said. “Nigel, you were a soldier. Have any scars?”

“Used to,” Nigel said. “During the change when I ascended to category one they went away. Now I don’t get them, no matter how bad the injury. Magically or naturally healed, they don’t leave a mark.”

“I’m curious as to what kind of injury leaves a permanent mark on one of us,” Gladys said. “I’d rather know what does it ahead of time than figure it out after some of our people run into it.”

“And we front-liners appreciate the concern,” Nigel said.

It only took a few minutes to drive into Casselton Beach and down to the marina.

“Is that thing Asano’s houseboat?” Annabeth asked as she stepped out of Asya’s roadster.

“Now we’re talking,” Asya said. “I wonder where he picked it up?”

“I suspect availability is limited,” Vermillion said as he got out of Keith’s sedan.

They made their way along the dock to find an eerie shadow figure waiting on the lower deck. It had the shape of a man wearing a cloak. but seemed to have a negative presence. It was as if instead of existing, it was a hole in the fabric of the universe.

“I am Shade,” it said in a cold, oddly British voice. “Given the warmth of the day, Mr Asano is taking a swim after his morning run. Please come aboard.”

The Network group glanced at one another while Vermillion stepped aboard.

“Hello, Shade,” he said.

“Good day, Mr Vermillion.”

The others stepped onto the lower deck and felt a sensation like stepping from the desert heat into an air conditioned room.

“Oh, wow,” Gladys said. “It’s like I just ate a spirit coin.”

“You should find the condition on board quite acceptable,” Shade said. “Please follow me.”

The group followed the floating shadow around the lower deck to the far side of the houseboat where they found Asano relaxing on a pitch black air mattress in the water. He was wearing only a pair of boardshorts, with his toned torso marred with scars on full display. The peppering of smaller scars were dominated by a large, ugly line running from his right hip, across his abdomen and around his left midsection. It looked like the kind of wound that a person was unlikely to survive to have scar over.

The air mattress turned onto a cloud of darkness and Asano vanished into it, immediately emerging from their shadowy guide like he was stepping through a door. He grabbed a towel hanging on the deck rail, rubbing it over his head before draping it over his shoulders.

“Best come in, then,” he said, moving up to the tinted glass wall, which slid open to access the bar lounge. “Lovely to see you, Asya. If I recall correctly, you had ambitions to join ASUS.”

“I was headhunted for a more exciting opportunity,” Asya said as the group followed him in. The interior of the houseboat simply but expensively appointed in white leather and rich wood.

“I can imagine,” Jason said, moving behind the bar. “Fighting monsters is definitely more exciting than exploiting our international neighbours to enrich the government’s corporate donors.”

“I have to protest to that description,” Gordon said.

“Protest away,” Jason said, putting a series of glasses on the bar and scooping ice into them. “Who are you, exactly?”

“I represent the government in these negotiations. Gordon Truffett.”

“Well, now you’re Other Gordon,” Jason said. “I’ve already got a Gordon, and he’s more important than you.”

“Is this how you start a negotiation?” Other Gordon asked indignantly.

“You’re right,” Jason said. “Give and take is part of the process. Hey, Gordon.”

Another dark, cloaked figure appeared, although this one was quite different to Shade, who seemed to have vanished when no one was looking. The new presence was a disembodied cloak, within which swirled an eye-shaped nebula. Four glowing orbs floated around it.

“This guy thinks you should be Other Gordon,” Jason said, pulling a large pitcher from one of the two large refrigerators. Gordon responded by turning on Other Gordon, making a slow, menacing approach. Nigel stepped between them.

“Alright, Gordon,” Jason said and the figure vanished. “Sorry, Other Gordon. Looks like actual Gordon’s taking a hardline position.”

Other Gordon was holding himself stable with a white-knuckle grip on the back of a chair. Jason poured lemonade into each of the glasses, taking an approving sip. Vermillion and Asya took glasses without hesitating.

“This lemonade is incredible,” Asya said. “I definitely want to stock some of this. Where did you get it from?”

“Lemons,” Jason said. “The secret is to put the lemon peel in with the sugar for about twelve hours so the sugar soaks up the fruit oil. That’s where the flavour is. Now, I need to show Anna how to make a proper sandwich, but we can talk while I do. Why don’t we start with introductions?”



## Chapter 303

### Otherwise Best Avoided

“I think we should start,” Keith said, “by getting everyone on the same page in terms of who we are and what we do.”

“I think that’s my cue to go,” Vermillion said. “Now that the meeting has been facilitated without anyone trying to kidnap anyone else, I’ll bow out to allow you to share secrets without concerning yourselves over a third party.”

“Thanks, Craig,” Jason said. “We’ll catch up later, yeah? Hang on; I’ll put your sandwich in some paper.”

Jason wrapped Vermillion a sandwich and Shade escorted the vampire away, leaving Jason with the Network contingent. Jason was standing behind the bar while the others had taken seats at Jason’s invitation.

“How about I get the ball rolling?” Jason said, continuing to assemble sandwiches. “We can go through my story, I can tell you what I’ve figured out about your little club and then we can do questions and corrections as you tell me about yourselves.”

“Before we begin,” Gladys said, “I’d like to ask about your scars. My understanding is that scars shouldn’t be possible for people like us.”

“Why is that?” Jason asked.

“Because we heal using the soul as a template,” Gladys said.

“Doesn’t that answer your question?” Jason asked.

“Wait,” Gladys said. “You’re saying that your soul is scarred?”

“I think marked might be a more accurate term,” Jason said. “Soul scars are usually what they call it in the other universe but I have more experience with this than most. The soul is a resilient thing and it can’t truly be harmed by external forces. Even the most extreme, which I have tested quite thoroughly.”

“Then what causes those marks?” Gladys asked.

“Your soul is who you are, at the core,” Jason said. “Some experiences change you, fundamentally. Standing against an enemy you didn’t think you could survive. Enduring a tribulation you thought would annihilate you. The scars left behind might be from the wounds you suffered, but the reality is that you put them there yourself.”

“Psychological scars made manifest,” Gladys reasoned.

“Something like that,” Jason said. “I spent some time with a healer well-versed in soul trauma. I learned a lot from him.”

“What about that tattoo on your back?” Nigel asked. “We use magic tattoos ourselves, but nothing that elaborate.”

“I’ve used a regular magic tattoo in the past,” Jason said. “I lost it when I ranked up to bronze. From category one to two.”

“The same happens with ours,” Nigel said.

“This one on my back is different,” Jason said. “It’s called a personal crest and it’s a physical representation of my soul. It allows me to prove that I’m me, regardless of how much my aura might change. It’s impossible to replicate, as far as I’m aware, which stops some shape-shifter from assuming my identity. Of course, that’s only if someone checks it. If a dragon takes my shape to steal biscuits, for example, then people probably won’t go to the bother.”

The Network team shared uncertain looks.

“Dragon?” Annabeth asked.

“His name’s Stash. Adorable little fellow, but he does get up to mischief.”

“You expect us to believe in dragons?” Other Gordon asked.

“Mate, I got sucked through a dimensional flare into an alternate universe. If you’re going to balk at the first magical creature that comes along, then you might as well just sit there quietly and be grateful your name isn’t Other Colin.”

“What?”

“I think, Mr Truffett,” Keith said, “we might be best served by listening instead of talking.”

“Can I get a better look at your tattoo?” Asya asked.

“I’m not sure turning my back on you lot is the smartest choice,” Jason said, “but okay.”

He came out from behind the bar and turned around, giving them a clear view. The crest took up his entire back, depicting a starry night sky dominated by a disembodied cloak. It was not unlike Gordon in appearance, except that instead of an eye-shaped nebula there was a bright, daylight sky contained within it. The crest shimmered and moved slightly as they observed it. After a moment, Jason turned back around and retook his position behind the bar.

“That’s what your soul looks like?” Asya asked.

“From the outside,” Jason said. “From the inside it’s more like a garden.”

“You’ve seen the inside of your soul?” Gladys asked.

“I’ve had some experiences that have developed my capacity for self-reflection,” Jason said. “I’m sure we can talk about the specifics at a later date. What you need to

know now is that I went to a magical alternate universe, died a couple of times, obtained magical power and knowledge and came home.”

“What do you mean, died?” Annabeth said.

“Dead. Croaked. Shuffled off. Do I have to do the whole parrot sketch? The important thing is that I came back stronger every time, so I’d advise against killing me.”

“That’s quite a claim,” Keith said. “I don’t suppose you have any way of substantiating it?”

“Mate, it’s death; you don’t get a receipt. I don’t think. Shade...?”

“No,” Shade said.

“Shade’s dad is in charge of the afterlife,” Jason said. “He refuses to tell me what happens to souls when they die, though. My personal recollection is hazy at best.”

“That is not for the living to know,” Shade said.

“What do you mean, in charge of the afterlife?” Annabeth asked.

“Are you familiar with great astral beings? They’re kind of like super gods. Your regular gods, that you’ll find on any world with enough magic, are on a scale of your Zeus, Odin, etc. Great astral beings operate on more of a cosmic scale. That’s your ‘knocking out a universe in seven days’ crowd. Shade’s progenitor is the Reaper, who takes charge of the dead. We haven’t met, but he seems like a stand up guy. He might be a little cross with me because I keep dodging him, though.”

“These are some outrageous claims you’re making,” Annabeth said. “Even by our standards.”

“Which means you’re either telling us fibs,” Asya said, “or giving us insights into some of the most fundamental questions about reality.”

Jason flashed her a grin.

“Stick with me and I’ll show you the cosmos,” he said.

“I might just hold you to that,” Asya said.

“Do you have the means to travel between worlds?” Annabeth asked.

“No,” Jason said. “My journey was unexpected, in both directions. I am, however, going to find one.”

“You told one of my people that there was more than one other world,” Annabeth said.

“Yes,” Jason confirmed, “although I only visited the one. I don’t know much about the others. What’s relevant to our dealings here is what I brought back with me. I have a few material resources, but that’s a minor matter. More important to us all is the knowledge.”

“What kind of knowledge?” Keith asked.

“Before I go into that,” Jason said, “I’d like to explore your side of things for a moment, now that we’ve discussed mine. Let me begin by going over what I’ve been able to surmise about your Network.”

“Please do,” Keith said. “I’m curious as to what an outsider has been able to piece together.”

“Well, I think the seeds of your organisation were planted somewhere in the vicinity of half a millennium ago, probably by one or more outworlders who roamed around founding secret societies. These secret societies were most likely predicated on the existence of essences, although that’s a guess. At that time, I imagine there were few, if any opportunities to encounter monsters or other magical resources. Essences were probably hoarded and used by only a few, maybe even one person for each of the secret societies.”

“Did you get this information from Vermillion?” Annabeth asked.

“Some of it,” Jason said. “I filled in a lot of the blanks he didn’t know myself. Now, I’m guessing that when these secret societies were founded, they were each given access to something. Some means of detecting and interceding in certain magical events. Events that either began happening or started to significantly escalate in frequency, somewhere around the turn of the twentieth century.”

“That’s not inaccurate,” Keith said.

“The incidents in question are, I’m assuming, the formation of short-lived, proto-astral spaces. I’m not sure what you call them locally, but I’m talking about unstable dimensional pockets attached to the world. I’ve only encountered the stable variant myself, although I have studied the theory.”

“We call them dimensional incursions,” Annabeth said. “The primary purpose of the Network is to find the incursions, enter them and prevent the entities there from making it into our world.”

“How does that work?” Jason asked.

“Each incursion contains a number of hostile entities,” Annabeth explained.

“Monsters,” Jason said.

“We use the term dimensional entity, or DE,” Annabeth said. “We send tactical teams to eliminate them. The secondary entities are inconsequential, but each incident has one or more of what we call an anchor dimensional entity, or ADE. If we take it or them out, then whatever is left disappears into the ether when the incursion space breaks down.”

“How long does that take?” Jason asked.

“Forty-three hours, as a baseline. Slightly longer with a more powerful ADE, but fifty-one is the record. That was with a category four ADE.”

“Gold rank?” Jason asked. “You have people strong enough for that?”

“There has only been one category four incursion to date,” Annabeth said. “It took a small army of category three tactical personnel plus a large amount of military firepower to handle it.”

“We’ve been working on magically enhanced heavy ordnance ever since,” Asya said. “We aren’t equipped to tackle an increase in incursions of that level, though.”

“When we fail to eliminate the ADE,” Nigel said, “any DEs still around when the incursion space breaks down are injected into our world.”

“We’ve prevented this in all but a few, isolated incidents,” Keith said. “Luckily, they were each in remote locations where there were minimal casualties and we were able to cover. Mostly.”

“We use the incursion space to harvest magical materials,” Asya explained. “Those materials are critical to maintaining our ability to resist incursion events. Essences and awakening stones are the most valuable materials, as you might imagine.”

“Over the last century,” Annabeth said, “both the number and strength of the incursions have been escalating, just as you said. We’ve managed to keep up thus far, given that more powerful incursion spaces mean better harvests. We’re reaching the point where we don’t have the resources to raise our people beyond category three. There’s been talk of pooling resources to try and get a small number of our most exceptional people worldwide to category four, but negotiations aren’t going well.”

“Trouble choosing which branch gets the category fours?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Keith said. “The obvious solution is to place them directly under the command of the International Committee and dispatch them globally at need. Unfortunately, the more powerful branches in the US, China and Russia are pushing back on that. Since they are the primary source of spirit coins, they can’t just be ignored.”

