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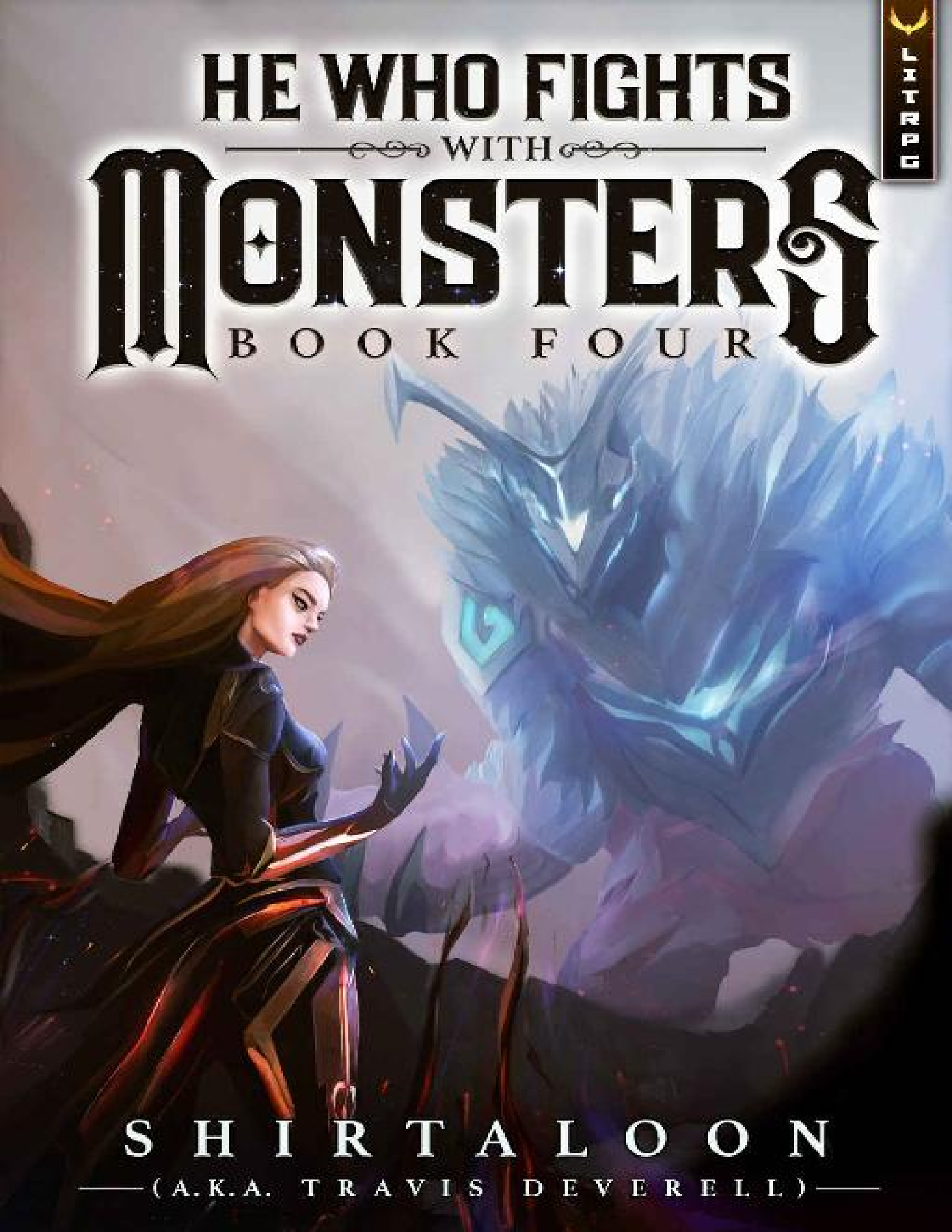
HE WHO FIGHTS WITH MONSTERS

BOOK FOUR



SHIRTALOON

(A.K.A. TRAVIS DEVERELL)

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HE WHO FIGHTS WITH MONSTERS FOUR
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Thank you for reading He Who Fights With Monsters, book four.

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1

A BETTER PANTS SOLUTION

Jason Asano regained consciousness surrounded by a fiery, transcendent energy. It burned without heat; he could feel its otherworldly power, but it left him wholly unharmed. It vanished and he dropped to the cold, hard floor. The feel of chilly tiles under his body told him that he was naked. For some reason, he was surprised it wasn't grass, and his mind went back to the last time he had woken up disoriented and naked. He had just been thrown between worlds, his body feeling strange, having just been remade out of magic. He had the same sensation now.

Memories came in flashes. Falling from a tower. Pain, anger, triumph. Death. He'd been fighting the Builder, a futile endeavour, as his powers had no effect. The Builder caught him. Chained him to parade in front of his team. The god-like being was akin to the deities of Greek myth: prideful, petty, and vain. Lording over mortals. It had given Jason a critical chance.

He'd launched them both out of the Builder's tower in a desperate attempt to buy his team time. He didn't know if it had worked, if they had put an end to the Builder's plan and, hopefully, gotten out alive. The last thing he remembered was falling, stone spikes of the Builder's rage spearing into his body. The mad whirl as he plunged through the air, darkness taking him before he hit the ground.

Then he woke up wherever he was now. His brain told him it had only been moments since he fell from the tower, but his soul told him otherwise. It carried an echo of some encounter that his brain had no memory of.

It was not the first time Jason had experienced that dissonance. The fight with the Builder for the fate of his soul, when Jason's body had already been claimed by a star seed, was the same. Like waking from a

dream, he felt the memories that should be there yet were outside of his reach.

The closest he had to recollection was a sense of travelling, and not travelling alone. His eyes were still closed as he lay on the cold, damp floor, but his magical senses told him that there was no one else in the building, let alone the room. His aura senses picked out rats and insects, quite a lot of them, but no people.

He opened his eyes and pushed himself into a sitting position. There were a bunch of system windows open in front of him, but he shoved them out of the way. They shrank into the periphery of his vision, and he looked himself over, confirming that he was naked. The impaling wounds on his chest were gone, although scars had been left in their place. One was at the base of his throat where a high-necked shirt would just cover it, if he'd been wearing one.

The marks seemed long-healed and were far from his first permanent reminders of battles past. Most had come courtesy of the Builder. His whole torso was pocked with scars from where fragments of star seed had been pushed from his body. They were added to by new marks from where the Builder impaled him multiple times, although the largest one was still his first. The wide scar running up from his right hip, across his abdomen, and around his left side was one the Builder had nothing to do with. At least it fit the theme of enemies no sane person would fight.

As he checked his torso, he realised his chest hair was also gone. He ran his hands over his bald head, groaning as he discovered that all of his hair had callously abandoned him once more.

"Again?" he complained to the empty room. "It's my best feature."

Jason turned his attention to the room around him. There was no window to let in light, but his very first magic power had been to see through darkness. The room was large and empty, the tiled floor and plastered wall both heavily cracked. The air was stale and clammy, with a taste of unhealthy growth on the air, like fungus or mould.

It was clearly an abandoned building. There was a broken fluorescent light on the ceiling and a pair of double doors that made him think of a school or maybe hospital. He jolted as he realised it was the architecture of his own Earth, not the magical alternate version into which he'd been thrown into.

He pushed his senses past the lingering remnants of the potent magic that had dumped him wherever he was. Beyond it, the magic was weaker than anything he'd felt even in low-magic Greenstone. It was at a level one would expect from a world where true magic was unknown. He sensed nothing but non-magical auras from the animals scurrying through the abandoned facility.

Jason was trying to collect his thoughts when he felt something building inside him. It was something he'd experienced before: a transfiguration of one of his outworlder gifts. They were usually triggered by extreme events and coming back from the dead had to be fairly high on that scale. Light started shining from within his body, an amber light that lit up from under his skin. He felt the change inside himself as the magic that made up his very self underwent a transformation.

- Outworlder racial ability [Inventory] has evolved to [Spirit Vault].

Any other time, the event would have been of immense importance. After coming back from the dead and returning home, though, it was only a distraction. Jason only glanced at the notice before minimising it with the other system windows. He had too much to deal with as it was. His mind was crowded and reeling with everything. His team, his death and revival. The discord between the memories of his mind and his soul. His apparent return to his own world. He needed time to spread everything out into manageable chunks that he could process.

He had no idea of what fate had befallen his team. Trapped in an astral space, they had been racing to stop the Builder from awakening his giant golems and using them to invade the other world. He'd resolved to throw his life away to buy them enough time, but had he?

"Okay," he told himself, shaking his head to try and throw off the many strange sensations he was going through. "Take stock, formulate a plan of action. What do I need and how do I get it? I need pants. Again. I need hair. Well, I want hair. I need to know what happened and where I am."

Fortunately, Jason had a better pants solution than the last time he'd arrived in another world, naked and bald. With a thought, dark mist engulfed him, vanishing moments later to reveal Jason garbed in one of his prepared outfits. He went with a smart suit in the Vitesse style. It was akin

to a casual designer suit from his own world with a little fantasy cosplay flair. The kind of thing an elf stockbroker would wear on his day off.

It was one of many outfits supplied for his wardrobe by Gilbert of Gilbert's Resilient Attire For the Discerning Gentleman, although he looked forward to replacing everything with bronze-rank apparel once he got back to Greenstone. If that was even possible.

The iron-rank clothes had basic self-cleaning and repair enchantments, along with some very light protection. None of that would hold up to the rigours of a monster fight, of course.

With his clothes sorted out, he moved on to hair, carefully applying Jory's hair-growth cream, which had been stashed in his inventory. He felt his hair rapidly growing from his scalp, an odd, itchy sensation. It was doubtless an unruly mop, but it would suffice until he found a hairdresser.

Meeting those simple needs left him feeling much more in control of his circumstances. He thought back to when he had first woken up in a new world, naked, bald, and confused. Just the question of pants had been a tribulation, let alone the larger questions. If there were cannibals again, he was ready to take them on.

Solving the smaller question of pants left Jason with more confidence to take on the bigger questions. To figure out what had happened to him, he pulled up the system messages that he'd pushed aside.

- You have died.
- All equipment has been returned to your inventory.
- [World-Phoenix Token] has been consumed.

"That explains how I survived, I guess—I didn't."

He only had a vague recollection of that system box appearing as everything faded out. He closed it and moved onto the next message.

- You have been reborn.
- You have received the blessing of the World-Phoenix.
- If you accept the blessing, your outworlder racial ability [Astral Affinity] will evolve to [Nirvanic Transfiguration].
- If you reject the blessing, your ability will remain unchanged and can be evolved by normal means or other blessings in the future.

Jason paced back and forth in the empty room. To call coming back from the dead a pleasant surprise was a fairly significant understatement. The World-Phoenix token had always been a mystery, but in hindsight, he felt it should have been obvious. The goddess Knowledge had told him that he lacked the faith to use it. He finally understood, since killing himself to trigger the token would having required a lot of faith that it would work.

The question of *how* he'd arrived solved, that left the question of *where* he'd arrived. Everything was telling him it was his own world, but that left him with a nervousness about being wrong. Belatedly, he remembered that he could just check and opened his map ability to check the location listing at the top.

- Zone: Casselton West Regional Hospital [abandoned] (maternity theatre).

He was a deer in headlights as he stared at the words. After a long, stunned moment, he turned his eyes to the map itself and zoomed out. He expanded out from the hospital to the whole town, then the larger Casselton region. There was his hometown, Casselton Beach. Large portions of the map were uncovered as he'd travelled through nearly all of it at some point in his life. He kept expanding out through the Mid-North Coast to all of New South Wales and then the whole of Australia. When he zoomed out to the entire world, the continents were all where they should be instead of the funhouse mirror of the magic world's geography.

Jason stared for a long time, not daring to believe. Then he closed the map, pushed open the heavy swinging doors, and rushed through the abandoned hospital. He'd been born there, but it had been closed down when Jason was still a kid. For the last fifteen years, it had mostly been a venue for the local teenagers to come smoke. The building had been emptied out, leaving nothing to obstruct him as he dashed down the hall in search of a window.

He found a patient ward, the windows opaque from years without cleaning. Without hesitating, he grabbed his sword from his inventory and smashed the scabbard into the window, sending glass raining down outside. He was on the fourth floor looking out on the semi-industrial part of West Casselton where the hospital was located.

It was deep into the night and the sky beat down with rain. Clouds obscured the moon and stars, but streetlights reflected off the wet asphalt of the street. On the other side of the road was a takeaway store he remembered. It had closed not long after the hospital. Next to it was the main depot for the Casselton regional bus service, the buses all parked for the night. It was far from a beautiful vista but, to Jason, it was more gorgeous than a sunset.

"I'm home."

The words came out in a tremulous whisper, as if he were scared that to say them would make them untrue. His mind was once again sent staggering. Jason's arrival in the magical world had been a stark dividing line. The difference between what came before that moment and after was like two different realities. Which they were, when he thought about it.

Seeing his old world with his new eyes was strange. The darkness did not obscure his sight, which was sharper than ever before. Colours had depth and nuance he had never realised, while the air carried a complexity of scents he could never have picked up when he was still a human. He could taste the ozone tang of water on the power cables, smell the grass of the overgrown hospital grounds. The damp and mould of the disused hospital interior, and even a lingering trace of disinfectant, some fifteen years after it was last used.

His brother, Kaito, had once gotten reckless with his bicycle when Jason was nine years old. He was stuck spending a few days in the hospital and their sister drove Jason in every day to visit. Afterwards, they would get chips at the takeaway store across the road. Now, under Jason's powerful new perception, the familiar sights were somehow alien. Then he realised that the alien one was him.

He was not the man who left. He wasn't even human. He took a long, deep breath that he didn't need because he didn't have to breathe anymore. The ramifications of coming back to his own world struck his mind like a storm hitting a ship at sea. He had no idea how to navigate what would be disorienting at best and deadly dangerous at worst. The things he had learned and the things he could do represented a fundamental shift in the general understanding of his world's reality. His very existence would be an opportunity to the ruthless and a threat to those who already claimed to have all the answers.