“You don’t have spirit coin farms,” Jason said. “That makes sense. Earth doesn’t have the magic and coin formation takes months, so you can’t do it in the proto-astral spaces. Are you getting your coins from loot powers?”

“Yes,” Keith said. “And the major powers make a point of trying to poach anyone who gets such a power to maintain their monopoly. They offer the kind of terms that are hard to turn down, although naturally many do. None of the Australian branches currently have anyone with a looting power.”

The others all turned an unfriendly glare on Other Gordon.

“The last two we had,” Keith said, “the government facilitated their exchange to the US, in return for political concessions.”

“Not even something that would help us do our job,” Anna said.

“Those deals were made in good faith,” Other Gordon defended.

“You’re not on TV, Truffett,” Annabeth said. “Don’t bother with the transparent lies.”

“Obviously, what we want from you,” Keith said, turning back to Jason, “is anything that will help us deal with the incursions. If you really do have a looting power, then supplying us with spirit coins is something we would be more than willing to demonstrate our appreciation of.”

“The real holy grail is the category three bottleneck, though,” Asya said. “If any of that knowledge you brought back can help our people reach category four, we’ll give you whatever you want. Enough hard currency to sink a container ship. Exemption from polygamy laws. Bora Bora.”

“Miss Karadeniz may be somewhat exaggerating,” Keith said, “but the magical deficit of our world creates choke points that significantly impact our operations. If you have any means to alleviate this, you will find us to be extremely generous.”

The Network contingent looked at Jason with anticipation, all but hanging off their seats as they awaited his response. He took a bite of his sandwich, paused to look at the sandwich appreciatively and then resumed thoroughly chewing it.

“Mr Asano...” Keith began as Jason swallowed, holding up a finger to indicate a pause as he slowly drained his glass of lemonade.

“Oh, that’s refreshing,” Jason said happily.

“Mr Asano...”

“Hold on a sec,” Jason said, retrieving the pitcher from the refrigerator and slowly pouring himself another glass. “Anyone else want a top up?”

“Please,” Asya said, eyes twinkling as she returned her glass to the bar. Annabeth flashed Keith a look of apology as she did the same.

“It’s really good,” she confessed.

“I can’t wave a magic wand and solve your problems,” Jason said as he finally emptied the pitcher. “Well, not all your problems.”

A wooden box appeared in his hands and he came around the bar to sit it on the table, where he slid off the lid.

“Two thousand iron rank spirit coins,” he said. “Category one, I guess.”

He took out a much smaller box and opened it as well.

“Two hundred category two.”

Next to the boxes he placed a pouch down with a clink. The crystal spirit coins had a different sound to ordinary metal coins. It was distinctive and almost ethereal, like fine wind chimes in a delicate breeze.

“Twenty category threes,” Jason catalogued. “Call it a goodwill gesture for the trouble I’ve caused. I think you know what is spurring my goodwill in this instance.”

“The other outworlder,” Annabeth said as Keith goggled at the boxes, running his fingers over the neatly stacked rows of coins.

“That’s very generous,” Asya said.

“I’m not a middle of the road bloke,” Jason said. “I like to think I make a good friend and a bad enemy. I’m otherwise best avoided, since I tend to cause trouble.”

“We’ve noticed,” Annabeth said.

“Now there’s your big problem,” Jason said. “Getting your people over the line into category four. I can’t help you with that. I daresay you have a better understanding of core-based advancement than I do.”

“That’s disappointing, I won’t lie,” Keith said.

“What I can do,” Jason said, “is help you to sidestep that problem entirely.”

## Chapter 304

### Terms

Jason looked over at Other Gordon.

“Are you sure that this guy should be hearing all this?” he asked.

“Participation in formal negotiations with outside parties is part of our agreement with the government,” Keith said.

“You know that when word about magic goes public, that’s where it’s coming from, right?” Jason asked.

“Oh, we know,” Keith said. “But that decision is settled, regardless of our personal viewpoints.”

“I resent the implication that...” Other Gordon started, only to trail off as a room full of hostile eyes turned on him. “The Prime Minister will hear about my treatment here!”

“And do what?” Jason asked. “Crap his pants in McDonalds again?”

“That’s an urban myth,” Other Gordon said.

“Sure it is,” Jason said, turning back to the others. “So, your real problem with the capabilities of your higher-rank members isn’t a matter of enough cores to break through to category four. My understanding is that monster core use is your primary means of advancement?”

“We call them magic cores, but yes,” Gladys said.

“I can tell from your auras that only some of you have been using cores. Just looking at the group of you, I’m assuming that essences are a privilege of rank. Anna and Asya, you are clearly sitting at baseline, with no advancement at all. Do you even have all your abilities awakened?”

“No,” Asya said. “And you’re right. Anna and I are executive level, while Keith is committee level. Nigel and Gladys are in the tactical and medical tracks respectively, which have their own standards, although Nigel is out of the ordinary.”

“I heard you had one guy doing things differently,” Jason said, looking at Nigel. “So, you’re him, yeah? What’s stopped you from sucking up cores? I’ve heard it’s been slow going.”

“It has,” Nigel admitted. “When I was first brought into the Network, I did all the research I could on magical combat. I found a number of references to non-core advancement in the oldest records, but it was like someone had gone through and excised them.”

“Nigel...” Keith said warningly.



“I’m sorry, Mr Culpeper,” Nigel said, “but I’m not letting this opportunity pass by, even if it is a controversial position. Mr Asano, I believe that core-based advancement was originally introduced as a method to control members through the magic core supply, only for that truth to be lost somewhere across the centuries and leave us with core-based advancement as the only path.”

“Well, I can’t speak to the history of your organisation beyond the broad guesses I’ve already made,” Jason said. “All I can do is to tell you is that there’s another way. It isn’t faster and it doesn’t make your abilities any more powerful, but the end results are individuals that are much more capable.”

Jason took a sip of lemonade before continuing.

“That man who attacked me, who you currently have in your possession. He’s silver rank. Category three. He should have had no problems handling me. Yes, he was trying to take me alive rather than take me out, which meant he couldn’t use a kill move with his opening attack, but he had me in one of the worst circumstances I could be in for a fight. He should have trounced me, but he didn’t.”

“You’re saying he was weak?” Nigel asked.

“Profoundly weak,” Jason said. “Same for his minions who tried to drag me off to France.”

“Where are those individuals?” Other Gordon asked.

“Last time I saw them they were heading up to Hanging Rock,” Jason said.

“Hanging Rock?” Other Gordon asked.

“I’m not offering a quick solution,” Jason said, ignoring Other Gordon. “I can’t really help your people who already use cores. What I am offering is a thorough solution. I can help you to bring up a new wave of people who are stronger than the last, using their powers to the fullest. I was taught using some of the best methodology for creating powerful essence users there is. I can’t train them as well as the people who trained me could, but I can still pass along the lessons I learned. I also have some tricks of my own that should prove useful.”

“You’re willing to train our people up to the standards of the other world?” Nigel asked.

“As best I can,” Jason said. “I’ll start with you, since you’ve been trying to reverse engineer the process yourself. I suspect that with some supplemental techniques, you’ll start leaping forward in advancement.”

“Can’t you just teach the people already using cores?” Annabeth asked.

“No,” Jason said. “Cores impede other forms of advancement. Once you go cores, you don’t go back, which is why professional adventurers on the other world don’t use them. They sell them or save them for their families so they can get the benefits of being essence users without putting themselves in danger. Basically, cores are what you give your Mum so she doesn’t have to fight monsters.”

“None of this changes the issue of not reaching category four,” Keith said. “You said you have a means to sidestep that problem.”

“If you have sufficiently capable people,” Jason said, “then you don’t need category fours. As I am right now, I could handle most silver-rank monsters alone. Category three, sorry. Don’t you find the number system less evocative and harder to remember? Sorry, I’m digressing. So, I can handle most category threes, and so long as it isn’t out on an open salt flat, I’d be willing to at least try any of them.”

“You’re that confident?” Nigel asked.

“I am,” Jason said. “That doesn’t hold true if you jump it up a rank, though. I don’t expect to do solo takedowns of category four monsters unless they happen to be very and specifically susceptible to my particular power set. A team of well-trained, silver-rank essence users should be able to handle almost any gold-rank monster, though. It’ll take probably more than half a decade to get there, but if I teach your people the foundational approach, then it should just be a matter of time before they get there themselves. I’m talking just about power use, here; I’m sure you have plenty of capable people to instruct them on combat skills.”

“That we have covered, yes,” Nigel said.

“So, that’s what I’m offering,” Jason said. “Everything you need to transform your roster of essence users over the next decade. There are other things, but they’re all secondary. I’m offering you the chance to transform the magical world.”

“You talk about big results,” Other Gordon said. “But you only promise them years in the future. This all sounds like a con.”

“You’re such a politician, Other Gordon. The Network doesn’t need a sound bite solution they can sell to people who aren’t paying that much attention. They need a fundamental change in the underlying infrastructure of how they operate. If they can’t see the value in that, I’m not the one losing out.”

Jason shook his head.

“Your friends here had me kidnapped, Other Gordon, so they don’t get to claim the moral high ground on this one. I’m not making any concessions for the purpose of proving that I’m on the level. You can accept it or not. If you can’t give me what I want, I’m happy

to walk away. I'm pretty sure I can get everything I need on my own, just with a little more effort."

"You won't find retrieving the other outworlder so easy without us getting them released," Annabeth said.

"You're right," Jason said. "But the hard way is kind of my thing. You haven't seen the list of who bet against me and lost, Anna. If I have to make a whole new list in this world, then so be it."

"Let's not go making any hasty decisions," Keith said. "You're saying you'll help us rebuild our entire tactical program if we get the other outworlder released?"

"No," Jason said. "Getting the other outworlder released is what brings me to the table. You don't get to ransom them to me."

"We don't have them," Keith said.

"The man responsible for kidnapping me is sheltering in your headquarters at this very moment. The person who kept him alive is in this room. You've got the same letterhead on the official stationary, so don't try selling me on their part of the Network not being your part of the Network. I had the crap kicked out of me, got collared and shoved into the boot of a car. You should be grateful that I'm not holding you responsible for that."

"We have wide-ranging concerns that go beyond just you," Annabeth said. "We can't just drop everything and work towards your agenda."

"I don't care about you, your problems or your perspective," Jason said. "This negotiation isn't about trading football cards. Your Network is holding a person against their will for no more crime than having something you want. The only reason I'm here to negotiate instead of in some shady rendition site is because the people you sent after me were pathetically weak."

Jason took a floral shirt from behind the bar and slipped it on, buttoning it up as he continued to talk.

"I know I come across as a light-hearted guy, with the lemonade and the sandwiches and the jokes."

Although his voice remained jovial, there was an undercurrent to it that tickled the hairs on the back of his guests' necks.

"I recognise that this may have led to the gravity of my concern on this matter being undercut. Allow me to rectify that. I am going to get that outworlder, whoever they are, out. That's just a fact. Maybe I die trying, but I've died before and it hasn't stopped me yet. If you help me, then we can put any unpleasantness behind us. If you won't, but you don't turn yourselves into obstacles, then okay. It's your organisation and I can't expect you to

go against your own team. But when I say gods help anyone who gets in my way, I'm being very specific. I know exactly what it means and that truly is what it's going to take."

As Jason talked, his aura ramped up until it was bearing down on the Network contingent like a weight. Only Gladys was able to truly hold up and even she was feeling pressured. The normal-ranked government official panicked and ran out the doors, sprinting around the outside deck towards the dock. The incongruent menace pouring off the barefoot man in a Hawaiian shirt and board shorts somehow made it all the more eerie.

The pressure receded, leaving the iron-rank Asya and Annabeth taking deep breaths, as if they'd just breached the surface of the water. Keith wasn't looking much better, while Gladys looked at Jason warily. Nigel was staring at him with wide eyes.

"Can you teach me to do that?" Nigel asked.

"To a degree," Jason said. "I can't replicate all the conditions that led to the current condition of my aura and you don't want me to. Some things aren't worth the price."

"And what is it that you want in return?" Gladys asked, taking over while the others were still recovering. "You haven't told us, yet."

"Nothing onerous," Jason said. "Mostly I want monsters."

"You want us to catch monsters alive?" Keith asked.

"No," Jason said. "I want dibs on killing any category three monsters in Australia. Further afield, if you can swing it. I want right of refusal on category twos as well."

"You want in on fighting the dimensional entities?" Nigel asked.

"Yes. I'm open to negotiation on dividing the loot, but I have no issue handing off most of the cores and spirit coins. I just need enough to meet my own needs. Aside from that, I have a few other requirements."

Gladys turned and looked at the wall.

"What is your shadow creature doing to Truffett?" she asked.

"He just mana drained him until he passed out," Jason said. "Can't have him causing trouble. He'll recover quickly on the houseboat."

"Asya, go check on him," Gladys said. "Upper deck."

"There's an elevator just through there," Jason said, pointing to the inner door. "Show her, please Shade."

"How many of those shadow creatures do you have?" Gladys asked as Asya followed Shade deeper into the houseboat.

"Just one."

"I sensed another one outside," Gladys said.

“Shade is an excellent multitasker.”

“What are your other requirements?” Keith asked, getting the negotiation back on topic.

“Small things,” Jason said. “I have some gold I’d like the Royal Mint to take off my hands without my getting audited or accused of arms smuggling.”

“Gold from the other world?” Annabeth asked.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“I don’t see that being a problem,” Keith said. “What else?”

“I’m going to get my family ready for when magic goes public,” Jason said. “The Network’s support isn’t strictly necessary, but it would be useful. You would also get to keep an eye on things, to head off any potential information breaches.”