Those were just his concerns for the world he found himself back in. He had further concerns over his adoptive world. Most pressing was that he would have no idea how his team fared until he found his way back across a dimensional gulf. That was a feat significantly beyond the rudimentary astral magic lessons he had taken from his teammate Clive.

He fretted yet again over the fate of his friends. Did they survive? Did they know he'd revived in his own world? While he had discussed the World-Phoenix token in broad terms with some of them, he had played that particular card close to his chest. In any case, even he hadn't known the specifics. Only Knowledge had the full truth and Jason would make no prediction about what the goddess would do.

Those concerns were only peripheral compared to what he had to deal with immediately. He had no idea what his situation would be now that he was home. Did people think he was dead? How was he going to explain everything? How much did he even need to explain? For all he knew, time moved at different paces between worlds. He might have been gone for a week or for ten years.

Then there were his arrangements going forward. Whatever his circumstances, he wasn't going to go back to the stationery store to ask for his job back. He had a pile of solid gold in his inventory, but that wasn't the same as having money he could spend.

"I can't just rock up to the royal mint with thirty million worth of gold bullion and no explanation of where it came from. They'll think I'm a drug dealer."

Jason didn't know much about the gold trade in Australia, or anywhere else for that matter, but he did know there was an amount of regulation. A scrap gold buyer might go overlooked, but if he dropped an unmarked ten-kilo bar at a booth in a shopping centre, they would probably call the police.

The larger gold exchanges were watched more carefully. A retail store employee who went missing, only to show up a year and a half later with a bunch of gold bars he couldn't explain, would quickly find himself in a room with federal officers. Maybe he could find a shady one willing to make a backroom deal, but Jason's ignorance would make any such attempt a dangerous endeavour.

Jason could have used a sounding board, but his familiar, Shade, was locked away within his soul. All three of his familiars were connected to his

soul, but their vessels were no longer present in his body. This allowed him to draw certain conclusions.

Jason had come a long way in his understanding of magic, with Clive guiding his studies. His focus, like Clive's, had been on astral magic, but he still had a solid grounding in general magical theories. This gave him a better understanding of the processes involved with his summoned familiars.

His familiars' vessels hadn't been literally contained in his blood, shadow, and aura. Jason's magical body, like that of anyone iron-rank or above, was composed of the biomass that made it up and the magical matrix that governed that biomass. The magical matrix was responsible for the ways in which the body interacted with both the world around it and the soul within it.

A familiar's vessel, on being summoned, was anchored to physical reality by attaching itself to aspects of the summoner's matrix, rather than the biomass. This was the reason that summoned familiars gave enhanced abilities when their vessels were subsumed, as they enhanced the capabilities of the aspect to which they were attached.

That knowledge allowed him to make a deduction about his current situation. Since the spirits of his familiars were ensconced comfortably within his soul but their vessels were gone, his revival had been in a whole new body. He had no idea if that was a function of the World-Phoenix token or just of his returning to his world. Any soul entering a world would build a new body for itself, as Jason's had when he first became an outworlder.

If it was because of being an outworlder, building a body hadn't changed his racial gifts the way it had the first time. His soul had already been affected by passing through the astral, unconsciously reshaping itself to acquire the tools it would need to survive. His racial gifts remained as they were, aside from the one that had just undergone a transfiguration.

Jason was still standing in front of the window he'd smashed open, the rain coming in to wet the floor. He pulled a chair out of his inventory and sat down, since it was time to formulate a plan that went beyond pants. He went back to his original questions.

"What do I need and how do I get it?"

He needed information. If nothing had gone wonky with any interdimensional time-streams that might or might not exist, it should be somewhere near the start of winter. The rain pounding down outside the

broken window let in a damp cold that certainly fit that guess, but he would need to be more accurate than that. He enjoyed the bleak cold coming in through the window, having spent the last year and a half roaming scorching desert, sweltering delta and hot, wet jungle.

He also needed to know what his status had become. Did the world think he was missing or dead? Was his outworlder self some kind of magical clone, with his original still living his life, oblivious to what had happened?

A lot of those answers could be had with an internet connection. Unfortunately, he had no phone, no money and no transport. He was hesitant to call on family to get them, at least until he had a better understanding of his circumstances. Then he remembered a certain member of his family and reconsidered.

Jason had two uncles, one of which was estranged from the family. Hiro Asano was the family's black sheep due to his hopefully minor involvement with organised crime. Hiro might simultaneously be a useful source of information and a method to convert some of his gold into cash. He would get well-below market rates for an illegal gold sale, but Jason only needed enough money to get by, at least for a while.

The only problem was that Hiro was in Sydney, hundreds of kilometres to the south. In theory, Jason could portal his way south, reaching Sydney in a few hops. He knew from Clive that all portal powers had the same range of around forty kilometres per rank at bronze, including rank zero. Fortunately, Jason's Path of Shadows ability was one of his highest rank powers, giving him a range of roughly two hundred kilometres. His only concern was if the power would work at all in the barren magic of his own world.

Normally, portal abilities would take someone to any place they had been. Jason had never thought to ask if that included places they had been before they gained the power, or before they were even an essence user. It was something he would need to test.

That, at least, gave Jason a tentative plan: Test his portal ability, cash up, and get the lay of the land. It would do for his immediate, practical concerns. That left the more magical concerns, so he turned back to looking through the system windows.

- You have been reborn.

He wondered why he had appeared in the abandoned hospital. It had been closed for years, since the new regional hospital opened in Castle Reach. Was it random? If so, that would be quite the coincidence, arriving in the same hospital he had been born in.

Something occurred to him and he backtracked to the room he had arrived in. On the outside of the room was a faded sign. MATERNITY THEATRE.

Jason pushed the doors open and went through. He hadn't arrived on the floor, but in the air, where he immediately fell to the floor. He guessed the height was about right for a hospital bed.

"Was I reborn in the exact same place I was born the first time?"

2

TIME TO FRONT UP

JASON RETURNED TO THE CHAIR HE HAD LEFT BY THE BROKEN WINDOW and sat down. The cool, clean air coming in as the rain continued to hammer down was a stark improvement over what had been sealed away in the old hospital. Before he made a move, he needed to go through the system messages that he had been ignoring. He pulled up the first one.

- You have entered a region of magical desolation. The levels of magical density and magical saturation are extremely low, insufficient to produce spontaneous magical manifestations.

- Stamina recovery reduced by 50%.
- Health Recovery reduced by 75%.
- Mana recovery reduced by 99%.

- Consuming a spirit coin of your rank or ten spirit coins of one rank lower will restore your recovery rates to normal for eight hours. This duration is reduced by using active magic abilities.

- Rituals and summoning abilities require spirit coins to enact, in addition to any spirit coin cost they already have. Rituals will be unable to function without artificially enhancing the density of local ambient magic.

- Summoned familiars will need to consume a spirit coin of their rank or ten coins of one rank lower to sustain their vessels. Consumption of spirit coins will allow them to maintain their vessels outside of the summoner for one day before requiring additional coins. This duration is reduced by using active magic abilities.

Clive had long surmised that the dimensional membrane of Jason's world was much more restrictive than that of Clive's own. The reduced levels of magic it allowed to seep in from the astral space would account for the absence of magic that Jason had described. The analysis of Jason's interface ability was completely consistent with that hypothesis, reflecting a level of magic so low as to be, for practical purposes, absent entirely.

The absence of magical manifestation meant no monsters, no essences, and no awakening stones. Unless someone already had magical tools and abilities, interacting with the world's meagre level of magic would be impossible.

Fortunately, Jason was not short on spirit coins. Months of looting them from monsters with nowhere to spend them left Jason with silver coins numbering in the low thousands. There were enough bronze coins to use indefinitely, and if he emptied out his iron coins, he could swim through them like Scrooge McDuck.

"The Builder could learn a lot from Disney," Jason muttered to himself, opening his inventory to take out a coin. Doing so, he noticed that his supply of monster cores now occupied currency counters like spirit coins, instead of taking up space in his inventory slots. He presumed this was one of the effects of his inventory power evolving and immediately noticed another difference.

The dimension bags he used to expand his inventory slots were no longer in the appropriate space in his inventory display. The spaces for them had been removed, replaced with a button to expand the slot count on his inventory. Whatever had changed about his power, capacity no longer appeared to be an issue.

Spirit coins and monster cores were only the beginning of the treasures that had left his inventory bursting at the seams, making the extra capacity very welcome. Between looting monsters and scavenging the astral space, Jason and his team had dumped all their iron-rank loot to make room for the good stuff. The treasure had been split between Jason, Humphrey, Clive, and Belinda, who each had their own storage spaces.

Even more had been piled up in the spare rooms of Jason's cloud house. This was the lowest-priority loot, as it was inaccessible while the magical building was stored inside the cloud flask. Between his inventory and what was carried over in the house, Jason had essences and awakening stones enough to turn a dozen people into essence users, complete with full sets of abilities.

The essence users in question would be rather uniform, however, as the environment of the astral space produced a lot of duplicate essences. Half of them were plant essences, with most of the others spread between venom, might and a handful of animal essences. Those were all common-rarity essences, but he also had a few uncommon growth and life essences, plus a precious handful of more exotic ones.

The rest of the haul was filled out by various magic items they had picked up. Most had been kept for selling; the team had already claimed anything they wanted for themselves. There were even more items in the cloud house, which could serve as a large, if less convenient, dimensional space.

Fortunately, the cloud flask in his inventory was full, the cloud house having been returned to it before the final battle. That was where they had kept items that would occupy the most space in their storage abilities, along with things they had a lot of but knew they wouldn't be using. Because Jason had the cloud house, he had brought with him the bulk of the team's loot, even if it was the less valuable stuff.

He moved on to the next system window.

Title: [Indomitable]

- Your repeated defiance in the face of more powerful enemies and willingness to sacrifice everything for a cause has marked your soul. Your resistance to aura suppression is further enhanced and ignores rank disparity.

- Your aura signature has changed. Your unwavering resolve floods your aura and can be detected if your aura is closely examined or when strongly projected. Allies within your aura have increased resistance to aura suppression.

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger was not always true, but anyone who could fully recover from soul trauma found themselves enhanced as a result. This was something Jason had experienced more than once and, for all the power it had given him, left him unsure if the gains were worth the price. There was no question that it had resulted in some of his most powerful capabilities, but his suffering had changed him in more ways than just boosting his power.

When recovery from soul trauma affected Jason's abilities, his interface power used titles to translate the scars on his soul into game terms. He didn't need the new scars on his chest to know that his soul had once again passed through the crucible. He had been told that soul scars were rare, yet his soul had been battered and beaten to the point that his entire torso was a landscape of ragged marks and lumpen scar tissue. Even though his body was brand new, the tribulations of his soul were made manifest upon it.

He wondered if the deepest damage remained hidden. Looking into the rainy night of his own world, he wasn't sure if he belonged here after what he'd become. Not as a magic being, but as a person. He was no longer human, but how much of his humanity had he thrown away?

The first person he killed was Landemere Vane, by accident in a mad scramble to defend himself. That violence had shaken him to the core, leaving him a near-catatonic wreck. It was not his last kill, that first day or in the days to come. Rufus had warned him that it would only be the

beginning, but he'd been so self-righteous, looking down on Rufus, Farrah, and Gary for their callous attitudes. He resolved to be different. Now he had killed as much as any of them, probably more. He was still unsure if it was naiveté or decency that he'd discarded along the way.

He would never know how many Ustei tribesman had fallen to his afflictions in the battle on the sand barge. He regretted his participation now, but that didn't bring the people he killed back to life. At the time, he'd been caught up in the wild rush of the adventuring life, not even considering the reality of what he was doing.

That day, he'd just followed orders, killing wantonly and not even feeling bad. So much blood on his hands, yet he'd been excited about his first attribute advancement instead of horrified at the slaughter in which he'd not just participated but revelled.

Maybe there hadn't been a better solution and the battle with the Ustei was inevitable. It was certainly true that they had to be stopped from rampaging through villages, killing and taking slaves. But was any real attempt made at a peaceful solution? Jason wasn't foolish enough to think he was done with killing, but he wanted to be confident in himself that it was the right thing, instead of just accepting the assurance of others. Even now, he felt little. No churn of the stomach, no tremor of the hands. He held serious doubts about his own judgement.

He had made other mistakes on his search to make peace with the propensity for violence he had found within himself. His callousness had grown, and people had died at his hands that he knew should not have. The third-rate adventurers Thadwick sent after him could have been sent packing with the same ease that he slaughtered half their number. He had taken their lives, caught up in his own dark mythology.

Killing had become easy, even casual. He'd told himself that it was necessary; he had to send a message to the next people who came after him. The truth he now understood was that he'd been caught up in his own ego and power.

Rufus had warned him that he would need to harden himself to the realities of a violent world. It was necessary when monsters threatened innocent people and power turned the selfish into tyrants. What he had warned Jason about was the danger of becoming one of those tyrants himself. The god Dominion had seen it and apparently approved.

He had tried to balance himself out. There was no reclaiming innocence, but he at least tried to pull back from the dark precipice. He hadn't wanted to go after the bandits that took over some desert town. He knew it would be too easy to justify the killing to himself, yet he let himself be talked into it.

His kill count for the day came to thirty-seven. Three dozen people in a single afternoon. He could not say he went unaffected by the magnitude of his actions, but the most damning thing was that he didn't regret them. It was a grim job carried out with grim satisfaction.

The person that arrived in that magical other world was not the person who left it. Looking out at the dark, rain-filled sky of his own world, he couldn't help but wonder if there was a place for him in it anymore. He wasn't sure he deserved one.

Jason shook his head to dispel the dark thoughts. For all his dark deeds, he had done a lot of good as well. There was no changing the past, so all he could do was move forward and keep trying his best. In the meantime, he brought up the next system window.

- You have received the blessing of the World-Phoenix.
- If you accept the blessing, your outworlder racial ability [Astral Affinity] will evolve to [Nirvanic Transfiguration].
- If you reject the blessing, your ability will remain unchanged and can be transfigured by normal means or other blessings in the future.