“Again, not a deal-breaker,” Keith said. “It seems like what we need to hammer out are the specifics regarding your participation in our incursion response program.”

“How much are you allowed to decide now?” Jason asked.

“I’m empowered to make a preliminary agreement that I can put before the Steering Committee of our Branch and the International Committee. We aren’t looking to monopolise everything or we’ll just get more branches following Lyon’s lead.”

“You know that all this is predicated on the other outworlder,” Jason said. “I need to see some movement on that or we don’t have any kind of deal at all.”

“I can make that plain to the committees in question,” Keith said. “For now, I’d like to get some specific terms down that I can take back with me.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Let’s get down to it, then.”

As he and Keith moved to a table, Asya returned.

“How is he?” Gladys asked.

“Snoring,” Asya said. “Loudly.”

“You realise that he will be the one responsible for getting your gold organised,” Annabeth told Jason.

“What gold?” Asya asked.

## Chapter 305

### Section

Sitting at a table in the bar lounge of his houseboat, Jason spent considerable time hammering out details with Keith and Annabeth. For loot distribution, Jason would keep a percentage for his own needs and trade the rest for more ordinary remuneration, such as money or use of the Network's wide-ranging influence. Legally it would all go through his status as a security crisis contractor to one of the Network's front companies.

Other stipulations involved agreements on services and tertiary benefits Jason could access through the Network, as well as restriction on Jason's behaviour regarding secrecy.

"We'll need the family members you've informed already to agree to formal non-disclosure agreements," Keith said. "We'll do that through the government's existing classified information frameworks."

"I still have more people to tell," Jason said. "My brother, my sister-in-law and my mother."

"We don't love that you decided to tell so many people," Annabeth said. "We can live with it, though, so long as that's the end."

Eventually they came to a general accord.

"I'm comfortable taking what we have to the committees," Keith said, slipping the computer tablet he was taking notes on back into his briefcase. "Fair warning, though, Mr Asano: The committees are committees. They're going to want to change some details just to feel like they're in control."

"I think I've made my bottom line clear," Jason said. "If your committees want to make themselves feel like they're in control, I can probably accommodate a stipulation or two. If they want to make *me* feel that they're in control, you'll find me significantly less receptive."

"I'll do my best, Mr Asano," Keith said, standing up. "To be clear, my goal isn't to make them or you happy. It's to fulfil the Network's mandate of keeping people safe and maintaining secrecy."

"I can respect that," Jason said, standing to shake Keith's hand. As he did, Keith, Annabeth, Gladys and Nigel all received notifications on their phones, the same alarm-like sound for each. They glanced at each other as they took their phones out to check the messages.

"Is that notification of one of your incursion incidents?" Jason asked.

"It is," Keith said. "We'll have to skip the niceties and go, I'm afraid. Asya, I'll have to leave Mr Truffett to you."

"Of course," Asya said.

"Can I tag along?" Jason asked. "I'd like to see one of these proto-astral spaces for myself."

"I'm not sure that's appropriate until we've finalised our arrangement, Mr Asano," Keith said.

"Perhaps it's fair if Mr Asano gets a look at what he's agreeing to throw himself into," Annabeth said.

"It might help if you can go to the committee with a sense of his true abilities," Nigel added.

"Come on, Keith," Jason said. "I'll even give you all the loot. You want another big pile of spirit coins, right?"

"That's certainly tempting, Mr Asano, but this wouldn't be a sightseeing trip. It's a category three incursion."

"Oh, nice," Jason said.

Keith turned to Annabeth.

"You are head of operations, Anna," he said. "If you're okay with it, I'll defer to you."

"Alright," Annabeth said. "Don't make me regret this, Asano."

"Looks like the location isn't too far," Nigel said, looking at his phone. "Accessibility might be an issue and they're sending a helicopter."

"Where are we heading?" Jason asked.

"Dorrigo National Park."

"Oh, nice," Jason said. "I love it there."

"You might like it less crawling with interdimensional monstrosities," Keith said.

"Wow, you do not know me at all," Jason said. "If we're going to chopper out, I'll go grab your car."

"What do you mean, grab my car?"

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"I've never encountered a proto-astral space before," Jason said. He was speaking through the headphones they were each wearing as their helicopter flew over mountains. "I've read about them, but that's no substitute. What can I expect to walk into?"

"Incursion spaces can take a number of forms," Nigel said. "Most common is some variant of the space it's connected to, although those variants can be very extreme. The magic is usually very thick, although occasionally it's very barren. Kind of like your town."

“It wasn’t quite the same feeling,” Gladys said, “although the results were much of a muchness. Did I sense the solar panels of your houseboat sucking up all the magic?”

“Yep,” Jason said.

“When an astral space has low-magic conditions like that,” Nigel said, “the real challenge is environmental. We need to use spirit coins to keep our personal magic levels stable. In those cases, the ADE is usually the only monster that spawns, which is a blessing.”

“What did ADE stand for again?” Jason asked. “After dinner something?”

“Anchor Dimensional Entity,” Annabeth said. “If you’re going to join in our operations, Mr Asano, you’ll need to act with some professionalism.”

“When you see me get down to business, Anna, you may find you prefer this side of me. Nigel, what about the proto-spaces that aren’t magical deserts.”

“Then we tend to have the opposite problem,” Nigel said, “and the incursion space is swarming with DE activity.”

“Which is definitely preferred,” Keith said. “The higher the magic, the more bountiful the harvest. Inert magical materials, essences, awakening stones. We have specialist harvest teams that work alongside the tactical teams to make the most of every incursion.”

“It may seem like we’re profiting off the danger to our world,” Annabeth said, “but those resources are critical to protecting it.”

“I believe you,” Jason said. “I know what it takes to fight monsters and Earth is a magical wasteland.”

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There were already multiple military helicopters on site when they arrived, descending into a valley. There was no single open space large enough for all of them, so multiple clearings were being used. It was a full scale military operation, one of the ‘terrorist readiness exercises’ that Jason had heard about.

Nigel and Gladys hurried ahead along a bushland trail toward the main area of operations. Anna, Keith and Jason made their way at a more measured pace.

“We’ve been working with a special military unit formed for exactly this purpose,” Annabeth explained. “We provide the military with category one enhanced firearms. The military’s primary role is to protect the harvest teams until the ADE is neutralised, at which point our tactical teams will cooperate in maximising harvest yields and any necessary mop up.”

“Are you going in?” Jason asked.

“No,” Annabeth said.



“We don’t have the training,” Keith explained. “We’d just get in the way of the people who know what they’re doing.”

“My job is administration and logistics,” Annabeth said. “As Operations Director, my job is to get the right people to the right place with the right resources and let them do their thing.”

As they drew closer to the centre of operations, the ambient magic grew stronger.

- 
- You have entered the vicinity of a proto-astral aperture. The ambient magical saturation has increased. Your recovery rates will remain at normal levels without spirit coin consumption.
- 

They arrived at a bustling military camp Jason was startled to realise was only about an hour old.

“These military guys sure set up fast.”

“They’ve had a good amount of practise.”

“So they all get magic guns?”

“All the ones who go in,” Anna said. “It’s why spirit coins are important. That’s what we make magical ammunition from.”

As they reached the edge of the camp they were approached by a pair of armed military personnel. Jason could sense the low-level magic in their sidearms.

“Mrs Tilden,” one of the soldiers greeted with rigid politeness. “Is this Mr Asano?”

“It is,” she said.

“Come with me, please. Mr Asano, please follow Private Cowell.”

The private led Jason through the camp to where Nigel was gearing up outside a tent while barking directives at a mixed group of people in military camo and paramilitary black. Nigel’s own gear was black; fatigues under magical tactical armour. Unlike the soldiers, he carried no firearms, just a magical, thigh-mounted knife.

Nigel’s gear was very basic magic. Humphrey’s power to conjure weapons for his summons produced items very much of the same kind. Even basic, though, they were still bronze-rank items and would do the job for which they were intended.

The private deposited Jason nearby as Nigel dismissed the squad leaders and marched off with Jason in tow. They arrived at a group dressed in the same black tactical gear as Nigel, although most were holding guns. Jason could sense they were all bronze-rank essence users and, except for Nigel, core users.

“You’ll be with my section for protection,” Nigel told Jason.

“What am I protecting you from, exactly?” Jason asked, which drew a chuckle from Nigel’s section.

“Mr Culpeper’s directive was to keep you safe,” Nigel said. “That’s what I intend to do.”

“No offence, Mr Thornberry,” Jason said, “but I’m safer alone.”

“It’s Thornton, not Thornberry,” Nigel said.

“Who am I thinking of?” Jason wondered aloud. “Sorry, I’ll just stick with Nigel.”

“We carry out tactical operation in nine-man sections,” Nigel explained.

“Hey,” the solitary female member complained.

“Sorry, Darce,” Nigel said. “We operate in an eight-man, one Darcy section, broken into three groups by broad power type. We’ve got heavies, who have the powers to give and take the big hits. That’s Darce, Jonno and Higgy.”

“Higgy?” Jason asked. Higgy was a good-looking man of Indian descent.

“H.I.G.,” Nigel explained. “Handsome Indian Guy.”

“I’m not Indian, Thorny,” Higgy complained. “I’m from bloody Woolloongabba.”

“Then we’ve got our scouts,” Nigel continued, “who are what it says on the tin. They have powers that make them fast and – if they can keep their damn mouths shut – quiet.”

“That’s one of my things as well,” Jason said.

“One of?” Nigel asked.

“I have a lot of things,” Jason said.

“We prefer to get really good at one,” Nigel said. “Our scouts are Orange, Green and Woolzy.”

“Because I’m from Woolloongabba,” Woolzy said.

“Which is bullcrap,” Higgy said. “Why couldn’t I be Woolzy?”

“Me and Higgy were recruited together,” Woolzy confided. “He got the looks and I got the talent.”

“Talent for riding my coattails,” Higgy muttered.

“That’s enough out of you two,” Nigel said.

“Why Orange and Green?” Jason asked.

“Well,” Nigel said, “they have the same last name and one of them is from the town of Orange, so we call him Orange.”

“Are you from a town called Green?” Jason asked Green.

“Nope,” Green said, without further explanation.

“Do you have the same first name?” Jason asked them.

“Nah,” Orange said. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Okay then,” Jason said.

“Saving the best for last,” Nigel said, “due to me being one of them, is the hitter group. We’re the sweet, meaty chunks of this stew and we’re all about that damage.”

“Meaning they aren’t worth a damn without the rest of us,” Orange said.

“The other hitters are Cobbo and Digit,” Nigel introduced. “I recommend against asking about Digit’s moniker.”

“Suffice to say,” Digit said, “that there are certain services one might procure from a lady of negotiable chastity for which it behoves one to check the quality of said lady’s cuticle care.”

“Meaning don’t let a prozzy stick a finger up...” Orange said before Nigel cut him off with a sharp glare.

“I’m sure he gets the idea, Orange. Now, this time around, our goal is to introduce Mr Asano here to exactly what it is we do and bring him back very not dead. Mr Asano, we can get you suited up if you like, although I imagine you have your own gear.”

“I do,” Jason said as dark mist appeared to engulf him. A few seconds later it passed to reveal Jason in his combat robes and cloak. He pushed the hood back off of his head.

“That’s a neat trick,” Higgy said. “Ever tried it in a phone booth?”

“Oh, I totally should,” Jason said. “If I can find one.”

“Are you that bloke from the news?” Woolzy asked.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“What’d a bunch of bikers come after you for?” Orange asked.

“It was a huge bloody balls up,” Jason said. “I was hanging about with my mate Vermillion, who’s a vampire, but I don’t hold that against him. Some other prick vampire didn’t like it, so he sent some bikers to mess me up. Problem is, this other vampire’s thick in the head and doesn’t realise a very obvious problem. If you take a bunch of bikers addicted to vampire blood, cut off their supply and then tell them you’ll turn it back on if they do a thing, they get *really* worked up about doing that thing. The inevitable happens, the bikers go nuts and suddenly they’re firing guns from the back of motorcycles in the middle of the highway when every sod and his mum are out driving to bloody brunch. Now, I’ve got my uncle in the car and I’m not going to let a bunch of bikies shoot him full of holes, so I step out. Suddenly I’m all over the telly.”

Nigel was quietly observing as Jason’s mannerisms shifted more in line with those of his section, along with some subtle changes in his aura that brought it more into line with theirs.

“Is that the guy who runs Club Vermillion you’re talking about?” Woolzy asked. “I always wanted to check that out, but it’s a Cabal club. Normies and Cabal only.”

“I get in,” Higgy said.

“That’d be bloody right,” Woolzy complained.

“Is that a magic sword?” Jonno asked, looking at the hilt poking out from under Jason’s cloak.

“Yep,” Jason said. “A mate made it for me.”

“Nice,” Jonno said. “They won’t give us anything bigger than a knife.”

“Jonno,” Darce said, “you conjure an M61 Vulcan. That’s a Gatling gun from a jet fighter, yet you won’t shut up about getting a bigger knife.”

“Sometimes you don’t need a rotary cannon,” Jonno complained. “Sometimes you need a big knife. A sword would be even better.”

“Do you know how to use a sword?” Jason asked.

“Could you teach me?” Jonno asked.

“Don’t answer that,” Nigel said.

“Hey, Asano,” Orange said. “How come you sound like an Aussie but look like a Jap?”

“I dunno, Orange,” Jason said. “How come you sound like an arsehole but look like... actually, that checks out.”

The section all laughed.