He had no idea what the World-Phoenix wanted from him, or why it had slipped him a token as his soul was dragged through the astral space on his way to becoming an outworlder. According to Clive, the World-Phoenix's area of concern was dimensional stability. Its interests lay in events that impacted whole realities, with little care for mortal affairs. When the World-Phoenix did act on that small of a scale, it was oblique and subtle. Was the World-Phoenix trying to make Jason the butterfly whose wings led to the rise of a hurricane?

Jason had no insights into the World-Phoenix's objectives or intentions for him, which was exactly the problem. Entities existing in realms he couldn't imagine were playing games on a board he was too small to see.

He had no interest in being someone's pawn and, if he saw the chance, would rather flip the board over entirely.

According to Clive, a great astral being's blessing was very different to their star seeds. It could not control the recipient outside of ordinary methods like gratitude and obligation. The ability, once granted, could not be revoked like that from a divine awakening stone. It was truly a gift that could be neither managed nor revoked by the giver.

Some great astral beings were even known to give blessings to those that opposed their interests when their ideologies meshed. Jason himself had already received a power transfiguration through a blessing, courtesy of a Reaper token. His system had not asked for confirmation at that time; apparently, his use of the token while absorbing an awakening stone served as consent. He looked over the description of his potential new power.

Ability: [Nirvanic Transfiguration]

- This ability will be evolved from the ability [Astral Affinity].

- Your body and soul will be combined into a gestalt entity both physical and spiritual in nature. This state will grant inherent resistance to effects that utilise the soul-body disconnect.

- When suffering lethal damage, your death will trigger a nirvanic rebirth, restoring your body to a state of full integrity. This effect cannot be triggered again until you have increased in rank from the last time it was used. This ability will change on reaching diamond rank.

- The nature of your new body will render you immune to other resurrection effects, including those of high-rank healing magic. If your body is discorporated when the nirvanic rebirth is unavailable, your soul will return to a purely spiritual state, unable to reinhabit a physical form or re-enter a physical reality. This prevents the natural formation of an outworlder body on entering a physical reality. These restrictions will change on reaching diamond rank.

- The strength of your aura will significantly increase.

- Your resistance to hostile dimension effects and disruptive force damage will be increased. This is an enhancement of the [Astral Affinity] ability.

- The potency of your dimensional abilities and transcendent damage will be increased. This is a legacy effect of the [Astral Affinity] ability.

- Physical reality around you will be more stable. You will be able to sense nearby astral space apertures and proto-astral spaces coterminous to your location.

- You will be able to traverse astral space apertures, including those that are closed or have been sealed.

- You will be able to directly enter proto-astral spaces coterminous with your location or directly leave a proto-astral space to a coterminous location.

- While within the astral, you will be able to create and maintain a small zone of physical reality around you. This does not grant the ability to enter or traverse the astral.

The power seemed wildly suspicious. For one thing, no racial gift Jason had heard of came close to that complexity. It was more akin to an essence ability after ranking up multiple times. For another, it seemed very specific. It was clearly designed to push Jason in certain directions, for reasons that remained hidden from him. Whatever the World-Phoenix's agenda, Jason was certain this power was designed to serve the mysterious entity as much, if not more, than Jason himself.

Jason had two further misgivings. The major one was the removal of resurrection options. To someone from a world without magic, that might seem like a cheap cost, but Jason had already died twice. He knew that high-ranked healing magic had miraculous effects, to the point of bringing back the dead if the healer moved quickly enough.

While the nirvanic rebirth effect was some compensation, it would take Jason decades to reach diamond rank, even under the far-from-certain assumption that he would at all. In all that time, he would have only one chance to revive at each rank, compared to the potentially countless times a healer could bring him back from the brink.

His other concern was that it precluded using the outworlder effect of having his soul traverse the astral and form a new body in a new world. He didn't know if it was possible to engineer this effect without a transcendent

power like the World-Phoenix token, but accepting this power would rule it out entirely.

That was not something Jason was comfortable with. His intention was to settle affairs with his family, then find a way back to the magical other Earth. He had expected to be higher rank before that ever became an issue. Bronze rank seemed too low to find a means of traversing worlds and there weren't any monsters to grind his way up with on his own Earth. Figuring out how to artificially trigger an outworlder effect was the only idea he'd come up with so far.

Those concerns, plus a healthy scepticism about the agendas of great astral beings, left Jason unwilling to accept the power. The World-Phoenix certainly knew how to lay out tempting bait, however. Much of the ability seemed tailor-made for taking the fight to the Builder's minions, which he suspected it was.

The question was why? Was it to push Jason into taking the ability, or was fighting the Builder the entire point? Why would a great astral being even go to the effort for someone like him? Surely there was no shortage of powerful, knowledgeable people who would be willing to act on the World-Phoenix's behalf. He was self-aware enough to realise that his ego was perhaps a touch over-sized, but even he would admit to being unremarkable on a cosmic scale.

Jason had no intention of accepting the power without answering at least some of those questions. He didn't flat out decline it either. There didn't seem to be a time limit on the offer, and if there had been, it would have tipped him into rejecting it outright. For the moment, he could just leave things as they were, leaving the decision for when he had more information.

Finally, he moved on to the last window. This was a power evolution that he had received the old-fashioned way: by having the crap kicked out of him. He already had an instinctive sense of the power, but Clive was right: having it all spelled out was extremely useful.

Ability: [Spirit Vault]

- This ability is evolved from the ability [Inventory].

- You have a dimensional storage space.

- You may call up a gate and physically enter your dimensional storage space. Only you may enter; others cannot be invited or forcibly intrude. You may directly portal from within the storage space to another area using the location of the gate as a starting point, even if the gate is obstructed or destroyed, preventing ordinary egress.

- You may summon familiars within the storage space without the use of a ritual, although any material requirements of the ritual must still be consumed.

"See, now that's how a power evolution should work. Not eighteen different things, no over-the-top effects. No getting killed, no agendas. Just a nice bit of extra utility, with that little bit of flair that makes you excited to check it out."

He stood up and waved a hand over the floor. In response, a line of darkness appeared, crawling across the floor like a dark flame. He gestured upwards and an obsidian arch rose from the shadowy line, the archway likewise filled with darkness but marked with stars, like a gateway into the void of space.

Jason picked up his chair and stepped through the archway. He emerged from an identical arch into a luxurious gazebo, elaborately carved from marbled obsidian in swirling black and white. The gazebo was circular and had three more archways spaced equidistantly around it. The archway he had stepped through was filled with a starry void, while the next was filled

with what looked like a vertical sheet of roiling blood. After that was one filled with pure darkness, much like his normal portal arches. The last featured the blue and orange eye nebula that was Gordon's signature.

Outside of the gazebo's open walls was a dark, rain-filled sky. Looking out, he saw that the gazebo was floating in some empty void. Neither rain nor wind encroached upon the gazebo's interior, despite the open sides. A large crystal that looked to have naturally grown down from the centre of the arched ceiling gave off a cool, pleasant light.

Outside of the gazebo, numerous objects orbited it, each glowing with transcendent light like stars shining in the dark. Looking at them, Jason realised that they were the items stored in his inventory. He threw out the chair he was holding as an experiment. It gained its own halo of light and joined the other objects in orbit. Jason spied a stack of sandwiches, some of the last of the food his team had prepared and taken into the astral space. With a simple thought from Jason, one of the sandwiches separated from the group and floated to his hand.

"Nice," he said, then took a bite.

He turned back to the archways, clearly associated with his three familiars.

"Alright, mates. Time to front up."

Items flew into the gazebo, vanishing into the three archways. Jason had enough materials to summon Shade and Gordon once each, and Colin twice. Along with the material components being consumed, the required spirit coins came hurtling up and in from somewhere below the floating gazebo.

Leeches started spilling out of the bloody arch, forming a pile from which strips of ragged, bloody cloth emerged to start binding the pile into shape. Motes of blue and orange light streamed out of the nebula arch like a swarm of fireflies, slowly coalescing into Gordon's form. A dark shape slowly pushed itself out through the final arch, taking the humanoid form of Shade. As his shadow familiar appeared, Jason's own shadow vanished. Additional dark bodies emerged from the arch, one after another, before melding together as one.

"It is good to see you alive again, Mr Asano."

"Good to be seen," Jason said. "It comes as bit of a surprise."

"Not entirely," Shade said. "The World-Phoenix token in your possession was always a comfort to me, in regard to your safety."

“Wait,” Jason said. “You knew?”
“Of course,” Shade said in his usual dignified tone. “I’m not a scrub.”

3

THE SINGLE GREATEST THING ON THIS PLANET

JASON'S INVENTORY POWER HAD BEEN TRANSFORMED INTO A FLOATING, otherworldly gazebo. In addition to letting him do what amounted to storing himself, he could use it to resummon his familiars, allowing him to reunite with them. While he was pleased to see them, the revelation that Shade had known the nature of the World-Phoenix token was startling.

"How long have you known what the token could do?" Jason asked.

"Several thousand years," Shade said.

"It never occurred to you that I might want to know it could bring me back to life?"

"Of course," Shade said. "I chose quite specifically to withhold that information from you."

"Why?"

"Mr Asano, you are more than reckless enough as it is. If you realised you had a tool to bring you back from death, it would only have exacerbated the cavalier attitude you hold to your mortality."

"I'm not that bad."

"Mr Asano, you just died attempting to have a knife fight with an entity so powerful that it was forced to use a proxy so as to not annihilate the universe by simple virtue of arriving in it."

"Oh, come on, Shade. It was one time."

"Mr Asano, as I do not possess eyebrows, I shall require you to imagine me with a pair in order that I might give you a flat look from beneath them."

"Yeah, alright," Jason conceded. "I'm glad we all made it through."

“I hope that you will act with more caution in future, Mr Asano. We all do.”

Jason turned to the cloaked forms of his other familiars. Gordon was a disembodied cloak filled with power, while the leech swarm, Colin, was bound up in bloody rags in a cloaked, humanoid shape. Both of them nodded in agreement with Shade’s assertion.

“My own familiars are ganging up on me. What a sad state of affairs.”

“Then I recommend you stop trying to get yourself killed,” Shade said. “You are demonstrably good at it.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “Do you have any insight into the World-Phoenix, Shade?”

“Some,” Shade said. “You are undecided about the power she has offered you?”

“Did you sense that through our connection, or did I miss something while my soul was making its way back across the astral?” Jason asked.

“I took the opportunity to reconnect with my progenitor while your soul was in its care,” Shade said.

“You saw your dad; that’s nice. He didn’t give you any insights into what the World-Phoenix is after, did he?”

“The Reaper only said that the power was designed in negotiation between itself and the World-Phoenix,” Shade said. “I believe it withheld further information, knowing that I would pass it along to you.”

“More secrets. Wonderful.”

“The power transfiguration you have been offered is unusual,” Shade said. “The basis is something I have seen from the World-Phoenix in the past, but the Reaper’s hand in its design is clear.”

“Oh?”

“You have a habit of not staying dead,” Shade said. “This is not something the Reaper likes. You have its gratitude, however. Great astral beings, the Reaper included, rarely involve themselves with the mortals that venerate them. Typically, they restrict themselves to bestowing blessings by whatever criteria appeal to them, using star seeds only for their most important agents. The Builder is unusual in this regard, being much more prolific in its use of star seeds.”

“You’re saying the Reaper’s grateful that we helped out those Order of the Reaper acolytes trapped in the astral space as flesh abominations?” Jason said. “It didn’t have any boots on the ground to settle things?”

“The cult of the Reaper does operate in that world, or it once did, but the Reaper does not communicate with them directly. That would be to trespass on the domain of the local god of death. I have been sealed in the astral space myself for centuries and am unclear about the relationship between the order and the cult. The Reaper appreciates that without you and your team, the souls of its followers would still be trapped inside the undying flesh abominations, which is a direct contravention of the Reaper’s core principles.”

“That dead things should be dead and stay dead.”

“Yes. The ability you have been offered is a compromise, making sure that the World-Phoenix won’t just keep bringing you back every time you’re killed.”

“Is that an option?”

“I am not privy to the ancient pacts that govern the interaction between great astral beings, but I know that the World-Phoenix rarely acting directly is part of a trade-off in which she has the right to return mortals from death. She is judicious in its use out of respect for the Reaper’s authority in this area. In turn, the Reaper has worked with her to design for you a formidable power.”

“Limited revives,” Jason said. “Like when *Sonic the Hedgehog* games were still good. The Reaper is all right with me cheating death?”

“It’s a matter of perspective and authority,” Shade explained. “The Reaper doesn’t care if you cheat death. Even without magic, the dead have come back to life. Worlds like yours with advanced medical technology make it possible. The Reaper only cares if you cheat being dead. Once your soul has gone to the astral, that is when it becomes his concern. Until then, it is the affair of any death god a world might have.”

“Which is why quick-revive magic that high-rankers use is all right?”

“There are more potent diamond-rank resurrection effects that are less timely,” Shade said. “Such powers can return the soul after it has left the body, so long as it lingers in the world. Death gods may intercede for good or ill, as they choose, even governing the rules of such powers.”

“So this ability would put me back together while my soul was still around,” Jason said. “Once it’s gone, though, it’s gone.”

“The aspect of the ability you are being offered that prevents resurrection is not an artificially imposed restriction. It is a function of the combined physical and spiritual state you would attain on accepting the

power. Body and soul as a single gestalt entity. One of the ramifications of this state would be that once the physical element dies and it becomes fully spiritual, it stays that way. Rather than an ordinary soul, you would be closer to an astral being, like myself. You would be no more able to resurrect than I am."

"Could I end up as someone's familiar?"

"I don't know," Shade said. "We have reached the limit of my knowledge on the topic, although any familiar summons is voluntary. One more thing to mention about the state your body would take is that entities both spiritual and physical in nature have significant advantages when operating on an interdimensional scale. This aspect is not something that would help you much at your current rank, but would show its value over time."

"So you're saying that your dad made sure this power is the good stuff, in return for making sure I stay dead next time?"