“Yeah, fair enough,” Orange grumbled.

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The Network’s paramilitary nine-person sections were assembled, along with their actual military counterparts. The organisational structure seemed quite similar, with the Network appearing to have adapted much of theirs from the military. The sections formed by military personnel were based on weapons rather than essence abilities, with the heavies, scouts and hitter groups of the Network sections replaced with gunner, scout and rifle groups respectively.

“Once the boffins get the aperture opened up,” Nigel explained, “SOP is to secure a beachhead on the other side and assess local conditions. Once we have a stable landing point, we go hunting the ADE while the harvest sections get to work. Lucky for us, the ADE radiates a nice, detectable signal. That means we can go after it and the harvest teams stay out of its way. Green is our signals man, and he’s going to lead us right to it, aren’t you, Green?”

“Yep.”

“Asano, you need to do as I say, when I say it, no complaints,” Nigel said. “Your job is to do what you’re told and not die.”

“I won’t lie,” Jason said. “Those are both things I’ve struggled with in the past. Since I’m a self-invited guest, though, I’ll do my best.”

## Chapter 306

### Core Users

As a Network team set up a ritual to open the aperture to the proto-astral space, Nigel talked Jason through the assembled force. The Network's tactical presence consisted of two platoons of three nine-person sections. Four of the six boasted silver-rank tactical division members, while a specialist medic section also had Gladys.

"Those five make up the entire category three contingent of the Sydney branch," Nigel explained. "The network does not hold back with category three incursions."

Jason hadn't known how many silver rankers the Sydney branch had, as Shade had only spotted Gladys during their time in Sydney. The tactical personnel either spent their time at another facility or practised better informational security than the healer.

"So you're the only section with no category three?" Jason asked.

"Thorny's the only category two the Ditto trusts to run his own section," Digit said.

"Ditto?" Jason asked.

"DTO," Nigel explained. "Director of Tactical Operations, Koen Waters. He's the strongest of our category threes. That's him there, giving orders."

Nigel pointed out the four people radiating silver-rank auras. One of the men was an Indigenous Australian issuing instructions to the other three.

"Once we go through the aperture, he's the man on the ground with the final say on all operational decisions," Nigel said. "Master under God, as it were. Sections are expected to operate independently, though, since all the magic in dimensional spaces tends to fuzz-out comms. It's not like they don't work at all, but they have a habit of being unreliable, especially when a lot of powers are being thrown around."

"Actually," Jason said, "I might be able to help, there."

"Help how?" Nigel asked.

"I have a power that can serve as a communication system. I got a bump in the numbers it can affect when I hit bronze, but I never had the people to make the most of it."

"What's the range?" Nigel asked.

"About a half-dozen clicks, under normal conditions," Jason said. "With this much magic, at least a dozen, maybe fourteen."

"Clicks," Orange said. "Look at you with the military lingo."

"Yeah, because I've seen a war movie any time in the last thirty years," Jason said. "I guess you do seem like someone who doesn't get closer to movies than running a dog fighting ring in an old Blockbuster store."

“That’s enough,” Nigel scolded as the team cracked up laughing. “Give me a rundown of this ability.”

Jason explained his party interface’s voice chat function to Nigel, who then took him to do the same for the DTO.

“It can do a sixty-person raid group, with each member able to access two discrete channels,” Jason explained. “Each of up to six ten-person parties gets their own, plus another one that’s group wide. That won’t let us include the military, but it should just cover your Network contingent.”

Jason invited Koen and Nigel to a group. The two men were startled as they encountered his interface but Jason quickly demonstrated the functionality.

“This is in line with powers I’ve seen from some international branches,” Koen said. “We’ve never had access to it before, which makes you my new favourite person, Asano. Comms is the second biggest operating concern we have.”

“What’s the biggest?” Jason asked.

“Where to take a dump in active combat,” Koen said. “That being a non-factor for essence users does more to ease our operations than any power in our roster.”

Koen called back the other section leaders so that the tactical sections would be expecting it when Jason sent out raid group invites. Gladys was very different from Jason’s previous experiences. The air of flirtatiousness was replaced with one of cool professionalism. Jason warned Koen that going through the aperture would most likely break the link, but Koen wanted to do it anyway. Getting the people used to the power before they went through would save trouble when it was reapplied on the other side.

Jason returned to Nigel’s section while Nigel remained with Koen, discussing revised operating procedures given access to reliable communication.

“So, you have video game powers?” Digit asked Jason. He was Nigel’s second in command of their section. Nigel’s official rank was section leader, while Digit was section second. That was equivalent to a corporal and lance-corporal, respectively.

“Something like that,” Jason said, glancing over at Koen and Nigel. “Why does Nigel get his own section when he’s only a category two?”

“They were in the army together,” Digit said. “When Koen was bumped from Chief Training Officer up to Director of Tactical Operations, he recruited Nigel to replace him. Most of us actually grew up in Network families and got our essences without any kind of combat experience. We have people from the families who’ve been trained, of course, but we like to pull in more contemporary soldiers like Koen and Thorny to keep us current.”

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The aperture to the proto-astral space wasn't visible to the naked eye, although magical senses made it extremely easy to see. It was a more tenuous bridge across dimensional boundaries than a normal aperture, appearing to Jason's senses as if it might collapse at any moment.

It couldn't be traversed in its natural state and a team of network ritualists worked to stabilise and open the aperture. It was a similar process to opening up the archway into the astral space the Order of the Reaper had occupied, with the aperture at the centre of a large magical diagram. Mana lamps were unnecessary, as the aperture itself provided all the magic needed.

Jason watched with interest as the ritual was carried out, after which the aperture took the form of a normal, open astral space aperture. Jason went through with the rest of Nigel's section.

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- You have entered a zone of extreme magical saturation. Magical manifestations will occur at an increased rate.
- 

They arrived in a lush jungle, the air heavy with magic and humidity both. Through the canopy he glimpsed a large tower made from crude brickwork. The bricks were little more than crudely shaped rock held together with roughly slathered-on mortar.

"We see a lot of repeat scenarios," Nigel explained to Jason. "Usually the geography is similar, thus we're still in a valley. Jungle could be better, but could be worse. Good news: Probably no weird magic to impact our items and abilities. Bad news: This jungle will be crawling with venomous monsters. All kinds of serpents, primates with poisonous wrist barbs, giant bugs, big cats. Those are the least likely to have poison, but don't rule it out."

As Nigel went through his explanation, he led his people and Jason away from the aperture to allow more people to pour through. Nigel's section took up a perimeter position alongside the other Network tactical sections as the military teams moved in; first the combat soldiers and then the logistics people, alongside the Network's own auxiliaries.

"That tower in the distance," Nigel pointed out, "means we're dealing with giants, based on the scale and construction methods. A lot of the category two roamers we see will probably be troll and ogre variants. Jungle giants are smaller than most variants, around three metres tall. They're faster than the typical giant; not what you'd call agile, but they'll surprise you if you aren't careful. Expect some exotic abilities like poison breath and camouflage. Trust your aura and magic senses over your eyes."

"Good to know," Jason said. "You know, poison and giants are right in my sweet spot."



"I'll have to take your word for it," Nigel said. "Your job is to observe, not to fight."

"Will do," Jason conceded. "There'll be other chances."

"The category three anchor entity will most likely also be some kind of giant," Nigel said.

"ADEs, plural," Green corrected him. While the others were watching the jungle around them, he was occupied with a computer tablet in his hands. The tablet had magic engraving carved directly into the back, looking like an odd combination of magical diagram and simplified circuit board.

Each Network section had what they called a signaller which, in Nigel's team, was the laconic Green. The signaller had two primary tasks. One was to maintain communications gear, which was notoriously unreliable around heavy magic, while the other was to track the anchor entities that were the ultimate goal of the operation.

"I'm tracking three ADE readings," Green said. "That might be three big ones or three clusters, moving in groups."

"My guess would be small groups of stronger trolls or ogres," Nigel said. "That's a good thing. Multiple ADEs means we have to track them all down but they'll be individually weaker. When we're dealing with category threes, we like them as weak as we can get. Increased numbers we can live with since, as you can see, we have numbers of our own. We throw almost everything we have at category three incursions."

"What do you keep in reserve for other incursions if they happen?" Jason asked.

"We have four reserve sections on standby," Nigel said. "They'll be able to handle anything below a category three incursion if one pops up."

A ground base was assembled in startlingly little time, this time Jason getting to watch as Network members who could manipulate earth or even directly reshape it into simple buildings went to work. Koen did multiple comm checks with Jason's power while this was going on and once the military took over for the Network teams maintaining the perimeter, Koen sent the sections out into the jungle. Before being sent out, each section was supplied with poison resist and antivenom potions.

"I'm good," Jason said when they were offered to him. "Poison works like a recovery potion on me."

Nigel's team all turned to him.

"What?" he asked. "I told you that poison's kind of my thing."

"Is anything not your kind of thing?" Darce asked.

"Store-bought mayonnaise," Jason said. "Make it yourself or don't use it. Oh, and canned beans."

“I like canned beans,” Cobbo said. It was the first time Jason had heard the flat-faced, taciturn man speak.

“I’ll make you some proper baked beans,” Jason promised. “It’ll change your life.”

“Make double-sure to keep Asano safe,” Koen said over voice chat as the Network teams started making their way into the jungle. “He’s not just a VIP observer, now; he’s our communication’s hub.”

Nigel’s team was not assigned to pursue any of the ADE targets. That was left to the four groups with silver-rankers, while Gladys’ team acted as a roving support unit. Nigel’s team was tasked with sweeping an extended perimeter of the camp, reducing the number of bronze-rank threats the military needed to deal with. The iron-rank bullets in the military’s guns would hurt a bronze-rank monster but they would blow through an expensive stockpile of ammo for each one they dropped.

Nigel’s team carried bronze-rank carbine weapons, although most had them slung away. Nigel and Jonno both conjured their own guns, which would consume their mana for ammunition instead of expensive, bronze-rank bullets. Higgy carried a conjured shield and no weapon at all.

“I don’t love being called Higgy,” he confided in Jason as he conjured his shield, “but at least they didn’t go with Captain America.”

Darce, Digit and Cobbo also had conjured weapons; a whip, bow and spear, respectively. Only the scout team of Orange, Green and Woolzy kept their guns in hand.

Darce had preternatural control over her segmented iron whip, which she quickly demonstrated as they made their way through the jungle. Lesser monsters started coming out of the jungle every few minutes, their fearless, berserker rage completely at odds with their lack of threat. The others left them to Darce and her dancing whip, which struck them down out of their air.

Jason was astounded at the sheer number of monsters in the proto-astral space, trumping not just the other world but even the magically-saturated astral space in which he had spent months in constant battle. He had wondered how they managed to collect enough cores to field such a large force of bronze-rankers, but that quickly became clear. Jason’s ability to loot extended to the entire raid group, to the delight of Koen. He did have to revise procedures on the fly again as loot rained down on anyone who touched a kill.

Jason was reduced to a magic wi-fi hotspot as he withheld from joining the fights, even against powerful bronze-rank monsters like a hydra and a hulking bog ogre. His only active contribution was to drain poison from the team to save on their consumables.

The section's teamwork was something Jason paid significant attention to as they took down monster after monster. His own team had refined their teamwork to the point of excellence, but in a very different way to the Network operatives.

Jason's team was a collection of individuals who learned to dynamically reconfigure their approaches to build varying synergies that maximised their potential in any given circumstance. It was an approach that made the most of each individual's full suite of abilities, which both promoted versatility and helped advance those abilities to higher ranks.

The Network section's teamwork had clear origins in military tactics, with the group forming a lean, effective unit able to act in perfect unison. Their coordination was all about coming down on any threat like a hammer, taking it out before it had any chance to respond. Each member only used a handful of powers, but each one was a force multiplier to the team's effectiveness.

The scouts rarely used their guns with the expensive ammunition, instead baiting monsters into overlapping fields of fire from the other team members and their conjured weapons, throwing in some effects to hinder and control. Orange, as it turned out, was an affliction specialist like Jason. His abilities were more about inflicting debuffs than damage, though, setting enemies up for the team.

The team was highly offence-oriented, with three Onslaught confluence essences amongst them. Jason knew that was a favourite amongst humans in the other world, due to its synergy with the human aptitude for special attacks.

Watching the team of core users work together, Jason started to realise that they were making the most of their nature as core users. He knew from his own training, where he had many discussions with Rufus, that core users often focused on subsets of their essence abilities. Without the need to use every essence ability in order to advance them, they could ignore whole sections of their power set.

Rufus had always framed this as a universal bad, as they were wasting elements of their kit and leaving potential synergies on the table. Watching the military-style tactics of the team, though, Jason recognised that his own team would never be able to fight in that manner if they wanted to advance their abilities. The core users could ignore this restriction to develop an incredibly focused approach.

It was not something Jason would ever go for himself, since it would be hampering his own advancement, but he couldn't help but admit that it was effective. Jason had been expecting a bunch of second-rate core users, but was forced to acknowledge that they had made the most of their advantages.

Jason also suspected that the uniformity of their approach would make it much easier to swap personnel between teams. The more individualistic nature of an adventurer team made it hard to accommodate new or temporary members, and losing a member could be crippling. The Network, he imagined, would find this much less of a problem.

One thing that stood out was Nigel. Jason had originally thought it was the lack of proper training techniques alone that was slowing Nigel down, but it became clear that fighting like a core user was also impeding his progress. Nigel would need to fight more like an adventurer and less like a soldier if he was going to start advancing his abilities more quickly.