"That is a part of it," Shade confirmed. "Clearly, the power is designed to serve several agendas. Those of the World-Phoenix and the Reaper, certainly. But also to serve yours."

"Because it would give me the tools to fight the Builder?"

"In part," Shade said. "There is a balance between great astral beings, just as there is a balance between the gods of a world. They keep one another in check. This is why the great astral beings do not give blessings to their favoured supporters that contain as much magic as can be withstood without it destroying them. It is to avoid escalation and to minimise mortal interference."

"Except the Builder interferes anyway."

"Yet he does not grant blessing of excessive power. This ability you have been offered is a product of a bargain struck between great astral beings. It operates outside of the normal balance. There is a price to taking it, but the power is far greater than you would normally receive."

"That much I figured out."

"World-Phoenix frequently blesses those who serve its interests with a similar ability, although this seems to be an enhanced variant. These are generally high-ranking individuals whose tasks involve traversing the astral. Your intention is to find a reliable path between this world and the one you just left, yes?"

"Yes," Jason confirmed.

“That is what makes this power most advantageous to you. This ability will not give you the power to traverse realities, but it will make otherwise unfeasible solutions more viable.”

“Do you think I should take the ability?”

“My advice is to decline,” Shade said. “The benefits are many, but the danger it poses to your long-term survivability is not a risk I think you should take. It’s valuable now, but silver rank takes a decade or more to pass through. Gold rank will take even longer, with no assurance of ever reaching diamond. In the decades that takes, you could be saved many times over by powerful healers, so long as you don’t render yourself immune to such effects.”

“I’m not intending to die that much.”

“You’ve died twice in as many years, Mr Asano.”

“The first one doesn’t count. It’s not my fault I was sucked into another universe and had my body disintegrated.”

“There is a counter-argument to advice,” Shade said. “I believe the Reaper will be contacting the death goddess of the other world and asking her to reduce the efficacy of resurrection magic. I suspect your multiple revivals are at least part of the impetus, even if it was not healing magic that brought you back.”

“Oh, great. What if I get back and people find out that I’m the reason healing got nerfed? Can gods just up and change how powers work?”

“Within limits. They cannot affect the people with those powers, only the rules of magic within which the powers operate.”

“Doesn’t that invalidate certain essence powers?”

“No,” Shade said. “Essence powers have a natural balance. In any location where the local death god impedes resurrection, that same change will enhance the non-resurrection effects of relevant abilities. The Healer will be involved in the change for this very reason.”

“And part of the Reaper’s no-resurrection plan is pushing this power onto the World-Phoenix to offer me?”

“The only requirement the Reaper made was that any ability you were given sets hard limits on your power to revive from death. Everything else comes from the World-Phoenix.”

“Which raises the question of what the World-Phoenix wants,” Jason said. “I’m not above helping someone out in return for mutual benefit, but there’s a difference between cutting a deal and being pushed into one

without being told the details. Also, I'm not sure what I have to offer. I can't imagine anything I can do that can't be done better by someone else. I doubt the World-Phoenix is hard up for volunteers."

"The World-Phoenix does not like to act directly. It prefers to set things in motion that will ultimately achieve the end it desires."

"So I've heard," Jason said. "What does that mean for me?"

"Most likely," Shade said, "is that the World-Phoenix believes that you will naturally act in a way that furthers its goals, so long as you have the tools and the opportunity. Therefore, it has offered them to you."

"I'm not going to reject the power out of hand. I'm not ungrateful for being brought home and back from the dead. That doesn't mean I'll play along with its agenda, no questions asked, though. It is true that she won't use the power to unduly influence me, right?"

"Blessing powers do not offer control over their recipients," Shade confirmed. "Even an unusual case like this one."

"I'm just going to leave it be for the moment, then," Jason said. "I can reassess it later."

"Prudent," Shade said approvingly.

"What say we get out of this weird dimension and hit the road, then," Jason said. "Now that you're back in action, I have some more flexibility in my transport options. Having you turn into a magical carriage would look a bit odd driving down the street, though. Even a horse would be more subtle, but not great in the rain."

"I'll see what I can manage," Shade said.

Jason's familiars returned to his body, and he went back through the archway, emerging in the empty hospital ward.

"I believe that I can manage an acceptable form of conveyance," Shade said from Jason's shadow.

"Exactly how much control do you have over the form of mount you take?"

"Your ability defines the general parameters," Shade said. "Within those parameters, the choice of form is mine to make. In the astral space, for example, I could transform into anything suited to jungle travel, even if something that I know and you do not. I chose the mantis beetles, but could have easily taken the form of a large serpent or an arboreal climber."

"My original intention was to try portalling directly to Sydney to look for my uncle," Jason said. "Since I have you, I think I might head back to

my hometown and check on the family. The question is whether I portal straight there or catch a ride. What kind of mount is appropriate to a hospital environment? You're not going to turn into an ambulance, are you?"

Three of Shade's bodies emerged from Jason shadow and melded together into the form of a sleek, black two-door sports car.

"Strewth," Jason said. "Shade, you look like a space ninja's car. Is this an actual car that exists somewhere?"

"So long as I adhere to the basic properties of the conveyance ascribed by your ability, I am able to conform to my own sense of design aesthetics," Shade the car said. "I have drawn heavily from another world I have visited for this form. Does it meet with your approval?"

"Does the super-sweet talking car meet with my approval? Shade, you may be the single greatest thing on this planet. That definitely answers whether I'm going to ride or try a portal."

The car transformed to a cloud of shadows that returned to Jason's own shadow.

"That's going to make parking easy," Jason said. "I think it's time to get out of here."

From his inventory, he retrieved his magic umbrella. It could shield him from water when he was completely submerged, so it would be more than up to the task of handling the rain. He leapt through the window as he opened the umbrella, his shadow cloak appearing around him as he drifted to the ground like Mary Poppins.

He followed a concrete path through the overgrown grass of the hospital grounds to the street, not bothering to hold the umbrella that floated dutifully behind him. He popped a bronze spirit coin into his mouth to normalise his recovery rates as he gently expanded his aura. Not sensing any other auras within it, he had Shade once again take the form of a car. Slipping inside, he settled luxuriously into the soft, shadow-stuff seats.

The interior was opulent, in Shade's usual colourations of black and white. Looking over the dash, he noticed it appeared to have the full functionality of a car.

"Shade, is that a sound system?" Jason asked.

"I adhere to the parameters of the form I have taken. That includes something called Bluetooth functionality, which does not appear to involve teeth or the colour blue."

“Nice. Can you drive yourself?”

“I can.”

“Maybe I should have had you turn into an ’81 Trans Am.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“It’s for making a shadowy flight into the world of a man who does not exist.”

“That has not alleviated my confusion.”

“Do you have a turbo boost button?”

“I do not.”

“Oh well,” Jason said. “Let’s hit the road.”

“I need to work on my driving skills,” Jason said as he drove through the rain. It was a short half-hour to his hometown of Casselton Beach, the wet conditions only adding a few minutes.

There was nothing wrong with Jason’s abilities as a driver, if his only concerns were driving like a normal person. His problem was the speed and power he could feel within Shade’s car form. Despite it making very little noise, Jason could feel the potential, itching to be unleashed. It was a hunting cat, poised and eager to pounce. The potential of it taunted Jason’s ordinary driving skills, which would definitely not be able to handle them.

“I am perfectly capable of moving effectively and efficiently at speed without requiring input from a driver,” Shade said.

“Says the guy with no turbo boost button,” Jason said.

“I do not see how that is relevant,” Shade said.

“Maybe I could find a driving skill book. No, that’s pretty unlikely.”

Jason had used some skill books to give him basic proficiency with alchemy and artifice. Anything he made would be laughable to an expert like Jory, but he could make some basic consumable items, if he could find the materials. They would be of low quality, but a mediocre healing potion was still better than no healing potion.

The impressive features of Shade’s car form included projecting a heads-up display on the windscreen. That gave him his first taste of hard information regarding his return, including the date and time.

“It’s my sister’s birthday next week,” Jason said. “How did you even get this information? Do you have wi-fi or something?”

“I will remind you that it is your ability that is responsible for my shape-changing,” Shade said. “Do you have wi-fi?”

Jason thought back to his old quest ability and its power to sense things from the world around him that he otherwise could not.

“I actually might,” Jason said thoughtfully. “Magic wi-fi. It’s probably not Windows-compatible. I’m definitely running under a proprietary OS.”

It had been late November when Jason left and now it was early June, a year and a half later. It was fully dark but, a little before nine, not too late. He wasn’t sure what he would do when he arrived at his parents’ house. He still intended to get more information before making his grand reappearance.

“There is something I think you should know,” Shade said. “You asked if you missed anything while your soul was traversing the astral. The Reaper placed another soul alongside yours, which accompanied it into this world. It was not a soul I recognised, but I believe this soul is most likely now an outworlder, here on your world.”

“I think I knew that,” Jason mused. “I arrived with this lingering sense that someone else should have been there with me. Finding out who they are and why they are here should be at the top of my priority list. Why would your dad send a soul my way? Isn’t that antithetical to his whole purpose?”

“It is,” Shade said. “It was the price the Reaper paid to curtail your own future revivals.”

“Some minion of the World-Phoenix, maybe? Someone to keep me on track?”

“Possibly. As I said, it was not a soul I recognised.”

“I guess we’ll find out sooner or later. Any ideas on how we can find this outworlder?”

“It would depend on the conditions by which they were inserted into the world,” Shade said. “The World-Phoenix token placed you at the spot you were born, but this other soul is likely to have appeared at a random location.”

“Well, an outworlder should stand out at least. How hard can it be to find one weird person using the internet?”

Jason received a startling message as he reached the outskirts of his hometown.

- Contact [Erika Asano] has entered communication range.
- Contact [Ian Evans] has entered communication range.
- Contact [Emi Evans-Asano] has entered communication range.

Jason took in a sharp breath. The names of Jason's sister and her family had been darkened on his contact list since it appeared with his evolved interface. They lived in Melbourne and had most likely come north to visit. They probably had some time off and had come back to Erika's hometown for her birthday next week.

- Contact [Kaito Asano] has entered communication range.
- Contact [Amy Asano] has entered communication range.

Jason's brother and his wife lived next to Jason's parents, so it made sense that they would come into range at the same time. He drove through the empty streets of Casselton Beach towards his old street. The dark, the rain and his enhanced senses made the familiar unfamiliar.

He pulled to a stop across the street from the house where he grew up. Instead of getting out, Shade transformed into a cloud of darkness that retreated into Jason's shadow, leaving Jason standing on the side of the road as he pulled the umbrella from his inventory.

The dark and quiet car had drawn no attention. Jason stood away from the streetlights, the moonless, rainy night making him all but invisible. The first thing he noticed was the cars in the driveway. Neither of his parents' cars were present, although they might have been in the carport. In their place were what he recognised as the cars of his sister and her husband. He had no idea why they would both bring their cars if they drove all the way up from Melbourne.

Jason let his aura senses wash over the house. He sensed two adults who were wrangling with a child. He could feel the tiredness and frustration in

the auras of the adults and the defiance of the child. She was apparently not a big fan of bedtime.

Although he had never sensed the auras before, there was a familiarity to them. He had no doubt that it was his sister, Erika, her husband, Ian, and their daughter, Emi. There was no one else present; his parents were nowhere to be seen.

He had not seen his brother Kaito or his wife Amy since before they were married. Jason turned his gaze to the house next door, where they lived. Amy's parents had retired early and moved to Tasmania, selling their house to their daughter. Their generous price gave the young family a financial head-start at a time when few young people could afford a home.

He brushed his senses over the house, sensing two adults and two sleeping children. They just had one at the time Jason left, the younger child only a few months old. The auras of the adults were drenched in the tiredness of dealing with a new baby.

Jason turned his attention back to the house he grew up in. Had Erika and Ian bought his parents' house, the way that Kaito and Amy had bought hers? Erika certainly had the money for it, but what about her TV series that filmed in Melbourne?

"Will you go in?" Shade asked.

"No," Jason said. "I need to know what they think happened. I need some kind of story that fits."

"You won't tell them the truth?"

"Well," Jason said, "let's say I rock up and tell them 'hey, it turns out I'm alive and a wizard now. Also, magic is real, there are alternate universes, and your most fundamental understandings about reality fall somewhere between breathtakingly incomplete and utterly wrong.' How do you think that would go?"

"Perhaps a more measured approach would be best," Shade agreed. "You will travel to the city you mentioned, as planned?"

"Sydney, yeah."

"Will you be trying out a portal, or do you want to drive?"

"It's a long drive," Jason said, "but I think I could use that right now. I need more time to think."

4

SOME SECRETS CHANGE YOU FOREVER

Jason let Shade drive through the dark and the rain. The dark did not obscure his vision, but he trusted Shade more than himself to drive safely in the wet. He also didn't want to drive distracted; his visit home had left him contemplative and sober.

"We should do this trip again when the weather's better," he said. "And during the day. The Pacific Coast Drive is one of the greats."

As Jason's soul had grown stronger, the connection to his familiars had grown stronger in turn. Even with the current strength, the connection wasn't the equal of a bonded familiar, but he could feel them more than ever. They could likewise feel him and the emotional turmoil raging beneath his placid façade.

The familiars did not know Jason's complicated family history, and he doubted Colin or possibly Gordon could even understand if they did. What they did understand was the feeling it engendered in Jason. He felt them urge him on with feelings of support, smiling as he sent back his own feelings of gratitude. It was a comfort to have his strange but loyal companions on his side.

Despite the wet conditions, Shade had no regard for speed limits and every confidence in his ability, so Jason had arrived in Sydney before the bars stopped accepting people. Sydney was also suffering a downpour, so Jason's umbrella floated along behind him.

The Stone Wall was a bar in Sydney's Kings Cross. A remnant of the wilder days before the lockout laws, it was a bastion of the old rough and dirty days. Working the door was a small mountain—a Māori dressed all in black.

"Hey, bro," the bouncer said. Despite his towering figure, he had a high-pitched voice. His thick New Zealand accent made his use of the word 'bro' friendly and amiable, rather than frat-boy douchebag. "How's your umbrella stay up like that?"

Jason glanced at the magic item floating next to him. "Probably magnets."

"That's pretty sweet. You coming in? It's pretty quiet, on account of the rain."

"I'm looking for Hiro Asano," Jason said. "Last I heard, he was operating out of here."

"No worries, bro; I'll give him a call. Who should I say is looking for him?"

"His nephew."

"Okay, give me a sec."

The big man fished in his jacket pocket for a phone that looked like a toy in his huge hand.

"Hey, it's Taika. I've got someone here looking for you. Says he's your nephew."

The bouncer looked Jason over.

"Good-looking half-Japanese bloke, yeah."

He covered the phone with his hand. "Are you Kaito?"

"I'm the other one. Jason."

The bouncer went back to his call.

"He says he's the other one. Yeah, Jason."

The big man winced at whatever came through from the other end, then put his phone away.

"He says Jason is dead, bro. He sounded pretty angry that someone was claiming to be his dead nephew. Said he's sending Growl downstairs. My advice to is make yourself scarce before he gets here."

"Thanks, but I'm fine."

"If you say so. I'm Taika, by the way. Like the director, but I don't make films."

"Jason Asano."

“You really Hiro’s dead nephew?”

“The trick is to not stay dead.”

“I can see how that would be useful. You might be needing that soon.”

On cue, a hulking white guy came striding out of the bar. He wasn’t as big as Taika, but looked like a bicep that had grown a person around it, bought a tank top, and started getting tattoos.

“Is this the guy?” Growl asked. His voice could have surfaced a gravel road.

“This is the guy,” Taika said.

“I thought you might have warned him to run,” Growl said.

“I did,” Taika said. “He responded with a casual lack of concern suggesting that one of you is about to be very surprised.”

Growl looked Jason up and down. Even after growing a few centimetres taller with his ascension to bronze rank, Jason was not a large man. His lean muscle was not emphasised by his well-tailored suit.

“You think this guy is some kind of arse-kicker?” Growl asked Taika.

“I’ve seen movies, bro. Huge white dude goes to beat up a little Asian bloke? He’s probably one of them secret kung-fu guys. Trained up in the mountains or something.”

Jason watched the exchange with an amused smile.

“What are you smirking at?” Growl asked him. He grabbed Jason by the arm and dragged him towards an alley. Jason let himself be pulled along, out of sight of the street.

“Mr Asano doesn’t like people pretending to be his dead family members,” Growl said. “First, you’re going to tell me what you’re up to. Then I’m going to make very clear the degree to which Mr Asano is upset.”

“What I’m here for is easy,” Jason said with a sinister chuckle as he took on a malevolent expression. “My job was to get you away from Asano while the others go in through the back.”

“What?” Growl asked, then his eyes went wide. He swore loudly, shoved Jason against the wall of the bar, and sprinted back the way they’d come.

Jason followed at a casual stroll. When he reached Taika, the big man was looking at the door Growl had just barrelled through.

“Did you kung fu Growl?”

“I just told him a little porky pie,” Jason said, moving under the awning over the door and closing his umbrella. “Nice to meet you, Taika. I’m going

to go in."

"Okay, bro."

Jason followed Growl's aura through a half-empty bar. The lights were as dingy as the atmosphere and no one noticed the umbrella vanish as he returned it to his inventory. Growl had rushed past a pair of beefy men standing in front of a doorway, who blocked Jason's way when he went to follow.

Jason couldn't be bothered dealing with them, giving them just enough aura suppression to severely unnerve them without causing any real harm. The pair, suddenly terrified of Jason for reasons they didn't understand, quickly moved out of his way. Jason went through the door and up the stairs. The upper floor was completely unlike the downstairs, being clean and well lit. An angry voice was coming from an open door down the hall.

"No, no one has come in through the back. You installed that security door yourself. They'd have better luck coming through a wall. This is why you never move up, Growl. The only muscle you never work out is your damn brain!"

"Don't be too hard on him, Uncle Hiro," Jason said, stepping into the office where Growl was looking sheepish. Sitting behind a desk was Jason's uncle. Hiro's criminal connections had made him a black sheep of the family and Jason hadn't seen him since before he had left for university seven years ago. He was in shape and looked younger than his age.

"Jason?"

Hiro came around the desk, tilting his head back and forth as he examined Jason's face.

"Is it really you?"

"It's me, Uncle Hiro."

Hiro blinked a couple of times, then collected Jason into a fierce hug. When he let go, he placed his hands on Jason's shoulders, unwilling to let him go as he looked at his nephew with a beaming smile.

"You can go, Growl," he said without looking at his thuggish henchman.

"Are you sure?" Growl asked.

"Yes, Thomas."

Growl flinched at the use of his real name and slinked away.

"How did you get past the guys downstairs?" Hiro asked.

"I'm very intimidating," Jason said unconvincingly.

Hiro closed the door behind Growl as Jason looked around. Hiro's office was decorated quite differently to the grimy aesthetic of the downstairs bar. It had exposed brick, stained wood, and subdued art. The chair behind the desk was old-school leather, practically a throne. The two in front of it weren't much smaller.

Jason's uncle waved him into one of the seats in front of his desk. Instead of going back around the desk, he sat next to Jason. Jason's own chair was very comfortable, by the standards of someone who didn't own a house made of magic clouds.

"It's incredible to see you, Jason," Hiro said. "Even before all this, it had been too long. The memorial service was the first time I saw your father in years. We've even kept in touch at least a little, since. Your grandmother still won't have anything to do with me."

"You did send a huge man to beat me up," Jason said. "You aren't exactly a model citizen."

"I'm sorry about that, but you handled Growl deftly. He's not very sharp, but that's acceptable in a blunt instrument."

"It's fine," Jason said. "He's a giant tool either way."

"Still a smart-arse, I see."

"Yep. I considered dumb-arse but decided to go the other way."

Hiro chuckled.

"It's definitely you, alright. You've changed a lot since I last saw you, though. You finally grew into that chin a little."

"Why is everyone so focused on my chin?"

"Are you kidding? You could have drilled for oil with that thing. Did you have some work done?"

"What work?"

"Like chin-reduction surgery."

"I did not have chin-reduction surgery!"

Hiro chuckled, then his face grew more serious.

"What happened to you, Jason? Where have you been? Why hasn't anyone heard from you?"

"Those questions have very complicated answers," Jason said. "For the moment, let's just say that I've been doing some work in a place completely cut off from outside communication. I didn't even know people thought I was dead until I talked to your guys downstairs."

"Didn't the rest of the family tell you?"

“You’re the only one who knows I’m back. What does everyone think happened to me?”

“That you died in the gas explosion.”

“What gas explosion?”

Hiro’s eyebrows rose.

“There was a gas explosion in your apartment building in Melbourne. It wiped out your apartment entirely and a good chunk of the ones around yours. You were the only fatality, though.”

“My building didn’t have gas service.”

“That’s what your sister said. She threw up a big stink about it, but the feds were adamant.”

“Feds?”

“Your apartment blew up when there was one of those terrorist response exercises going on nearby. It was one of the first, actually; they’d only just started doing them.”

“What terrorist response exercises?”

Hiro leaned back in his chair, giving Jason an assessing look.

“You really were out of contact, weren’t you? The army’s been deploying forces all over the country for what they’re calling terrorist response exercises. The first ones started happening almost two years ago, but they didn’t get a lot of public attention until… well, until after you died. It’s happening in other countries too, all over the world. There’s media speculation about some kind of anticipated attack, but it keeps not happening. Since one of the exercises took place near your apartment at the same time, the federal police got involved.”

“And?”

“A lightning-quick investigation,” Hiro said. “They said it was a gas explosion and closed it out by the end of the day. Erika pushed for more information, but the feds pushed back. Hard, from what I hear. They told her to back off in no uncertain terms.”

“Well, that’s only very suspicious,” Jason mused. Clearly, the destruction was caused by the astral event that sent him hurtling into another reality, but why were people covering it up? Were there people out there who knew about magic and spent their time hiding any manifestations of it?

“Why come to me?” Hiro asked. “I’m flattered, but why not your parents or your sister?”

“Like I said, I’ve been out of contact. I need to know what I’m walking into before I make my grand reappearance. I figured you could help me and would be more willing to take ‘please don’t ask’ for an answer.”

“Of course I’ll help.”

“Is Erika living in Mum and Dad’s house now?”

“She is,” Hiro said. “You went by?”

“I took a look but didn’t go in. Where are Mum and Dad living? Don’t tell me they moved to Tasmania too?”

Hiro made an awkward expression.

“Sorry, Jason, but your parents divorced a year ago. I’m not really sure of the details, but your father bought a large property as a landscaping project and he’s been living in a little cottage on-site. Your mother moved up to Castle Reach.”

“Damn,” Jason said.

“So, what do you need?” Hiro asked. “Some cash? A place to stay while you get organised?”

“They would both be great,” Jason said. “I’ve been working, but they didn’t pay me in Australian dollars.”

“You can’t do a currency exchange?”

Jason lightly placed a large gold bar on Hiro’s desk with one hand.

“I was hoping you could help me move it,” Jason said. “Obviously, I don’t expect market rates.”

“Jason, you know that real gold is heavy, right?”

“I know.”

Hiro leaned forward, grabbing the bar with one hand. Then he used the second and hefted it heavily off the table.

“Jesus, Jason,” he said as he placed it back on the desk. “What have you gotten caught up in? I’m meant to be the shady one.”

“I haven’t been doing anything criminal,” Jason said. “Except secretly leaving the country, I guess. And importing unregistered gold. Okay, maybe a little shady. I’ve been doing security work. In Africa.”

“You were paid a bar of gold to secretly leave the country, and what? Be a security guard?”

“Security contractor.”

“A mercenary? Jason, do you have any idea how insane that sounds?”

Jason laughed.

“Uncle, you’re smart enough to know that I’m skirting around the edges of the truth. I don’t want to hide anything from you, but if I told you what was really going on? That would make what I’m telling you now seem as extraordinary as eating a microwave dinner and going to bed early.”

“Jason, seeing you eat a microwave dinner would be extraordinary. Your sister would burn you with hot coals. Why don’t you try me?”

Jason shook his head. “I’m not looking to lie to you, Uncle Hiro, but I need to give things more consideration before I start telling anyone anything.”

Hiro let out a sigh.

“Alright,” he said, standing up. He moved behind his desk, took a money clip from a drawer, and tossed it to Jason. Then he tapped his fingers on the gold bar.

“Leave this with me and I’ll see what I can do. It’s not my area, so I’ll have to ask around. Just so you know, I may get asked where it came from by people I can’t keep the answer from.”

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “I can handle people.”

“Not these kinds of people.”

“Yes, Uncle Hiro. Those kinds of people.”

Hiro looked at his nephew. There had always been an insecurity buried under Jason’s layers of lunatic wit, but no trace of that remained. There was an almost domineering confidence in the way he carried himself, sitting in the chair like a king on a throne. In his line of work, Hiro had developed a good instinct for dangerous people. Those instincts screamed at him right now.

“I’ll have Taika take you somewhere you can get some sleep,” Hiro said. “I have a townhouse I keep for important guests. Do you have a phone?”

“No.”

“I’ll see you get one. A laptop too. Ask Taika for anything else you need, and he’ll see to it. Just don’t ask Growl.”

Jason stood up and held out his hand.

“Thank you, Uncle.”

Hiro shook Jason’s hand warmly.

“You know, I’d like to hear what really happened some time.”

“You will,” Jason promised, “but I’m not sure you’d be glad once you did. Some secrets change you forever.”

5

IT WOULD BE WEIRDER IF MAGIC WASN'T RESPONSIBLE

Annabeth Tilden was woken by her phone.

"Damn it, Anna."

So was her wife, Susan. Anna snatched the phone off the nightstand and stumbled into the bathroom, closing the door before turning on the light and answering.

"What?" she answered grumpily.

"Director, I was going over the grid feed for the night and I found something. The monitoring agent passed it off as a glitch, which is why I'm only seeing it now, but I took a closer look. I think it warrants investigation."

Anna groaned but nodded to herself.

"Alright. Run me through it, Keti."

Ketevan wasn't in the habit of making unfounded leaps. Anna placed a lot of trust in her analytical abilities.

"We got a hit on the grid on the Mid North Coast, but it definitely wasn't an event. It was incredibly localised and lasted for less than a second."

"That sounds like a random reaction spike. What makes this different from the ones we see all day, every day?"

"Two things," Ketevan said. "One is that there was an almost identical hit in France at the same time. The other is the strength of the reaction. The grid registered it as being above category five."

"There is no above category five."

"Yes, Director."

“There’s only been the one category four and the Poms needed a Brimstone missile to deal with it.”

“Yes, Director.”

“Actually, they needed several.”

“Yes, Director.”

“Alright,” Anna said. “Send an investigation team. If there’s something there, look into it personally.”

“Shade,” Jason whispered. “Bring the car around. Make sure there’s room for our hefty new friend.”

Several shadow bodies discreetly separated themselves from Jason’s shadow as he made his way outside, where Growl was taking over from Taika on the door.

“It’s not like we’ll get a lot of traffic just before lock up when it’s coming down like this on a weeknight,” Growl was saying. They glanced out as the rain continued pouring down on the street.

Jason nodded a greeting at the pair of huge men and held out a hand for Growl to shake.

“No hard feelings, mate?”

Growl clasped Jason’s hand in his own meaty paw and shook it.

“I’m just glad I didn’t handle you in the alley,” Growl said. “Mr Asano wouldn’t have been happy once he knew you really were family.”

“No worries,” Jason said. “I wouldn’t have beaten you up too badly.”

Taika laughed and Growl nodded at the door Jason had just emerged from.

“What did you do to the guys inside?” Growl asked. “You scared the crap out of them.”

“It’s a body language trick,” Jason said. “It triggers instinctual fear reactions.”

“I told you, bro,” Taika said. “He learned secret kung fu in the mountains. I’ll go get a car.”