While he came to admire the tactics of the core-users, he also spotted a critical weakness. If that weakness came into play on this expedition, he knew he might not remain an observer after all.

## Chapter 307

### What You Call Observing

Jason saw flashes of what Nigel's team could bring to the table if they fought more like adventurers. While the general approach was for focus fire tactics, they each had specialties that were pulled out against various creatures.

The scouts rarely used their firearms full of expensive ammunition, instead using their powers to support the team in combat when they weren't actually ranging ahead in search of threats. Jason was surprised to find that two of them were affliction specialists. Green was a wide-area type, using various word-of-power abilities to impede enemies.

Orange was more focused on singular targets, like Jason. His evil-eye power set did little damage, though, instead setting his team up to enhance their focus-fire strategies by making enemies more susceptible to damage and impeding defensive abilities.

The last scout, Woolzy, was a fast-moving melee striker with the Swift, Foot and Knife essences combining to form the Master confluence. Of all the team, he was the most adventurer-like in his tactics, using bursts of staccato movement to set up assassination-style special attacks. He would only conjure his twin knives right before striking, leaving them buried in the victim.

Woolzy's role was to beat fast and agile monsters at their own game before they used their mobility to outmanoeuvre the team. He guarded their flanks, leaving them free to rapidly focus-fire through the primary enemies.

His speed was very different from Sophie's flowing, uncatchable grace. While Jason knew that Sophie would envy Woolzy's powerful attacks, Jason much preferred her ability set. He did admit to himself, though, that he possibly had his own case of burst damage envy.

Other members had their own times to shine. The shield-wielding Higgy would also erupt into bursts of speed, but to intercept attacks, rather than deliver them. Like Woolzy, his job was to let the team do their job unfettered, intervening to absorb the attacks into his shield. Every hit seemed to charge it up, as every so often he would unleash an overwhelming counterattack in the form of a conical wave of force.

Darce had the most exotic power of the team, summoning a brass steam golem to give them more frontline presence. Her summon had a number of differences from observations Jason had made of other summons. The steam golem was cheaper to summon, mana wise, but had a limited power supply. That supply was rapidly consumed, and all the faster if the golem used its special attacks like firing scalding steam.

The golem's weak longevity was paired with a much shorter cooldown, though, of half an hour compared to the usual six, and Darce didn't need a summoning circle to call it out. All this, plus the need to give it more direction than a normal summon, led Jason to believe it wasn't an actual summon. He suspected it was an ability he had heard of but never seen before, known as a puppet power. Rather than summoning an independent creature, it created a very sophisticated conjured object.

The meat and potatoes of Nigel's section was the hitter team consisting of Cobbo, Digit and Nigel himself. Cobbo used conjured spears, mostly throwing them with almost bullet-like speed. He would occasionally make devastating charging attacks or conjure a pike when monsters charged the team in turn.

Digit used a conjured bow, making flashy special attacks, while Nigel was quite conventional with his conjured rifle. With his black paramilitary gear and assault weapon, he would fit right into an autocratic dictator's extrajudicial death squad.

Nigel showed more of his capabilities when the team was attacked on all sides by a wave of small and weak, but multitudinous monsters. His rifle vanished as he tossed it aside and conjured a pistol in each hand. He moved forward slowly while continuously turning around, pistols blazing in every direction as he shot the leaping stoat monsters right out of the air.

Nigel wasn't looking to aim, firing to either side and even backwards, yet every shot landed on target. Bullets even whizzed past his own team on their path to dropping one monster after another. Jason continued to not participate in that encounter, although he did call up Gordon who used pinpoint beams to strike down any of the diminutive monsters that drew too close.

Jonno also used a conjured assault rifle for most tasks, and likewise had other gun forms available at need. Unlike Nigel's pistol configuration, Jonno's other weapon was a rotary barrelled machine gun, which he slung from his hip like it was an eighties action movie.

"Bit of a mana hog," Jonno explained, "so I only pull it out for the big stuff."

That gun was to be outshone when the group encountered a trio of silver-rank jungle trolls, half the height again of a human. Jonno conjured up a third gun, so large that even hip-slung it seemed like he should be toppling over. The rotary machine gun was already an image of excess, while this was a full-blown rotary cannon.

Jonno didn't fire immediately, instead letting his team go to work. Darce called up her golem, which launched into one of the trolls but was quickly being overpowered. Higgy used his charged shield to send one stumbling back while Nigel conjured a grenade

launcher to blast the third. A grenade to the face rang the troll's bell, but was far from a kill shot and they could visibly see it start to heal.

The purpose of their stalling tactics was to give Orange time to cast a curse spell three times over, chanting the same words for each.

*"Let the scales of power sway."*

"They all landed," he said, clearly surprised that none of the spells were resisted. He didn't know that Jason's aura had already lowered the resistances of the trolls. "You're good to go."

The barrels on Jonno's ridiculous weapon spun up with a whir before erupting with thunder as a terrifying storm of bullets started chewing into the trolls. Jason realised that Orange's curse must have temporarily negated the damage reduction from rank disparity.

The silver-rank monsters weren't especially tough examples of their rank, but they still had silver-rank physical fortitude. This was the only reason they weren't instantly turned to chum by the ludicrous weapon, Jonno's endless stream of bullets was cutting through them like a saw through a tree.

Jonno's mana was depleting at an absurd rate. Before that moment, Jason didn't realise someone could blow through mana so fast he could pick it up with his magical senses. From the look of Jonno, it was doing a similar job with his stamina.

Jason grabbed a silver-rank recovery potion he had taken from the archbishop of Purity and held it up to Jonno's mouth.

"Drink," he ordered.

Even the over-ranked potion bought Jonno only seconds more uptime with his crazy gun, but seconds were critical as the trolls finally collapsed under the barrage. Jonno's gun vanished and he collapsed right after, Jason helping him stay upright. As Jason pulled a camp chair from his inventory for Jonno to rest, the remainder of the team swarmed the trolls, pouring flasks of liquid over them that started combusting shortly after exposure to air.

"You have to torch them," Nigel explained as they watched the trolls burn. "Otherwise you can kill them and they'll still heal up."

"D&D rules," Jason said. "Burn the trolls."

Jason recognised that Jonno's huge gun filled the same role as Farrah's lava cannon: a showstopping power that devoured mana like pigs with a fresh corpse.

"We need to make sure the bodies are properly burned up or they won't stay dead," Nigel reiterated. "Jungle trolls are one of the physically weakest varieties but their recovery strength is incredible. Fire, fortunately, shuts down the regeneration of just about anything

you can get to burn. This bronze-rank everburn oil can be made fairly cheaply, so we all carry it for regenerators.”

Jason suspected that the alchemists of Earth were on the same path as Jory of making the most of lesser ingredients. His magic senses were sharp enough to differentiate Jory’s bargain potions from the good stuff and he got a similar feeling from most of the alchemical items he had seen in the Network’s possession.

“Are you alright, Jonno?” Jason asked. “You look like you’ve run a marathon.”

“I’ll be right,” he said. “Thanks for that potion.”

“No worries,” Jason said. “Don’t go taking another one any time soon, though. That was a category three recovery potion.”

“Yeah, I can feel it,” Jonno said. “Good thing mana recovers so much faster here.”

“You should see Mr Asano’s houseboat,” Nigel said. “It has the same mana recovery effect.”

“Seriously?” Jonno asked. “How do I get one of those?”

“Go to an alternate reality and then enter a contest to go to a pocket dimension where you compete against the most skilled young essence users in the world to pass a series of trials laid down centuries earlier by an ancient order of assassins that worship the lord of the afterlife,” Jason said.

“No one’s selling them online?” Jonno asked.

“I haven’t checked,” Jason said with a laugh. “Maybe one of those companies that makes custom super yachts can help you out. In the meantime, wait until that potion is out of your system and then eat this.”

Jason handed over a bronze spirit coin, which Jonno held up to examine.

“Is that you?” he asked.

“Yep,” Jason said. Jonno turned the coin over and read the text embossed onto the back.

PRODUCT OF JASON.

G’DAY MATE.

“You are a weird bloke,” Jonno told Jason. “And that’s coming from a guy who just killed a bunch of trolls with his magic airplane gun.”

Nigel checked in on Green, who was the team signaller. As the signaller, it was Green’s job to pay attention to the ADE tracking, even when hunting it wasn’t their job. He did so with a computer tablet that seemed to merge magic and technology, something Jason was fascinated to explore later.

“Those category threes weren’t one of the ADE groups were they?” Nigel asked.



“No, Boss.” Green said. “All three ADE signals are well clear of us. These were definitely ordinary roamers.”

Nigel bowed his head unhappily.

“Problem?” Jason asked.

“Only the ADE should be at the category cap for the incursion space,” Digit explained. “We’re seeing more and more roamers breaking that rule, though. Word is that it’s a sign that we’re going to start to see category four incursions. They had one in the UK a couple of years ago.”

“That kind of speculation is above our pay grade,” Nigel said firmly.

“All due respect, boss,” Cobbo said, “but since we’re the ones standing at the front, we’re the first people who get to speculate. If that’s above our pay grade then they’re free to pay us more.”

The rest of the section, on the lookout for more monsters, nodded.

“We have more immediate concerns,” Nigel said, opening up the voice channel to Koen. “Koen, we just ran into some category three jungle troll roamers. The ADE will probably be something with more grunt.”

After reporting in, the section was back on the move.

“Those category three monsters mean that the anchor monsters will be stronger?” Jason asked.

“That’s been the experience so far,” Nigel said. “We won’t be dealing with category fours, but it’ll be from the more dangerous end of category three. It might not be so bad individually, seeing as there’s more than one ADE, but the rules went out the window once a category three roamer showed up. Mr Asano, I’d advise you let us escort you back to the camp.”

“I’d rather stay,” Jason said. “It sounds like you might have need of me.”

Nigel let out a reluctant sigh.

“Mr Asano, I don’t doubt you’re a capable combatant. I’ve seen the footage of you fighting the category three from France. But I have orders and you don’t have the coordination with our units. I don’t doubt you can tear up some monsters, but I am not going to lose people because you wandered into their field of fire and they held back.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “I’ll stay out of the fray, but I’m not going back to camp.”

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While the silver-ranker led teams continued to track the anchor monsters, Nigel’s section became more aggressive in their sweep of the extended perimeter, bringing their patrol range closer the camp. If a category three reached the camp, iron-rank bullets were

not going to stop it. There were bronze-rankers amongst the Network's harvest teams who were trained enough that they could step up if needed, but probably not without casualties.

Given the situation, Koen had ordered the harvest teams back to camp.

"Nigel," Jason said. "There's another category three 900 metres in that direction," he said, pointing. "It looks like it's approaching one of the harvest teams as they're pulling back."

"And how do you know that?" Nigel asked.

"It's possible I have some friends looking around," Jason said innocently.

Nigel frowned but ignored Jason's behaviour for the moment to stay focused on the priority of keeping the harvest teams safe.

"How reliable is your information?"

"100%" Jason said.

"Alright. Section, move out, double time. Don't think we won't be having a conversation about this later, Mr Asano."

As the team moved rapidly through the jungle, they saw a distress flare rise up into the sky.

"Looks like the DE found them," Nigel said, glancing at Jason to find that he wasn't there. "Bloody hell, Asano."

"Sorry," Jason said over party chat. "I thought it was more important to move fast and I didn't think asking you would facilitate that."

The team came across a clearing where a toad the size and shape of a Volkswagen Beetle was belching out poison gas. It was adding to an already huge cloud of sickly green that filled the clearing and was now spreading further into the jungle.

Although it was silver-rank, it was far less dangerous than even an individual troll, at least to the team. The monster's only true threat was its breath, which failed to penetrate a shimmering screen manifested by Higgy. Orange again stripped the rank-disparity damage reduction and an onslaught of special attacks made relatively short work of it. Just as they were wondering how to find Asano and the harvest team in the lingering miasma, a big black ute came rolling out of the greenish cloud. It had no driver but stricken harvest team members were piled into the tray with Jason standing over them, holding out his hands.

*"Feed me your sins."*

With the incantation, the red glow of life force emerged from a member of the harvest team, tainted with green murk. The stain was extracted, rising up to be absorbed into Jason's waiting hand.

While that was still being completed, Jason chanted the incantation again and a second person started to be cleaned alongside the first. Then a shadow hand emerged from Jason's torso for a third simultaneous cleanse, followed by another. As the fourth began, the first finished and Jason moved on to another harvest team member with his first hand.

With four going at once, the nine-person harvest team was cleansed of the silver-rank poison before it was able to finish them off. Many of them were a lot worse for wear, however, only being iron-rank. If Jason hadn't prioritised their cleansing over the bronze-rankers, then it would not have gone as well.

Jason hopped down off the ute as it pulled to a stop in front of the team. As several of the team started checking on the poison victims and feeding them potions, Nigel marched up to Jason.

"Mr Asano, I thought we had an understanding. Is this what you call observing?"

"I observed that these people were going to die," Jason said. "If we'd had this conversation before instead of after those people would be corpses, not survivors."

"Better to ask forgiveness than permission?" Nigel said. "We have standing operating procedures for a reason, Mr Asano. A silver-rank monster isn't something you cavalierly take on."

"No, Nigel. It's something *you* don't cavalierly take on. If I couldn't take on monsters like that alone, I'd have died a dozen times over. Look, I'll admit that I wasn't expecting much from your Network teams and you've really turned me around. Your tactics are perfect for sweeping through monster infestations this thick."

Nigel opened his mouth to speak but Jason fired off a harmless but startling burst of aura to silence him.

"While I have been impressed with your methods, I've already seen the problem and you should know what I'm about to say. Your teams are great at mopping up the trash, but this strategy won't hold up against the really powerful stuff. If a monster is tough enough to withstand your hammer-blow tactics – and it's a big hammer, I'll grant you – then you're going to get hit back hard. Am I wrong?"

"We've taken out four category threes just today," Nigel said.

"I saw," Jason said. "And I saw what it took to get there. You're going to need people who can take on trolls solo, even at category two."

"You're saying you could have taken one of those trolls by yourself?" Nigel challenged.

“I could have taken all three by myself,” Jason said. “That’s not bragging; it’s just the kind of level you get to when you master all of your powers. I’m not saying every bronze-ranker – category two – should be able to take out every category three. I have powers to shut down regenerating creatures, but throw me up against a silver-rank rock monster and then I only have a chance because I have an arsenal of weapons and tools that the Network just can’t compete with.”

“We can’t match up to your gear,” Nigel said. “But we have training and discipline.”

“You were at that meeting on my houseboat,” Jason said. “Your existing methods are reaching their limits as the monsters keep growing stronger. What happens when the category three monsters aren’t on the weaker end of the spectrum?”

“We adapt our tactics,” Nigel said.

“Look, the Network has kept a lid on all this for centuries, which is incredibly impressive,” Jason acknowledged. “I thought I’d need to rebuild your whole tactical division from the ground up,” Jason said. “That was naïve, dismissive and insulting, for which I apologise. Even if I had my team here, we couldn’t mow through monsters with the efficiency that yours does. What you need is a supplemental program. A smaller cadre of people who don’t fight like soldiers. Not regular soldiers, anyway.”

“You’re talking about a special forces unit,” Nigel said.

“Sure,” Jason said. “A special forces unit with training and tactics built around hitting fewer but stronger targets. Powerful monsters require adaptable strategies that leverage every advantage from every team member. That’s how adventurers fight and I’ll help you get there because you’re going to need it. Even if the monsters are getting stronger, the solution to your problem isn’t category four personnel. In fact, I’ve heard that would be a bad idea. The Cabal’s category fours can’t survive on Earth without going into hibernation because the magic is too low-grade. I have to imagine that essence users would fare just as badly, if not worse.”

“You think that specially trained category threes are a viable alternative?” Nigel asked.

“Yes. Right now, your team can take on a category three at category two. You need a team that can take on a category four at category three, which is a whole different scale.”

“We don’t have whole teams of category threes.”

“We can work on that too,” Jason said. “My big concern was not having enough monsters to go around, but that’s clearly not an issue.”

Woolzy walked over from where he had been checking on the harvest team.

“Boss, they’re going to pull through but they’re not in much of a state to move. Either we need the healer support team or we move them on Jason’s...”

He looked around and then at Jason.

“Where did that ute go?” Woolzy asked. “That’s pretty short-lived for a conjured vehicle.”

## Chapter 308

### Not the Monster

“Here’s the situation,” Koen said through voice chat. “The ADEs are river hydras. Big ones. Lots of regeneration, lots of poison, lots of heads. We’ve got two that are ideally placed. Far enough apart that we can take them on separately but close enough that we can take out one and intercept the other before it gets near the camp. The other one is more of a problem. It lies on the other side of the camp and seems to be moving in that direction.”

“What’s the approach?” one of the silver-ranked section leaders asked.

“We’re going to need both platoons to hammer our way through all that regeneration, even with fire powers to slow it down,” Koen said. “All sections will meet up at the designated rendezvous point. The camp will need to fend for itself against whatever else comes its way and I’ve already issued orders for the camp to withdraw from the incursion space.”

“What about the other ADE?” Nigel asked.

“We have two options on that,” Koen said. “Option one is we carve off some of our forces to stall it, buying time for the camp to fully extract. I do not like this option, since it diminishes our strength and distances the second group from the healers. Both of those factors will increase the chance of casualties, given that these things spew clouds of category three poison gas. I don’t want to lose anyone today”

“What’s option two?” Another of the section leaders asked.

There was a pause, as if Koen was reluctant to say.

“It’s probably a worse choice,” Koen said finally. “Asano, how strong are you? No flexing, no bullcrap. Honest assessment. How good are you really?”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Nigel said.

“Asano,” Koen said, “you took on a category three essence user alone.”

“He lost,” Nigel said.

“Do you think you’re strong enough to stall out the other ADE?” Koen asked.

“Koen,” Nigel said, “you can’t be serious.”

“By which you mean Director of Tactical Operations Koen, right Nigel?” Koen asked.

“We may not be in the military anymore but there is a chain of command that I will use to beat the English out of you if you interrupt me one more time. Mr Asano, can you do it or not?”

“Director Koen,” Nigel said, his anger held back behind clipped, disciplined speech. “Sir. Mr Culpeper directly and personally ordered me to keep Asano safe and you want to send him into danger.”

“I have complete operational authority for a reason, Section Leader Thornton, because sometimes the man on the ground has to make the call. My current options are to balance casualties in our own forces against casualties in the withdrawing camp against one man that isn’t one of mine.”

“Does the man in question get a say?” Jason asked, having let the two men argue amongst themselves.

“Go ahead, Mr Asano, although let me be clear that Nigel isn’t wrong. I am looking to put you at risk in order to keep my own people safe.”

“I appreciate the candour,” Jason said. “I came here to see what the Network is capable of and I am impressed. I’ve also seen the weaknesses, though. I know how to help you and now is the time to show you what that means.”

“I don’t want you getting yourself killed in an attempt to raise your value in our eyes,” Koen said. “Unless you’re genuinely confident of surviving, I don’t want you anywhere near that thing.”

“This is the point I’m trying to make,” Jason said. “You need to see that we view these circumstances very differently. This situation might seem exceptional to you, with all these category three monsters running about, but I have a word for days like today.”

“And what’s that?” Koen asked.

“Tuesday.”

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Against Nigel’s protests, Koen sent Jason after the third hydra. At Koen’s insistence, Jason went to the rapidly evacuating camp on the way, to pick up an observer. She was a scout from one of the harvest teams and apparently excelled at stealth.

Kylie Chen was bronze rank. While she did have abilities and training that could be turned to combat, she was not a primary combatant. Her skills and abilities were best suited to quietly scouting out potential opportunities for the harvest teams. Her kit included strong perceptual abilities that allowed her to find plants, minerals and other materials with magical properties.

She had a dark essence, like Jason, and could hide herself even from silver rank monsters. Although he had been reluctant to bring her along, Jason was less grudging after his own senses couldn’t pick her up until she was almost close enough to touch. The silver-rank assassin from France had not accomplished better.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Jason asked her. Around them was a storm of activity as the support teams were evacuating the camp back through the aperture.

“I might not be much help in a fight,” Kylie said, “but I’m confident in not being caught.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Let’s go.”

They left the camp on foot, Jason getting out of sight before having Shade emerge. He didn’t want the commotion of his familiar taking a monstrous form and disrupting the evacuation. Darkness exploded out of Jason’s shadow, coalescing into a pair of mantis beetles. It was a form Jason was experienced at riding from his time in another astral space jungle.

“I hope we mix up the environment next time,” Jason muttered to himself as he used his cloak to lightly jump into the saddle. He was surprised at the lack of trepidation from Kylie as she curiously climbed onto the dark carapace of the other beetle and settled herself.

The beetles scurried into jungle too thick for more conventional vehicles, moving swiftly through difficult overgrowth. Sweeping blade-arms opened up otherwise inaccessible pathways. Gordon floated next to Jason, keeping up with the swift beetle by transforming into his nebula state to make rapid dashes. He used his force beams to dispatch any low-rank monsters fast enough to keep up with the beetles or dashed right through them to the same effect.

Twice along the way they stopped for Jason to deal with bronze-rank monsters. One was a mud elemental that fell to Jason’s sword, while the other was a pack of simian-shaped lizards. They were loaded up with afflictions and quickly handled.

“It’s up ahead,” Kylie announced, showing off the perceptual powers of a scout. Soon after they heard the sound of something large and heavy forcing its way through the jungle. Kylie pulled out a hand camera from a small belt bag.

“Stay well clear and keep hidden,” Jason said. “I don’t want to be running off to rescue you when you catch a dose of poison breath, no matter how heroic it would make me look. Well, maybe if you can set me up with good backlighting.”

“You seem very relaxed for someone about to fight what sounds suspiciously like a kaiju,” Kylie said.

“I’m a man’s man,” Jason said. “The only thing I fear is a frank discussion about my feelings.”



Jason warned Kylie to get ready and dropped lightly to the ground as the beetles turned into clouds of darkness that returned to Jason's shadow. Kylie stumbled, but was prepared for the drop and managed to remain upright.

"Don't put yourself in danger trying to get good footage," Jason warned, the jokiness now absent from his voice. Without waiting for a reply, he started walking into the jungle.

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Kylie wasn't getting great footage. She had some impressive shots of reptilian heads larger than she was snaking through the jungle, but little else. Between the dense jungle and the obscuring clouds of poison gas, visibility was poor.

Knowing she would need another approach, she reached into a small bag at her belt and took out a headband stitched with magical symbols and slipped it on. A cable dangled from the headband and she plugged it into the camera, which she returned to the belt bag. The camera was now recording her perceptions directly.

Her senses were much more capable of seeing what was happening than the camera itself. The racial gift she obtained when awakening her Vision confluence essence gave her the unusual capability of awakening a perception power from each essence, where other essence users only had the one. There was a lot of overlap, with so many powers enhancing her magical and aura senses, but the effects grew with each one to be far more powerful than her rank suggested.

This allowed her to gain a real sense of just how powerful Asano's aura was. Auras had a quality to them that was separate from their strength, that clearly indicated an essence user's rank. Asano's aura bore the unmistakable feel of category two, while easily reaching category three in strength.

All auras with a power, she had discovered, had a flavour to them that reflected their magical effects. Asano's was no exception. His aura had an overwhelming feel of domineering judgement, as if Asano himself was the arbiter of objective right and wrong. It was the most arrogant aura she had ever encountered and she felt it react to her senses, which flinched from it like fingers from a hot stove.

Kylie's superior senses had helped her to hone the control of her own aura, which was a key part of her formidable stealth abilities. Compared to Asano she was a second-rater and he was the first person whose emotions she was completely unable to read. Even category three agents allowed her to snatch glimpses of what was happening behind their eyes, but Asano's aura felt like a solid wall around something mysterious, dark and dangerous.

Like most of the Network members in the incursion space, she had no idea who this strange essence user was that the higher-ups seemed to consider so important. He wandered around like he was in charge, with his strange robes and eerie cloak. Rumour was that he was from another branch that Sydney either had or was trying to recruit. She hadn't really cared until she encountered his bizarre aura and sensed the incredible magic of the equipment he wore.

The items weren't just powerful but incredibly well refined. It made it hard for anyone with lesser senses to even realise how potent the magic on them was. The man was a walking treasure trove and she wasn't sure that anyone but her realised.

She returned her concentration to the fight, which she was tracking through her senses, eyes closed. She could sense the bulk of the dimensional entity's main body and its necks that were incredibly long and flexible. The seven heads crashed through the jungle trying to chase down Asano, who repeatedly vanished from one spot to appear in another. As for the hydra's poison breath, Asano was not just ignoring it but absorbing it, and transforming it into some kind of health and mana recovery effect.

Asano was lashing out at the creature repeatedly with a weapon in each hand. One was a dagger and the other was a strange whip that, ironically, took the form of a hydra. Both weapons easily landed against the monster's bulk. She could also sense some kind of swarm creature crawling all over the hydra. She sensed echoes of Asano's aura from it, meaning it was likely a familiar and not just a summon.

Summons and familiars were both rare. Very few people had the knowledge to perform the rituals involved, which seemed to influence which essence users could awaken such powers. Asano, strangely, had three; the swarm, the shadow that could turn into beetle mounts and the nebula monster that guarded them on their journey through the jungle. It was another reason to be curious about the odd man.

Asano's weapons seemed to have little effect on the hydra, although they certainly agitated it, sending it thrashing through the jungle in pursuit of Asano. He dodged the creature well but there were seven heads snaking through the trees in pursuit. He took a few hits as he dodged a toothy mouth but a giant head crashed into him sending him flying like he'd been hit by a truck. He seemed to have some kind of shield that, with each hit, transformed into a healing effect.

After one such hit, one of the heads clamped down on his leg, huge teeth sinking into it and it lifted Asano up through the canopy and into the air. Asano's nebula familiar launched all four of the orbs floating around it at the creature, which collided in pairs to trigger two explosions with potent magical force. The hydra dropped Asano, who did not

fall but slowly drifted. She could sense that it was the magic of his cloak holding him aloft as he chanted a spell.

She felt the life force drained out of the hydra. It flowed out of the monster and into Asano, completely restoring his leg. He then dropped out of the air and back through the canopy.

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The hydra's body was lumbering and Jason easily sprayed Colin all over it. The heads, by contrast, were as quick as the body was slow, with Jason taking multiple hits in the course of locking in his afflictions. The creature was powerful enough that even with the shields his amulet was creating with each affliction, the monster punched through those shields in short order.

The hit that breached the armour left him dizzy and the monster clamped onto his leg, rearing its head to haul him up and over the treetops. If not for Gordon's orb explosions freeing him, the leg would have been torn right off.

Jason's Feast of Blood power didn't actually drain blood but life force to heal him and, as of bronze-rank, grew stronger for each instance of poison on the target. Since both Colin and Jason himself had left the hydra riddled with poison, one casting was enough to completely heal him.