“We’ll take mine,” Jason said, nodding at the black car pulling up in front of the bar. Shade was no longer in his previous sports car form. Now

he arrived as a sleek but roomy four-door sedan with sharply aggressive lines.

"That's a choice ride," Taika said. "You got a driver or something?"

"Or something," Jason said.

In the dark and the rain, the windows looked like black glass, and they couldn't see inside. Jason went around to the driver side door and Taika opened the passenger door. He looked around the interior of the car.

"You got one of them self-driving cars," Taika said. "I didn't know you could buy them here."

"I know a guy," Jason said. "It's not strictly allowed, though, so keep it under your hat, yeah?"

"No worries," Taika said and clambered inside. The massive Māori man was a snug fit but settled in comfortably. "This is nice. These seats are really plush."

Taika directed Jason on a short drive to what looked like a dilapidated brick building, but the heavy security door had a gleaming keypad beside it. Taika punched in a code, telling Jason what it was so he could come and go freely. The interior was a stark contrast with the outside; the old brick storehouse had been renovated into a modern, open-plan townhouse. The downstairs was divided into sections by furniture, gym equipment, free-standing bookcases, and a quartz-top kitchen island. The floors were polished wood and a set of stairs led to a mezzanine upper level.

"There's one bathroom through that door," Taika pointed out, "and one more upstairs with the bedrooms."

Taika pointed out the computer tablet on the wall.

"All the smart home functions go through that tablet," he said. "There's a computer upstairs, but I'll bring a laptop and phone in the morning. There's food in the fridge and you can order delivery through the tablet."

"Thanks. I'll have to thank Uncle Hiro for putting me up somewhere nice."

"I think he'll be happy having you around for a bit," Taika said. "I know he regrets being estranged from family."

"I know the feeling," Jason said. "Do you have family nearby, Taika?"

"I do, yeah. Me and my brother got caught up in some gang stuff back in New Zealand. Dad got us out and brought us over here. Mum's happy, so he's happy. Now I do security and site management for Mr Asano."

"You like working for my uncle?"

“It’s honest work, mostly,” Taika said. “Mr Asano runs the legit businesses. It’s good to have someone out front with clean hands, yeah? We even work with the cops sometimes.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, bro. If some politician’s rich white kid takes some dodgy eccies and has a seizure, the cops get it worse than we do. There’s no stopping the party drugs, so they look the other way and we make sure they find the blokes flogging off the bad stuff. The cops get to make some arrests and we stay out of trouble.”

“Good to know. Thanks, Taika.”

“Boss said that I’m at your disposal for as long as you’re in town. I’ll have that phone and computer for you in the morning. If you need anything tonight, I’m in the apartment building next door, in 2C. Your uncle lives in the penthouse.”

Jason waited until Shade, who had a body hidden in Taika’s shadow, told him that the big man had arrived in his apartment.

“Alright,” Jason said. “Let’s go out.”

When Taika entered the townhouse in the morning, he found that Jason had moved the dining table to create a central open space, which he was making use of. Wearing loose pants and a plain tank top, Jason went through a graceful and deliberate kata with an impressive sword in his hand. The sound system was playing some kind of meditative music.

Jason gave no indication of having noticed Taika’s arrival, which was novel to Taika. Most people reacted to the arrival of a hundred and fifty kilos of Māori. Taika moved to the lounge area and placed the phone and laptop boxes he carried onto the coffee table. He glanced at the gym equipment in the corner, noticing it had been moved since the previous night. All the weights had been set to maximum, which even Taika would have trouble with.

Taika had taken the laptop and phone out and was setting them up when Jason walked over. Taika looked around but no longer saw the sword.

“I knew I was right about the secret kung fu. That was a sweet-looking kata.”

“It’s more of a meditative sword dance,” Jason said.

Taika gave him an assessing look, glancing at the door.

“I didn’t see your car outside.”

“It’ll be there if I need it.”

“You’re a mysterious guy, bro.”

Jason flashed a grin.

“I just fake it for the ladies.”

Taika laughed as he handed Jason the phone.

“I put my number in the contacts, along with your uncle and current numbers for your parents, your sister and your brother-in-law.”

“Not my brother or my sister-in-law?”

“Mr Asano said that might be touchy.”

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “Put them in.”

“No worries,” Taika said. He took back the phone and programmed in two more numbers he read from his own phone.

“All done. Mr Asano never did say what the issue was exactly,” Taika said leadingly.

“I used to be in a relationship with my now sister-in-law, before she married my brother,” Jason said.

“Your brother married your ex? That’s not cool. How long after you were with her did they get together?”

“During.”

“Oh, damn. That sucks, bro.”

“Agreed.”

“So is there anything you want to do today?” Taika asked. “I’ve set up an appointment with a lawyer this afternoon so you can sort out the legal stuff about you not being dead anymore. Mr Asano wants to have dinner with you, and you can talk about what you asked him for then.”

“Thanks. I think I’ll spend the day on the internet, catching up on what I missed.”

“You’ve been away for a year and a half, yeah?”

“Yep. No TV, no movies, no internet. Not even a radio.”

“Damn. You missed the last season of *Game of Thrones*.”

“Was it any good?”

“It was real good. Extending it to thirteen episodes so they could properly develop the climax was a smart move, after how much they’d been rushing things.”

“Last I heard, they were cutting it down to six episodes.”

“Someone leaked the scripts and the internet went crazy. Something about everyone turning dumb, evil or both. They rewrote the whole thing and everyone really liked how it turned out.”

“Nice.”

“Okay. I’m going to go. You need anything, give me a call. Otherwise, I’ll pick you up for lunch before I take you to see the lawyer, yeah?”

“Sounds good,” Jason said.

Taika called Hiro, from his car, neither aware of the shadowy creature hiding a body in each of their shadows.

“Are you getting Jason settled?” Hiro asked.

“No worries, boss. Well, maybe some worries.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Your nephew’s weird.”

“He’s certainly different to what I remember. You think there’s a problem?”

“It’s just a lot of little things. He disappeared, yeah, and now he’s back and all mysterious and stuff? What if he’s EOA?”

“Clearly he’s been through something,” Hiro said. “It’s a big leap from there to the EOA, though.”

“We know they’ve been sniffing around,” Taika said. “You saw how jumpy it’s made Growl. What if your nephew is their foot in the door?”

“That wouldn’t be their style. They go heavy, not subtle. What makes you think Jason is EOA?”

“When I checked on him this morning, I saw someone had put all the weights up to maximum. Your nephew isn’t exactly a huge bloke.”

Hiro thought about Jason lifting the gold bar with one hand.

“You think he’s one of the EOA’s juiced-up thugs?”

“I like your nephew, boss, but he feels dangerous.”

“He’s not one of their juicers,” Hiro said. “Have you ever talked to them? That drug cocktail they put them on messes up their heads.”

“Like brain damage?”

“Exactly like that. It’s not that bad, but I talked to Jason for a while and didn’t see any signs. Did he seem slow at all to you?”

“No, boss; he seems pretty sharp. I can’t help but feel like he seems dangerous, though.”

“I thought the same thing. Keep an eye out, but make sure nothing happens to him. If the EOA do get it in their heads to make use of him, it’ll be by grabbing him, not recruiting him.”

“No worries, boss.”

The abandoned hospital’s helipad was still serviceable and Annabeth Tilden’s helicopter landed mid-morning. She was dressed in a sensible suit, as was the woman waiting for her with a powerful torch in hand. They looked like government functionaries, which was exactly the intention.

“Director,” Ketevan greeted loudly over the sound of the helicopter winding down. Anna didn’t bother to respond over the noise, instead letting Ketevan lead her inside the building. The corridors were filthy and the broken fluorescents didn’t have power anyway. Ketevan guided her boss through the building by torchlight.

“What do you have, Keti?” Anna asked. “I’ve got the Engineers of Ascension pushing into Sydney that I have to keep an eye on, now this Children’s Hospital miracle nonsense that blew up this morning.”

“The hospital miracle thing is ours?”

“A hospital full of kids were mysteriously cured by an angel made of stars, Keti. It would be weirder if magic wasn’t responsible.”

“That really happened?”

“Yeah. The media doesn’t even need to sensationalise. Not that they aren’t trying, bless them. Whoever’s responsible clearly doesn’t give a crap about the mess they’re making, but the media is Terrance’s problem, thankfully. What do you have for me here?”

“It definitely wasn’t a glitch in the grid,” Ketevan said. “The magic event is over, but it was so powerful that we can still read the residual magic like it just happened. After our investigators picked up on it, I sent in an after-action team to see what we could learn.”

“And?”

“Well, you remember that I told you the event was localised?”

“No. You woke me up in the middle of the night.”

“Sorry, Director. Well, it turned out to be very, very localised.”

Ketevan turned off the torch when they reached the maternity ward, where a number of lamps had been set up to illuminate the area. The after-action team looked like a forensics team as they bustled about. In the maternity theatre, a flat board had been set out and a magical diagram drawn onto it. Floating above the circle was a horizontal figure that looked to be made of fire.

“What am I looking at?” Anna asked.

“As best we can tell,” Ketevan said, “this is the echo of a variant incursion event.”

“That’s a rather extreme variant,” Anna said.

“Yes,” Ketevan agreed. “I told you about the rated strength, which still registers above five in every test we run. The proto-astral space existed for less than a second, which is quite a lot less than the usual forty-three hours. And, of course, instead of covering kilometres, it was the size and shape of a person.”

“You’re suggesting a person came through,” Anna said.

“Or something person-shaped,” Ketevan said. “Maybe it was an angel made of stars.”

6

NOT THE REGULAR SORT OF DANGEROUS

"How'd it go?" Taika asked as he drove Jason through the city. They were in one of the cars Hiro kept in a pool for his staff, a luxurious town car Taika had picked for the roomy interior.

"There are some hoops to jump through in legally coming back from the dead," Jason said. "That lawyer you set me up with seems to know his business."

"Yeah, he's good," Taika said. "We've got some time before you meet your uncle for dinner. Is there anything you wanted to do?"

"I don't suppose you know where I could get some powdered silver?"

"I know a guy."

"Really?"

"Yeah, bro. No worries."

"You're not going to ask what it's for?"

"A job like mine," Taika said, "you learn when to ask questions and when not to."

"You seem like a really good employee."

"That's why your uncle pays me the big bucks."

For each of his shadow bodies subsumed into Jason, Shade could mask his summoner from one form of sensory perception. He could muffle Jason's sound, mask his scent, and even eliminate the heat radiated by his body.

The only senses Shade could not mask were aura senses and direct looking at him. Those, Jason had to control himself.

While Shade couldn't prevent direct observation, doing so through a secondary medium was another matter entirely. How effective the obfuscation was depended on the medium in question. Shade could hide Jason entirely from a magical telescope, for example, as if he were invisible. Non-magical means, such as an ordinary telescope, Shade couldn't block at all.

Electronic devices, like cameras, proved to be something of a middle ground. Shade could not totally remove Jason from their detection, due to the lack of magic to interfere with. What he could do was interfere with the complex process of data translation involved in electronic devices. The result was that Jason appeared as little more than a blur to someone watching the feed. In shadowy conditions that Jason's magic cloak could make the most of, it was the next best thing to true invisibility.

This was not Shade's first time in a technologically advanced world and he had a solid grasp of his limitations, which he and Jason had discussed at length. One advantage Shade offered was an uncanny sense of when they were being observed. Jason's aura senses could do this for living observers, but Shade could sense any camera systems pointed in their direction.

Jason was uncertain if his personal immunity to tracking powers extended to his phone, so he decided to take precautions. After obtaining some powdered silver with surprising ease, along with a few other relatively ordinary materials, he had Taika leave him back at the townhouse until it was time for Jason to meet his uncle.

Shade had ascertained that there were no cameras, other than the one in his phone, the webcam in his new laptop and the one on the desktop computer upstairs. Jason left them all upstairs on the mezzanine while he worked on his new phone case downstairs.

Clearing a space on the polished hardwood floor, Jason prepared for the first of several rituals. First, he took from his inventory the mana lamps he had left to charge the night before. He would need them to temporarily upgrade the anaemic ambient magic to perform even the most basic rituals.

The same lack of magic made the lamps very slow to accumulate charge, however, so he would need to work with haste. He was going to miss Clive and his powers that made performing rituals easier. Jason didn't

activate the lamps immediately, wanting to be as ready as he could so as to not waste their limited uptime.

The ritual Jason wanted to perform required magically charged silver powder. Since he couldn't source it locally, he would need to take some ordinary powdered silver and add the magic himself. It was the kind of peripheral skill he hadn't picked up from his skill book knowledge. It was Farrah and later Clive pushing him into expanding his knowledge base that prepared him for these circumstances.

That was not to say that skill books didn't have their place. His skill book-derived knowledge of artifice would let him craft a very simple magical item once he had magical silver powder.

He started by using the engraving pen he had just purchased to carve a magical diagram onto the back of his new phone case. He had practised with it first, quickly becoming comfortable with its use. The superhuman coordination of his speed attribute and the accelerated learning speed of his spirit attribute allowed him to swiftly become comfortable with simple physical tasks.

His hand moved with confidence as he engraved the phone case. One of the advantages of skill book knowledge was that it was imprinted like a computer file, so he could easily engrave the magical diagram from memory. Like most protection-type diagrams, it was an elaborately embellished pentagram, which made for a visually pleasing design.

He set out the other things he would need: chalk, a bag of powdered lesser monster cores, and some iron spirit coins. He wondered if there was a way to charge the lamps faster with spirit coins. That was something he would need to look at later.

Jason drew out a ritual circle on the hardwood floor with chalk, then activated the mana lamps. He used powdered monster cores to adjust to the ambient magic, which was an easy task given the magically inert conditions. It wasn't something he'd done a lot, normally relying on Clive's power to render the step unnecessary.

"Next time I get killed and sent to another universe, I'm taking Clive with me."

Jason's thoughts drifted to the other soul who had apparently arrived with him. If it really was an outworlder, Jason still had no idea how to track them down. Searching for a mysterious, naked, bald person with magic powers on the internet had brought up an unhelpful plethora of results.

Setting the mana lamps to raise the ambient magic to just the minimum level for iron-rank rituals would still only give Jason a few minutes. In that time, he needed to charge the silver powder with magic using one ritual, rebalance the ambient magic with a quick second ritual, then use the magically charged silver in a third ritual. He activated the mana lamps, getting results in just a few seconds.

- You have entered a region of normalised magic. Your recovery rates will remain at normal levels without spirit coin consumption.

Despite the time constraint, Jason didn't hurry. Taking the time to do it right would get better results than rushing the job.

"Slow is smooth, smooth is fast," he muttered to himself as he worked with careful deliberation.

He successfully charged the silver with magic from the spirit coins. He used a simple cleansing ritual to purge the residual magic from that first task, then performed a third ritual as the last step. His hands moved over the magic diagram like an orchestra conductor's as he chanted out the ritual. When he uttered the final syllable, the magical silver powder became a liquid and crawled onto the phone case in the middle of the ritual circle. The liquid flowed into the engraved diagram and instantly turned solid, leaving a silver diagram set into the black case.

"I think it looks good," Jason said, picking up the case and turning it over in his hand.

"It is aesthetically satisfactory," Shade agreed.

"Of course you think so," Jason said. "It's mostly black."

"If you are unhappy with my design choices, I can make some modifications to the vehicle shapes I take," Shade said. "Gordon was watching something called *The Love Bug* on television this morning. I could probably do something like that."

"Uh, no," Jason said. "Consider my criticism withdrawn with apologies."

Jason turned off the mana lamps.

- You have entered a region of magical desolation. The levels of magical density and magical saturation are extremely low,

insufficient to produce spontaneous magical manifestations.

He returned the mana lamps to various places around the townhouse, as separate as he could make them. The further apart they were, the less they would fight over what little magic there was as they charged.

Jason then took his new case and picked up his phone.

“I have no idea if this will work,” Jason said.

“It should be sufficient to prevent non-magical tracking, along with most iron-rank tracking effects,” Shade said. “Anything more powerful will be a large enough effect to be caught up in your personal tracking immunity.”

“Magical tracking,” Jason said. “Am I reading too much into what Uncle Hiro said about the federal police covering up my disappearance when I left this world?”

“It is best to gather more information,” Shade said. “If your world is less ignorant of magic than you initially believed, your actions at the hospital will draw out those who know.”

“Any nibbles yet?”

“I have not seen anyone with auras above normal rank amongst the investigators, but there are some who seemed out of place compared to the others. I am continuing to look into it.”

“Should we have left more of your bodies at the hospital?”

“Two more would be useful. I will only be able to take the form of a motorcycle instead of a car with fewer bodies on hand, however.”

“That’s fine. It’s not raining today, so send the bodies over now.”

Two dark figures slipped out of Jason’s shadow and quickly vanished. Jason retrieved his phone and placed it in his newly enhanced phone case. A few seconds later, it rang.

“G’day, Uncle Hiro.”

“Hi, Jason. Did you do something to your phone?”

Jason chuckled.

“Were you tracking it? I just installed some security, so thanks for helping me test it.”

Jason made his way to the apartment building next to his townhouse, where Hiro's penthouse apartment occupied the entirety of the top floor. It was large, open and modern in design, with lots of white, cool grey and metal. Jason drooled over the kitchen where a personal chef was working on their dinner.

"You had a haircut," Hiro said.

"It got a bit out of control in the process of coming back," Jason said.

"But you're letting the beard grow in?"

Jason rubbed the stubble on his chin.

"I started wearing one while I was away."

"Do you go all bushy, or more of a sculpted, archvillain look?"

"Villain all the way," Jason said.

Hiro led Jason to the entertainment lounge. Showing off the bar, Hiro drank Tasmanian whisky while Jason eyed the white chocolate liqueur. He made himself a cocktail that was milky, smooth and sweet.

"So, I've been looking into selling this gold bar of yours," Hiro said as they sat. "There is someone who can take it off your hands, but he wants to meet you in person."

"You don't think I should."

"I don't," Hiro confirmed. "Jason, I operate on the periphery of legality. A large part of what makes me useful to the people I answer to is that I stay more or less clean. This man I'm talking about is not clean. He's serious. Dangerous. If you need money, I can help you out."

"I appreciate that, Uncle. I'd like to go through with it, though."

"I thought you'd say that, but I had to ask. We'll go after dinner."

"Thank you. There's something I'd like you to ask you about, Uncle."

"Oh?"

"What can you tell me about the EOA?"

Hiro frowned.

"Where did you hear about the EOA?"

"I've been getting the lay of the land. I heard about them, and something about drugged-up thugs. That's all I know, though."

"They're a gang. Or an organised crime outfit. There are a lot of stories. Strange stories. Word is that they have international backing, although from who I have no idea. They started taking things over in Perth, maybe two years ago. Melbourne a year after that. Now, they're turning their eyes on Sydney."

“They just move in and take over?”

“They’re strange, like I said. Dangerous, and not the regular sort of dangerous. They have some kind of drug regimen they use to turn their muscle into ’roid freaks.”

Hiro was watching Jason carefully as he gave his explanation.

“I’m not one of them, Uncle.”

“Would you tell me if you were?”

“I have no idea. I genuinely only heard of them for the first time today. What does EOA stand for?”

“No idea,” Hiro said. “You are into something, though, aren’t you? Coming back from the dead with a walk full of swagger and pockets full of gold. Sleek sports cars and anti-tracking software. It’s all very James Bond.”

“I’ll tell you about it, one of these days. Once I have a better handle on things.”

“Is someone going to come looking for that gold bar?”

“It’s not just one bar,” Jason said. “And, no. I obtained the gold quite legally. I just didn’t bring it into the country legally.”

“Why not?”

“I couldn’t explain where it came from, I never left the country legally in the first place, and I was dead.”

“Fair enough.” Hiro chuckled. “How many of those bars do you have?”

“More than your dangerous associate can handle. I’ll have to find a way to legitimise it if I’m going to get any use out of it.”

“I don’t know anything about gold regulation,” Hiro said. “I know some good lawyers, so I’ll see if they have someone who works in that field.”

“Thank you, although I don’t anticipate it being a simple process.”

“How much gold do you have, if you don’t mind me asking.”

“The bar I handed to you,” Jason said, “plus thirty-nine just like it.”

Hiro took in a sharp breath of air.

“Jason, that was a ten-kilo bar.”

“Yep.”

“You have four hundred kilos of gold? That’s a market price of…”

“More than thirty million,” Jason said. “It’ll have to be a very good lawyer.”

“No kidding. The lawyer I sent you to today was adequate?”

“He was great,” Jason said. “My legal status should be cleaned up without too much fuss.”

“Any more thoughts on letting the rest of the family know you’re back?”

“It’s Erika’s birthday next Friday,” Jason said. “I thought I might start by seeing her then, and go from there.”

“A birthday present she’ll really appreciate,” Hiro said. “She wasn’t happy with the investigation into your death. She didn’t let it go for a long time and was never truly satisfied.”

“She’s always been good to me,” Jason said. “Do you know what happened with her TV show when she moved home?”

“She has a new one now. *Beachside Kitchen with Erika Asano*. She films outdoors, on the boardwalk right by the Surf Club. Big audience, cooks huge batches of food to give out.”

“I hope she wasn’t meant to be filming yesterday. It was really coming down when I got back.”

“She takes winter off. They asked her to be a judge on one of those cooking shows where they vote people off, but she turned them down.”

Jason chuckled.

“She hates those shows.”

7
BOOGIE MAN

Taika drove Hiro's large town car with Hiro and Jason in the back.

"The advantage of being on the legitimate side of the business is that I can be more conspicuous about enjoying the fruits of my labour," Hiro said. "The man we're going to see doesn't live in a penthouse apartment, but don't think that means he's without influence and power. Especially don't make the mistake of thinking he isn't dangerous."

"I'm familiar with the ramifications of crossing powerful criminals," Jason said.

"Oh?"

"I received an unfortunate lesson some time ago," Jason said, not explaining further.

"You seem fairly comfortable with my criminal entanglements," Hiro said. "Your grandmother would be disappointed in you."

"It wouldn't exactly be out of her way," Jason said. "She always liked Kaito better."

"The same with me and Shiro," Hiro said. "He was the favourite, I was the disappointment, and your father laid low in the middle. Ken didn't really grab attention until he married a white girl so young. Everyone was expecting an explosion, only to be startled at how well your mother and mine got along. No one expected that."

"They both wanted diligent little Japanese children," Jason said. "They got Kaito, so they were willing to put up with me."

"Mother cares about you more than you think, Jason."

"She'd care more if I'd learned Japanese."

“I’m serious, Jason. The family had many regrets after you were gone. They even softened their stance on me. Not a lot, but they’ll at least take my calls now. They still won’t be happy to know you and I are spending time together. I never would have expected you to become entangled in this kind of life.”

“I only touched on criminal affairs peripherally in the course of my work.”

“Well, don’t go underestimating the man we’re about to meet. His name is Ari, and while he might live in a poor suburb, he is anything but. I didn’t want to involve you directly, but he insisted on meeting you first. Since he did, he must have tested the gold and found it to be what you said it was.”

“You left it with him? That’s more than eight hundred and fifty thousand dollars’ worth of gold.”

“Australian market price,” Hiro qualified. “You aren’t going to a gold seller in the shopping centre, Jason.”

“I’m aware,” Jason said with a chuckle.

“Honestly, the fact that it is so much money is what stops him from just taking it. I suspect he wants to meet you to feel out what kind of backing you have. If he thinks you’re weak, he’ll try and rip you off and push to see if you’ve got more. Don’t show any weakness and don’t let him shake you.”

“You don’t need to worry about that, Uncle Hiro.”

“Jason, don’t underestimate this guy. He’s an old-school Armenian gangster; don’t think you can treat him like Growl. He knows the places out bush where they will not find your body.”

The expensive car looked increasingly out of place as it drove through the western suburbs, pulling up in front of a house obscured by large bushes rising over a high wooden fence with flaking white paint. The street was dark, the streetlights somewhat dimmer than normal.

“Ari likes to let his dogs intimidate people as they come in,” Hiro warned.

Jason concentrated his aura senses, feeling nine people in the house and four dogs in the yard. He sent small, directed aura pulses at the dogs, letting them feel the strength and inherently domineering nature of it.

Taika opened the gate in the fence, allowing Hiro and Jason to go through. A concrete path ran up the front yard to the door, with an overgrown lawn on one side and a chain-link enclosure on the other. Inside the enclosure was a concrete floor and long, aluminium kennel, padded

heavily with old blankets. In contrast to the clear disregard for lawn maintenance, the enclosure and the kennel within were clean and cared for. Taika and Hiro looked warily at the four German Shepherds hunched submissively on the floor of the enclosure in a line.

"What's up with the dogs?" Taika asked.

"I don't know," Hiro said with worry in his voice. "Every other time I was here, they tried to claw their way through the fence to get at me."

"Maybe they've gone through obedience training," Jason said.

"Dogs have sharp instincts," Taika said, glancing at Jason. "Something's got them spooked."

"I guess we go knock?" Hiro suggested. "Normally, dogs barking is the doorbell."

They approached the door, Taika stepping forward to knock. A man opened it, looking past them with a confused expression at the dog enclosure. Jason noticed the man wore socks but no shoes. Taika gave him a greeting nod.

"G'day, Petros."

"Hello, Taika," Petros responded. He was a big man, although didn't seem so in front of the mountainous Taika. He spoke softly, with a slight Armenian accent. He turned to Hiro.

"Mr Asano," he greeted. "This is your nephew?"

"This is Jason, yes."

"The boss said to bring you in as soon as you arrived," Petros said, moving deeper into the house. Hiro motioned to Jason and followed, with Taika bringing up the rear.

The exterior of the house was in desperate need of paint, which fit right in with the neighbourhood. The interior was like a different world, having clearly been gutted and rebuilt from the frame out. Past the door was a tiled entryway, where shoes were lined up on racks.

"Shoes off, please."

Jason took his shoes off along with Taika and Hiro. He slipped them into his inventory instead of onto the racks, using Taika's bulk to hide the action. Petros then led them deeper into the house, at which point the purpose of removing their shoes became clear. The tiled foyer gave way to a hallway with rich carpeting that would be easy to dirty and hard to clean. The walls were wood panelled, with soft sconce lighting to provide a warm environment.

Petros led them into a large, open-plan room. Jason could see into the kitchen and dining areas, while most of the room was a lounge space with a giant television, bar, and luxurious couches and chairs. In the centre of the room was a large table with a sunken area with a felt surface set into it. An elaborate board game was laid out on it, with five people sitting around playing.

Jason even recognised the game, due to an old friend from school named Greg. He had regularly roped Jason and Amy into board games that would last upwards of three, six, and even eight hours. He absently wondered where Greg was now, having fallen out of touch when Greg moved to Sydney to study law. Jason had gone to Melbourne, studying political science.

Four more men were playing a video game on the large television. Everyone in the room was a burly man, except for one of the people at the table. He was slightly older, with less of an obvious-henchman air about him. Jason picked him out as Ari.

"Hey, boss," Petros said. "Mr Asano is here."

Jason had guessed right. The older man turned to give the entrants an assessing gaze before getting up. He was lean, around forty-five, with thinning hair. He wore neat, comfortable pants and a simple shirt.

"Ari," Hiro greeted neutrally.

"Hiro," Ari said in turn, then glanced back at Petros.

"The dogs?" he asked.

"They looked scared, boss," Petros said. "Like when Vermillion comes."

Jason felt every aura in the room except for Ari's and his own tremble upon hearing the name Vermillion. Even the stalwart Taika radiated trepidation.

"Is that so?" Ari mused. Unlike Petros, there was no trace of an accent. Ari turned back to his visitors.

"My dogs aren't scared of a lot," he said. "They're definitely not scared of you, Hiro. They probably should be scared of you, Taika, but they're not."

His gaze settled on Jason.

"There's only one person that scares my dogs. He's a man who does business with my boss. When he comes here, you don't hear a peep out of

them. They're trained guard dogs, and trained well, but they will have no part of this man."