Things became easier over time as another of Jason's bronze-rank powers came into play. Rigor Mortis was an unholy affliction left behind when Jason made attacks using the shadow arms of his Hand of the Reaper ability. Rigor Mortis inflicted a stacking penalty to the speed and recovery attributes. It was only a small penalty, but as the afflictions built up, the hydra became easier to dodge and slower to chew through the afflictions already impeding its regeneration.

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Gradually, Kylie came to sense that something was profoundly wrong with the hydra. It was slowing down and becoming sluggish, giving Asano an easier time of avoiding it. Further, there was some kind of malediction taking over its body with increasing speed. It wasn't recovering the way it should and the magic afflicting it kept growing and growing.

What was, at first, a small collection of minor effects had escalated into a magical force that rivalled anything she had ever sensed. It was a cancer, chewing at the hydra from the inside like a carnivorous tumour. Then Asano cast a spell that she felt resonate with the afflictions. Each one enhanced the spell's power only a little, but there were so many that the spell ravaged the hydra to the point that she was amazed it clung to life.

At this point, the fight was effectively over. The hydra struggled to move its sluggish heads in pursuit of Asano, but could barely move. She was expecting Asano to back off, but he was not done. To her shock, he cast a spell that drained all the horrifying afflictions from the hydra.

Startlingly, Asano devoured all that terrible power, feeding on the misery and suffering of what had once been an enemy, but could now only be described as a victim. Even so, he was still not done. In the wake of the darkness drained from the hydra, Asano had left something in its place. A power, bright and terrible, appeared inside the hydra. It was unlike anything she had ever sensed, a force that felt like it could burn a hole in the universe.

A calm had come over the jungle as the hydra lay prostrate and unmoving. Her incredible hearing heard Asano's voice in the eerie stillness, alien to his warm, joking tone from earlier. It was as cold, dark and merciless as the bottom of the ocean.

*"Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death."*

She felt something rupture the very dimensional fabric of the incursion space, right above the hydra. Power, like that now inside the hydra but far stronger, came from the dimensional rent, smashing into the hydra like the fist of god, sending a blinding glow shining up through the jungle canopy.

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When Jason returned to Kylie, he found her huddled against a tree, wide-eyed and shaking with fear.

"It's fine," he told her. "The monster's gone."

He moved forward to help her to her feet but she scuttled away from him like an insect.

"Oh," he said, realisation dawning. "It's not the monster you're afraid of."

## Chapter 309

### Letting Him Run Rampant

In the Network's Sydney branch offices, several people were sat around a conference table while an image displayed on a screen. Keith, Annabeth, Gladys, Koen and Nigel were all in attendance, as was Eustace Brown, the grizzled director of the Harvest Division, and Asya, the International Committee representative. The recording made by Kylie Chen was garbled nonsense to anyone without the ability to sense magic, as the true recording was of her magical perceptions. The display was simply the magitech medium used to present it.

"What exactly was that?" Keith asked as the recording came to an end. The recording was deeply immersive, allowing them to experience the recorder's perceptions and, to a limited degree, their emotions.

"It was proof that we need to get Asano on side," Koen said. "Not because of his personal power but because he can teach his training methods. Two years ago he was selling staples and making occasional appearances on a cooking show. Now he's one of the most powerful essence users on the planet. It took two platoons to take out one of those hydras and we only avoided casualties because we have a top-flight healer. He did the same thing alone and under-ranked. If he can teach our people to do that, and without cores, our monster escalation problems are over."

"Can we expect our people to reach that standard, though?" Annabeth asked.

"No," Gladys said. "Not unless they have the right power set."

"That's true," Koen said. "If we examine what we just experienced, it becomes clear that Asano's maledictions start weak but grow exponentially more powerful until they rival what even the most powerful category three is capable of. I've seen this type of specialist before, although never to this extreme."

"What about that power at the end, with the glowing light?" Keith asked. "Do we know what that was?"

"It's an extremely rare damage type," Gladys said. "It ignores all forms of protection and resistance. The only other essence user I've seen use it was in the US. He was a proper religious type. 'Essences are god's test to see who is worthy of the power,' that kind of thing."

"Because that never ends badly," Annabeth muttered.

"That guy called it god fire," Gladys said. "As for whether a god actually gave it to him, who knows?"

“We’ve yet to confirm the existence of any deific beings,” Keith said, “so I don’t think that’s a productive line of discussion.”

“I agree that we need to reach an accord with Asano,” said Eustace, head of the Harvest Division. “Rope him in, whatever it takes. That haul was like nothing we’ve ever seen. Even putting aside the incredible materials, we looted what are now some of the best magic items in our arsenal. Two category three guns with poison effects that use mana instead of bullets for ammunition. From testing, they aren’t as mana efficient as conjured firearms, but even so it’s a game changer. There was also some category three leather armour that not only protects against poison but heals the wearer and repairs itself. Plus, a very rare, healing and recovery focused essence.”

“Asano didn’t take any of the harvest,” Koen said. “I offered, after what he did with the hydra, but he said a deal’s a deal. The leather armour and the essence came from the hydra he killed, plus a category three core and more than a thousand spirit coins. He even said that he was tempted to just filch the essence for himself. It’s not like we’d know, because he loots right into a storage space.”

“The man is a like a hydra himself,” Eustace said, “except instead of heads he has ridiculous utility powers. Did we confirm he has a portal ability yet? Allowing anyone connected with his communication ability to loot a dimensional entity is basically gold raining from heaven. The only challenge is figuring out how to collect it all when the tactical teams are leaving a trail of treasure like Hansel & Gretel came from a Saudi oil family. This guy is what I’d wish for if I found a genie in a bottle.”

“That communication ability is also incredible,” Koen said. “I’d put Asano on the response team of every incursion space if I could.”

“I disagree,” Nigel said. “Yes, Asano brings a lot to the table. And I like the guy. I’d have a beer with him any day, but I don’t want him watching my back.”

“Explain,” Keith said.

“He’s unreliable. He acts without warning, only follows directions as long as he doesn’t think he knows better, and he’s the type to always think he knows better. He’s powerful, but I’ll take someone I can trust standing behind me over someone who’ll be amazing if he doesn’t wander off first.”

“I will acknowledge he would be better employed to operate independently,” Koen said. “Nigel, even if you don’t want to fight with him, would you be willing to train with him? You’re head of the training program and don’t use cores. That puts you in the best position to pick up and pass on his methods.”

“That, I can do,” Nigel said. “When my people aren’t on the line, I’ll work with him, no worries. It’ll let me offset any problematic attitudes he tries to introduce to our people about discipline and following orders. But if you put him in the field, I don’t want him attached to my section. Trying to incorporate him into a chain of command would be futile. He’s too arrogant.”

“He never much cared for authority,” Asya said, speaking for the first time in the meeting. “He always liked to question and provoke.”

The recording had shaken Asya quite badly. The man she met on the houseboat was a natural progression from the boy she had known. The sexy, impish grin and intelligent eyes full of insolence and promise. Treating conversations like prize fights, constantly streaming nonsense to throw off the opposition.

The man in the recording was something else entirely. The malevolent power and the grand destructive force that followed. The chilling voice chanting a sinister incantation to mercilessly finish a monster already on the precipice of death. The incongruity with the Jason Asano she knew left her unnerved.

“It seems like the French were onto something, trying to snatch up Asano,” Keith said. “Clearly, though, active cooperation is more valuable than forced capitulation. I think I’m just about ready to recommend we do whatever it takes to get a deal.”

“We should,” Eustace said. “Someone told me that Asya made a joke about giving him Bora Bora. If that’s in any way possible, I say we do it. Just one incursion with a looting power and it’s clear how China and America have become so dominant, poaching everyone with a loot power from other countries. I’m not sure there can be a price that isn’t worth paying, given the riches we can expect to reap. We need to lock this down before the US and China come sniffing around.”

“As the IC representative,” Asya said, “I can’t advocate tying this up in factional politics. It’s only right for your branch to claim some benefits, but if you try and keep the pie to yourselves, you’ll get cut when others come to take their own slice.”

“I don’t think Asano will want to give the Lyon branch as much as a crumb,” Annabeth said. “After what they did, the only reason he’s open to collaboration is that he wants us to deliver the other outworlder.”

“Asano made it clear that he wants access to dimensional entities,” Keith said. “Presumably, that’s tied to his advancement methodology, which we’ll learn for ourselves soon enough. He needs us to access the dimensional spaces.”

“I think that’s less of a certainty than you’re suggesting,” Gladys said. “He’s given me a peek at his magical knowledge. Now that he knows about the grid and we’ve shown him

how to access apertures, he may have everything he needs to access incursion spaces himself.”

“Tapping into the grid?” Keith asked. “Is that even possible?”

“The grid is designed to be accessible to anyone with the requisite knowledge,” Asya said. “Given that he’s been to a place that makes our magic look like bronze age technology, it seems likely that he could.”

Keith let out a sigh.

“My largest concern,” he said, “is oversight. Our only leverage in enforcing any agreement is the ability to take what we provide away. If that isn’t a real threat, what reason does he have to abide to our agreement?”

“I’ve had analysts poring over his whole life for a week,” Annabeth said. “Our profile suggests that loyalty is a core value for him. Their analysis is that if we play it straight with him, he will hold up his end.”

“For how long?” Keith asked. “What happens when we deliver the other outworlder? What happens if we can’t?”

“We’re increasing pressure on the Lyon branch,” Asya said. “They can’t just kidnap anyone they want something from.”

“Tell that to Miranda Ellis,” Annabeth said darkly.

“There’s a reason she was moved out of the Melbourne branch,” Keith said, “but now isn’t the time to revisit old grudges. After seeing Asano in action, I think I can get the Steering Committee to move forward on making a final agreement with him. What about the International Committee?”

“My recommendation will be to go along with that,” Asya said. “I’m just a representative, though. The actual decision will be made above my head.”

“You should realise that we’re playing with fire, here,” Nigel warned. “I think, after watching this recording, we all realise that Asano is dangerous. Do we really want him running around unchecked?”

“The agreement is what keeps him in check,” Keith said. “What’s your alternative? Some kind of enforcement?”

“If we went down that road – which I strongly recommend against,” Koen said, “then we need to avoid the mistakes of the Lyon branch. From a tactical perspective, we hit him hard and fast, with overwhelming force. I’m talking all of our category threes, including Gladys. He can build up to endanger a category three but he’s vulnerable in the early stages of a fight. We don’t give him a chance to ramp up to the power level he showed



against the Lyon branch operative and the Hydra. And I'm not talking about capture. We put him all the way down and make sure he stays there."

"Agreed on both counts," Annabeth said. "We shouldn't do this, but if we do, we do it thoroughly. Our analysis is that he'll play it straight if we do, but if we turn on him and he's not dead, he will hurt us. Really hurt us."

"You think he'll go after our families?" Keith said.

"No," Annabeth said. "I think his threats to my wife were just a message not to go after his own family. He knows the way to really hurt us is by going after our secrets. He's threatened as much in the past. Once he's curing children's cancer on television, we can't touch him, while he can blow us wide open. Or he goes to the Cabal. Maybe the EOA. You think they won't welcome him with open arms?"

"Imagine if he really can access the grid and dimensional spaces," Gladys said. "What wouldn't the EOA give him in return for that? They'd want him more than Eustace and his obvious man crush."

"Hey, if it gets him on board," Eustace said, "I'll take one for the team."

"Well," Gladys said. "Maybe not quite as much as Eustace."

"Surely there's a middle ground between war and letting him run rampant," Nigel said.

"Not from his perspective," Annabeth said. "What did we ever do other than threaten his sister and try to kidnap him? What reason does he have to answer to us?"

"When I was in school," Asya said, "I was in debate club with Jason. He was always better at winning over audiences than judges, because his arguments sounded logical but were really about passion. You could feel him believing things so hard that you started to believe them too. We were debating democracy versus authoritarianism, and the way he talked about the difference between obedience and loyalty..."

She stood up.

"As far as I'm concerned," she said, "this discussion is over. If we act in good faith, I believe that he will too. If you go the other way, don't tell me, because I will warn him. I'm heading back to Canberra to make my report to the IC in person."

The others watched as she marched out of the conference room.

"So," Gladys said, turning to Anna. "You took my advice and went with the honey trap."

"I did no such thing!"

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Paul Abreo was part of the Steering Committee for the Lyon branch of the Network. He had wanted to talk to the Operations Director, Adrien Barbou, in person, but the man

was spending all his time working out of the black site. With the International Committee ramping up scrutiny, Paul didn't want to risk the site's location being exposed by a visit and instead called Adrien on the secure line.

"Adrien, it's time to bring this to an end."

"I'm close," Adrien said. "She's ready to break. I can feel it."

"Close isn't good enough, Adrien. The IC is coming down on us hard."

"Once she breaks, we can share what we get out of her and they'll shut their mouths."

"The Sydney branch is cutting a deal with their outworlder," Paul said. "It's already showing results. They're not going to back down when they're getting voluntarily what we can only potentially get through rendition."

"You have to keep them off my back long enough to finish this," Adrien said. "You think this outworlder will give us anything after what we've done? If he has the support of the International Committee, he'll probably leverage what he can offer to sanction us. All we can get, we'll have to get from her, or the other branches will leave us behind."

"You think I don't know that, Adrien? The simple fact is, we took a risky shot and we missed. At this stage, cooperating with the IC will get us more than resisting them will. It's time to hand the girl over."

"Give me a week," Adrien said. "If I can't do it in a week, I'll hand her over."

"The Steering Committee has made their decision, Adrien."

"One week."

Paul grumbled through the phone.

"Three days," he said. "That's as much as I can give you. More than that and the Steering Committee will send people in to remove you from your position."

"Thank you, Paul. You won't regret this."

"See that I don't. You owe me for this one, Adrien."

In his office, underground with concrete walls, Adrien hung up the phone. His fury showed only through his stillness as his mind ticked over. He unlocked the bottom drawer of his large oak desk and took out a steel lockbox with magic engravings that would destroy the contents if anyone forced the lock.

He took the box to the elevator. There were no buttons, only a locked panel that he opened with a key. Behind the panel was a card reader, through which he swiped his identification, a hand scanner that he pressed his palm to and a voice scanner, into which he spoke his name. A light turned green and the elevator doors closed, the lift ascending up to the surface.

The elevator emerged on the grounds of an abandoned water plant that looked to have been left unattended in the countryside for decades. He wandered through a hole in the chain link fence, beyond the range of the hidden cameras. He then opened the lock box, took out a satellite phone and an envelope containing a number, which he dialed.

“Ms Ellis,” he said, when the line was picked up. “This is Adrien Barbou. I’d like to talk about your proposal.”

## Chapter 310

### Old Testament Power

Erika stormed upstairs and threw open the door to her daughter's bedroom. Standing in front of a monitor, Jason and Emi were holding plastic guitars and playing a rhythm game. Taika was sitting on the floor behind a plastic drum kit. All three turned to guiltily face the door.

"Jason," Erika scolded. "We have thirty family members in the back yard and you're in here?"

"Those may not be unrelated facts," Jason said.

"Well, nanna just arrived, so get your arse downstairs."

Emi and Jason immediately perked up, putting aside the guitars.

"I'll head back to the houseboat," Taika said.

"You can stay if you like, Taika," Erika said. "I didn't see you arrive."

"I left a portal open in your bedroom," Jason told her.

"What?"

Erika marched to her own bedroom and opened the door to find a shadowy archway at the end of her bed.

"Seriously?" she asked, turning her glare on Jason.

"No one's going to come in here," Jason said.

"Excuse I," Taika said as he brushed past and paused in front of the portal. "We're heading into Sydney tomorrow, yeah, Jason?"

"Yep," Jason said.

"No worries," Taika said. "You have a lovely home, Mrs Asano."

Taika disappeared through the portal.

"Come on, Emi," Jason said. "Let's go see Grandnanna."

Arriving downstairs and going through the kitchen, Jason was intercepted by one of his cousins. Koji was the son of Ken's brother, Shiro. Being Jason's age, they had spent a lot of time together as children, without ever really being friends.

"So here he is, back from the dead," Koji said. "I guess there's no keeping Bananaman down."

"Koji," Jason said, "You do realise that you're implying that I'm too invested in white culture by referencing a British cartoon series from the 1980s that you and I used to watch together, right?"

"I see dying didn't make you any less of a smart arse," Koji said.

“No, that’s pretty set in stone,” Jason said. “Still, I won’t begrudge you going the other way.”

“What?” Koji asked.

“He’s calling you a dumb arse, Uncle Koji,” Emi explained.

“Oh Jesus,” Koji said. “You’re going to turn out just like him, aren’t you?”

“You hear that?” Jason asked Emi. “Uncle Koji thinks you’re going to be super good-looking. Let’s go find Nanna.”

“I hate you so much,” Koji said. “I’m glad you’re not dead, though.”

“Love you too, cousin.”

They went out into the back yard where a huge family barbecue was in full swing. He nervously met with his grandmother, who was lucid and happy to be so. She had almost no memory of the last several years and was happily catching up with all her family. Things got a little awkward, given that she didn’t remember that Amy was no longer with Jason but Kaito.

Jason found himself answering the same questions over and over. His story started with the one he had originally given his sister, but as his frustration grew, the story started to morph.

“I got one of the men who killed my wife, but the other one clubbed me over the head,” he explained to one of his cousins. “Now I can’t form short term memories so I have to keep meticulous records as I put the pieces together in my quest for revenge.”

“Isn’t that the plot of the film Memento?”

“Never heard of it,” Jason said, then gave a knowing look. “Or maybe I have and don’t remember.”

Jason spotted Erika scowling at him from across the yard and he ducked out of sight, finally grateful for the crowded yard. Emi continued to trail along behind him.

“Uncle Jason?”

“Yeah?”

“What were you busy doing, yesterday?”

“Fighting monsters.”

“Really?”

“Yep.”

“What are monsters like?”

“Scary.”

“Do you have any recordings of them?”

“I don’t think your mother wants you seeing them. Neither do I, for that matter.”

“What if I can talk dad into letting me?”

“No dice, Moppet. Convince your Mum and maybe we can talk.”

Emi’s face took on a pout.

“Where did you find monsters?” she asked.

“That’s not my secret to tell,” Jason said. “I’m hoping you’ll learn that soon, though.”

Jason was somewhat uncomfortable, the attention of everyone present prickling his aura senses. One particular strand was focused on him like a laser beam and he looked over at his mother.

“Emi,” he said. “You go see if you can’t convince your Mum now. I should go talk to mine.”

He made his way up to Cheryl, whose hands were clasped together around an untouched glass of wine.

“G’day, Mum,” he said softly. “I was kind of a prick the other night. Of course, you were kind of a prick for most of the twenty-tens, but maybe we can start treading some fresh ground. How about we find somewhere quiet inside and I tell you about what I’ve been up to.”

Cheryl flashed a well-recognised look of dissatisfaction at Jason’s poke, but visibly calmed herself.

“I’d like that,” she said.

“We can use Erika’s room,” Jason said. “There’s something there you need to see.”

Soon after, a startled Cheryl emerged through the portal onto the houseboat. As she leaned against the wall trying not to vomit, Kaito’s voice drifted in from the media room.

“What the hell is that? Is that a lion man?”

“It looks like Ron Perlman from Beauty and the Beast,” Amy’s voice came after.

“From the movie? That can’t have been Ron Perlman.”

“Not the movie, Kai. The TV show. The old one, not the new one.”

“There’s more than one?”

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Jason, Hiro, Taika and Vermillion met the EOA contingent in the downstairs bar of Hiro’s establishment. It was closed and empty, pending the change in ownership. The EOA representative was Michael Kissling, who had once come for Jason in Vermillion’s café.

“You’re not going to try and drag me off again, are you?” Jason asked.

“It’s come to our attention that the attempt would be unlikely to go well,” Kissling said wryly.

Jason had no expertise in the field of managing criminal or legitimate enterprises, so he hung back with Taika as Hiro and Vermillion went over documents and signed contracts.

“So, you fought a bunch of monsters, right?” Taika asked.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“Isn’t that scary?”

“Terrifying,” Jason said. “The trick is to start with the little ones and work your way up.”

“How little?”

“You know that rabbit from Holy Grail?”

“Bro, that thing’s savage.”

Jason’s phone rang with a number he didn’t recognise but he answered it anyway.

“Johnson Deli, where we give you the big sausage,” Jason answered, getting an odd look from Taika.

“Sorry, I think I got a wrong... wait, Jason?”

“G’day Asya. How’d you be?”

“This is how you answer your phone?”

“No, you really did use the wrong number. I’m actually doing temp work in a deli. Crazy coincidence, right?”

“You’re a lunatic, you know that?” she laughed. “Look, I’m on my way back to Sydney from the International Committee office in Canberra and we’ve gotten some movement from the Lyon branch about the outworlder. Can you meet me to talk in person? I can drive up to Casselton Beach once I’ve been to the branch office in Sydney.”

“Actually, I’m in Sydney myself,” Jason said.

“Great! Can you meet me at the Sydney branch in, say, three hours?”

“I’m not quite ready to walk into the lion’s den yet,” Jason said.

“You realise that if we’re going to work together, there has to be at least a level of trust,” Asya said.

“Tell me that there wasn’t a discussion about killing me off to forestall trouble and I’ll take you up on that.”

“Neutral ground, then,” Asya said. “You set the place.”

“Yarranabbe Park.”

“Alright. I’ll see you in three hours.”

Jason wandered back just as Vermillion and Hiro settled up. Hiro was looking like the cat that got the cream, while Kissling was throwing uncertain glances in Jason’s direction.

“We’re happy?” Jason asked.

“Very,” Hiro said. “Their lawyers didn’t try to sneak anything through.”

“You’re not out of practice?” Jason asked. “You haven’t practised law in a long time.”

“Are you kidding?” Hiro asked. “I got more out of my law degree as a morally questionable business developer than I ever did at my old firm. Besides, it’s plain they went out of their way to make it clean and unambiguous.”

“The EOA clearly has no interest in provoking a visit from you,” Vermillion said. “After the bikers, I think they realised that if we hadn’t reached an accord the last time you met, it would not have gone the way they expected.”

“We should go see my Mum now,” Taika said. “Jason’s got a date later.”

“I do not have a date,” Jason said.

“You didn’t just arrange to meet some lady in the park?” Taika asked.

“It’s not like that,” Jason said.

“You should have heard him, all smooth,” Taika said. “He was all ‘let’s not meet at the office. We should go somewhere more intimate.’ You’re good with the ladies, bro.”

“I am not going to entertain this kind of talk,” Jason said.

“Who are you meeting?” Vermillion asked.

“Just someone from the Network,” Jason said.

“Anna Tilden?” Vermillion asked.

“Asya Karadeniz.”

“Oh, nice,” Vermillion said. “Elegant beauty, I like it.”

“It’s a professional interaction,” Jason insisted.

“And what’s your profession, exactly?” Vermillion asked. “Interdimensional man of mystery? That definitely doesn’t sound like someone that mixes business with pleasure.”

“That sounds sweet,” Taika said. “You should get a theme song, bro. Something funky and sexy. Seventies-style.”

“Can we just go see your mother?” Jason asked. “I brought West Indian lime and coconut squares.”

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In the medical department of the Network’s Sydney branch, Kylie Chen was sitting alone in a dark room. She trembled not from the cold but from the battle in the incursion space playing over and over in her mind. The door opened and someone came in, turning on the light.

“Hello, Miss Chen,” came the visitor’s sympathetic voice. “How are you holding up?”



“Ms Ellis,” Kylie said standing up from the edge of the bed in the presence of a Steering Committee member.

“Please sit,” Miranda said. “After everything you’ve been through, I won’t make you stand on formality.”

Kylie hesitantly lowered herself back onto the edge of the bed and Miranda sat companionably next to her.

“I’m sorry you had to go through what you did,” Miranda said. “I’ve experienced the recording for myself. If we had any idea what kind of monster he was, we never would have let you go with him.”

“The recording device doesn’t get everything,” Kylie said in a tremulous voice. “Did you know he doesn’t use cores? Like Section Leader Thornton, but far more powerful.”

“I know.”

“That’s not all, though,” Kylie said. “There’s something in his aura. I don’t know what it is, but it’s more powerful than anything I’ve ever seen.”

“His aura strength is incredible for a category two, yes.”

“It’s more than that!”

Kylie’s voice was frantic, almost panicked, like she was desperate for someone to understand.

“Help me to understand,” Miranda asked.

“This thing inside him,” she said. “It’s like an echo of power not just above his category but beyond the very concept of categories. It’s almost... godly.”

“You think he possesses some kind of divine power?”

“I don’t know how else to describe it,” Kylie said. “When I was a girl, my grandmother used to take me to church. The priest was one of those sulphur and brimstone types, you know? I think he moved to America and joined one of those fundamentalist denominations. When Asano used that strange, bright power at the end of the fight, I was that little girl again, having nightmares of fire and judgement. It was like the fist of god coming down to punish the wicked. That’s what the thing inside Asano feels like. Old Testament power.”

Miranda nodded.

“He’s dangerous,” she said. “That’s why the committee has decided to act but we need to be careful.”

“Yes,” Kylie agreed, nodding her head. “You do.”

“We need to keep our hands clean. The International Committee wants this man, regardless of the threat to us, so we need to do this delicately, and at a remove. This

information is at the Steering Committee level only. We're only bringing in people who understand the threat and that we can trust. We can trust you, right, Kylie?"

"Of course."

"Good," Miranda said. "When the time comes, and that will be soon, I'll deliver you a message with instructions. You need to obey them without hesitation, however startling they may be. Until then, complete discretion. Speak of this only with me. Do you understand?"

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"One of the Lyon branch's members grew a conscience," Asya said. They were sitting on a bench with the outdoor fitness equipment at Yarranabbe Park. After arriving at the park, they had found one another through their auras.

"His name is Michel," she said, "and he's been at a black site the Lyon branch maintains."

"A black site? Like the CIA?"

"It's a facility whose existence wasn't divulged to the International Committee. Even our new informant doesn't know the location. The personnel, other than the Operations Director and the Steering Committee aren't allowed to know its location. Workers are taken in blind."

"And that's where they're holding the outworlder?" Jason asked.

"Yes."

She took a folder from the briefcase she brought with her and handed it over.

"They've been putting her through rendition," Asya said. "What the Americans call enhanced interrogation, but she hasn't cracked yet."

"She?"

"We don't have a name. Everything we do have is in there. He even managed to sneak out a picture, which isn't flattering. They don't exactly have her in the best conditions."

Jason opened the folder to look at the photograph that was the first thing in the file. Her hair was cut down to stubble and her face was covered with grime, but he still recognised the features.

"Jason?"

He looked like he'd been hit with a taser, his face twitching and the folder slipping between trembling fingers to spill papers onto the ground.