"Animals have good instincts," Jason said.

"They do," Ari agreed. "But the thing is, this man does not just scare my dogs. He scares my people and he scares me. I feel no shame in admitting it. This man, Vermillion, is the boogie man. Isn't that right, Hiro?"

"It is," Hiro said. He was clearly unhappy at the turn the conversation was taking, but Ari paid it no mind, keeping his gaze locked on Jason.

"Now my dogs are scared," Ari continued, "but this man isn't here. You are. Are you a boogie man too, Jason Asano?"

"Yes," Jason said softly.

Ari grinned, letting out a chuckle as he turned away.

"I didn't know what to make of it," he said. "Hiro calls me up and says he wants to move some gold. Obviously, I want to do my due diligence, and what do I find? Hiro's dead nephew, mysteriously returned to life and wandering about with a giant gold bar. You understand why this raises a lot of questions."

"I do," Jason said. "But since I'm here, I'm assuming you're satisfied with the product."

"I am so long as no one is going to come looking for it. You know that if they do, I'm going to come looking for you."

"I believe you," Jason said. "No one will come looking for it. Where I got it from, gold isn't valued very highly. That's how I picked up so much for a relatively small cost."

"And where did you get it from?"

"You believe a magical alternate reality?"

Ari snorted a laugh.

"You have more of these bars?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Enough that I'm not willing to pull them out until I get a better deal and a good money launderer."

Ari laughed.

"The thing about this man who scares my dogs," Ari said, veering the conversation back to the previous topic, "is that it isn't just my dogs that get scared. I told you this, but I don't think you understand. This man is a

predator. You can feel it in your bones, like something crawling under your skin. Just being near him is like being a mouse under the gaze of an owl."

Ari's eyes were locked on Jason's.

"My dogs might be scared, but is it really of you?"

Ari stepped right into Jason's personal space, looking down at the shorter man.

"You don't scare me, Jason Asano."

Jason gave Ari a slight smile.

"Would you like me to?"

Ari took a step back and laughed, the tense atmosphere breaking.

"Would you like me to?" he repeated, still laughing. "You know, Hiro, you said your nephew wasn't in the game. He's into something, though, yes? He's got the stuff."

"He doesn't like to talk about his time away," Hiro said.

"But I do want to talk about it," Ari said. "Are you EOA, Jason Asano?"

"If I told you no, would you believe me?"

"If I asked you hard enough, I'd be confident you were telling the truth," Ari said.

"I'm hoping it doesn't come to that," Jason said.

"Then you will need to answer my questions," Ari said, his mirth dropping like a mask. "You're going to assuage my curiosity, one way or the other."

"Ari," Hiro said. "This isn't what we agreed."

"We've got EOA pushing in and your boy turning up with the word 'suspicious' tattooed across his face. Mr Tollman told me personally to get some answers, Hiro."

Hiro blanched.

"I'm sorry, Jason," Hiro said. "I know you don't want to talk about it, but you need to answer Ari's questions."

There was a shift in the room. No one moved, but everyone felt it as Jason slowly unleashed his aura. Normal humans couldn't detect auras unless they were projected in a specific way. It was a simple use of basic projection control, one of the first things Farrah had taught him. It was a tool that essence users employed to intimidate normals—exactly what Jason was doing now.

With his well-trained aura manipulation skills, Jason could expertly express his power slowly and deliberately, allowing the same domineering

force that intimidated the dogs to press down on the men in the room. Only Taika and his uncle were exempted, but they couldn't miss the growing dread on the faces around them.

"Is this what you were talking about when you said that man scared you?" Jason asked. He spoke quietly but his words reverberated with aura. The beleaguered criminals felt them hammer into their very souls. Jason was the smallest person in the room, yet to everyone in it, he felt larger than Taika. The room was silent, everyone transfixed by Jason's suddenly tyrannical presence.

Jason stepped into Ari's space, the way Ari had to him. His aura settled on Ari's soul like a knife at his throat.

"Is this how your boogie man makes you feel, Ari? Do you still have any questions for me?"

Ari wordlessly shook his head in short, scared jerks.

"That's what I thought. Give my uncle the money for the gold; I'll see myself out."

Jason turned to his uncle.

"You'll probably want to chat with Ari once I'm gone," Jason said. "I'll make my own way back. Taika can give me the money later."

"You don't have a car," Hiro said.

"I'll make do," Jason said. "I'm sorry for this, Uncle. I've caused you trouble."

Jason walked out. Hiro nodded at Taika to follow, but Jason was already closing the door behind him. When Taika opened it, Jason was nowhere to be seen.

8

MORE PLAUSIBLE THAN THE REALITY

Hiro returned home to his penthouse apartment. He owned the entire building and, it being where he lived, he kept it legitimate. He had places enough to launder money without making a mess in his own house. He accessed the penthouse level through his private elevator. It could also be reached via the normal elevator, but only with an access key. Aside from himself and Taika, only the carefully selected and very well-paid security staff had keys, and the security staff kept it in a safe even they couldn't open without calling Taika or Hiro for a rotating access code.

Slipping out of his jacket and dropping it over a chair, Hiro walked through the open-plan space, went behind the bar, and poured himself a stiff drink. He was used to getting home in the early hours, but it had been a strange night.

The entire north face of the apartment was made up of uninterrupted windows that could be opened up to allow balcony access. Just as he was about to sit, Hiro spotted a silhouette on the balcony, easy to miss on a moonless night. He hurried back towards his jacket and the security alarm signal in the pocket, looking back warily at the figure outside the window. He stopped, recognising Jason's figure on a second glance. Hiro's nephew was leaning on the railing, his back to the apartment as he looked out over the city. Hiro slipped his jacket back on and walked over to the balcony doors, adrenaline still rushing through him.

"How did you get up here?" Hiro asked.

"You've been nothing but generous, Uncle Hiro," Jason said, neither answering the question nor turning around. "All I've brought you in return is trouble."

Hiro moved forward and leaned next to Jason on the railing.

"You're family, Jason. All you ever have to do is ask."

Jason turned and offered his uncle a smile.

"I admire you for feeling that way after the way the family has treated you. I was less magnanimous, with less reason to be."

"Your brother stole the girl you loved since you were ten years old, Jason. That's seriously not okay."

"I know, right?" Jason said. "It's nice to have someone actually say it. My own mother more or less told me to suck it up and be happy for them."

"I'm going to be honest, Jason; I never liked Cheryl."

"Really?" Jason asked with a chuckle. "You always hid it so well."

"I swear that the only reason she kept the baby was your father being Japanese."

"Don't you dare say yellow fever," Jason said.

"I'm not that crass," Hiro said. "I'm pretty sure she was entranced by the idea of an adorable Japanese baby, though."

"In her defence, Erika was very adorable," Jason said. "I swear Dad took more photos of her than Kaito and me put together."

"She really was the cutest little girl," Hiro agreed with a reminiscent smile. "Sometimes I wish I'd had some of my own, but I liked being an uncle. Before things went bad."

"Did things go bad after I left you with those hoodlums?"

"Hoodlums?" Hiro said with a laugh. "Jason, we don't carry money out of banks in a big sack with a dollar sign on it."

"How am I meant to know that?" Jason asked. "If I was a criminal mastermind, I wouldn't need your help."

"Taika has your money," Hiro said. "Full market price."

Jason frowned.

"Why? That's taking a loss on the deal. I'm not looking to rip anyone off and I'm not looking to get played."

"After you left, Ari called our boss. He decided what to pay you, but he also wants to meet you. You should know that the man we talked about, Vermillion, will probably be there."

"He works for your boss?"

"Definitely not," Hiro said. "I'm not sure who Vermillion works for exactly, but my boss is very careful about how he treats them and their secrets. All I know is that there's some kind of group that has no interest in

criminal enterprises themselves, only maintaining some useful contacts. I don't know if they're government spooks or corporate pricks that make me and mine look clean and occasionally need some dirty work done. They've got way more juice than my boss, though, let alone me. Vermillion is someone from that group the boss occasionally calls on for favours. He scares my boss as much as everyone else."

"Alright," Jason said. "I don't want to cause you more trouble than I have, so set up a meeting with your boss. In the meantime, I've brought a lot of strangeness to your door. I know you must have questions."

"I thought you came to me because you knew I wouldn't push."

"And you haven't, which I appreciate. But fair is fair, Uncle, and you deserve some answers. That said, there are things I think it's better you don't know. Some doors you open can't be closed again."

"Jason, you're being very clandestine. Faking your own death, the self-driving car, the secrets practically dripping off of you."

"The James Bond thing again?"

"The James Bond thing," Hiro said. "Did you go off and join ASUS or something?"

"Nothing so safe," Jason said lightly. "As you said, there's a very big secret hanging over me and I'm starting to suspect that there are powerful people invested in keeping it."

"This organisation that Vermillion belongs to?"

"Maybe," Jason said. "They may only be part of a wider circle. I don't know who these people are or what they would do if they found out you knew the things I've been keeping from you. But if you're willing to take the risk, I'm willing to tell you everything. To answer all your questions."

Jason let out a frustrated sigh.

"You've been unreserved in helping me," he continued. "I fear that all I've done in return is bring danger to your door. If you get involved in my affairs, you'll have no more protection than what I can personally offer. Ignorance is an uncomfortable shield, but it may be the best one you have."

"Alright," Hiro said. His curiosity was enough to war strongly against his prudence. "How about I ask you some questions and you tell me when we're nudging into dangerous territory?"

"That works," Jason said. "I know you must have some pressing questions. Things haven't quite seemed rational since I showed up, have they?"

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Hiro said. “Things have been getting strange for a while now and you turning up is just one more thing. It’s like that feeling before a storm. The people I work with, we’ve all felt it. This EOA group with their juiced-up thugs. The army running around with their terrorist readiness exercises that are so transparently a cover-up for something. This guy Vermillion and whoever’s behind him. There’s a game going on in the dark that I can’t see. I don’t know the rules and they’re changing on me anyway. Then you show up and I get the feeling that maybe you can see through the dark. Maybe you know the rules.”

Hiro shook his head.

“Or maybe not,” he said. “This probably sounds like nonsense to you.”

“No,” Jason said. “As it happens, I really can see through the dark. I don’t know who the players are, but I’ve played this kind of game before and I’ve already started looking for answers. I don’t have them yet but, for now, you were promised yours.”

Hiro rubbed a hand over his face, unsure of where to start. After the encounter with Ari, he couldn’t help but compare the dangerous and enigmatic Vermillion with the returned Jason. The way Ari reacted; Hiro knew that fear. Standing in front of Vermillion was like floating in the water in front of a giant shark.

“Did you really make Ari’s dogs go submissive like that?”

“Yes,” Jason answered.

“And the thing you did that scared Ari and his guys. That was the same thing?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think it’s the same thing Vermillion does?”

“I can’t be certain, without meeting the man,” Jason said. “It seems likely.”

“And what is that thing?”

Jason gave his uncle an awkward smile.

“This is where we head into dangerous territory, Uncle. I’ll try and explain enough to give some understanding, but I’m going to start out very vague. If you want more details, you can have them. But be certain before you ask.”

“How dangerous is this secret you’re not telling me, Jason?”

“I honestly don’t know. I have no idea about the local situation, which I’m hoping this Vermillion character can help me to rectify.”

“You want to meet him?”

“If he doesn’t know about me already, he soon will. There’s little point in avoiding it at this stage.”

Jason took in a cleansing breath of winter night air, only to find it not so cleansing. His bronze-rank senses picked out the trace pollution in the air, not present in the other world. The astral space in which he had spent the last year was filled with the rich, natural aromas of the jungle. In Greenstone, the magic carried downstream by the Mistrun River left even bog water smelling oddly fresh and clean. Compared to that, taking a deep breath of city air was like coating his tongue in old motor oil.

“You alright, Jason?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Where I’ve been, it’s hard to get in or out. There’s no internet, phone, television, radio. No communication of any kind. My chance to leave came unexpectedly and I don’t know how things ended up after I was gone. My friends might think I’m dead.”

“Why would they think that?”

“Things got hectic at the end, but let’s put that aside for the moment.”

“What happened to you while you were away?”

“While I was gone, I became part of… let’s call it a community. I never realised it existed here, and in secret, until I joined it myself, over there. I haven’t even confirmed that it’s here, but everything you told me points very strongly in that direction. It’ll be different here, I’m certain, but there will be commonalities.”

“And this community, they teach you to do what you did to Ari’s dogs? And to Ari? Is it like pheromones or something? Did the CIA MK-Ultra you with designer drugs until your body odour triggers a fear response?”

“That sounds more plausible than the reality,” Jason said with a chuckle. “Although barely. But no; it’s something else. As for what, that would be crossing the informational Rubicon. If you want to know…”

“No,” Hiro said firmly. “One of the reasons I’ve been successful doing what I do is knowing when not to go deeper. And these waters are getting very deep.”

“That’s wise,” Jason said with relief. “I hope. It could be that I’ve already implicated you, just by coming back. The whole family, in fact. There’s a chance that some will see my return as a threat or an opportunity. Or both. Those with poor intentions and few scruples may try pulling you in as leverage.”

“You worry that not telling us what you’re involved in might get us blindsided?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “Ultimately, though, knowing won’t help you. You aren’t equipped for what’s out there and I can’t get you ready in any kind of practical timeframe. All I can do is protect you if someone comes knocking.”

“I have Taika and Growl,” Hiro said. “Taika isn’t just big; he’s smart and observant.”

“So I noticed,” Jason said. “He’s not enough, though. Not even close.”

“So what are you doing about it?”

“I’ve made a move already, to draw people out. For the moment, I’m keeping an eye on you and another out for them. If trouble comes while I’m in the city, I’ll know and be there faster than you can imagine.”

“Are you having me watched?”

“Yes.”

“They must be good,” Hiro said. “My security hasn’t caught so much as a whiff of them.”

Jason chuckled again.

“They won’t. Suffice to say that I’ll be informed immediately if anything outside of your security’s purview comes along. I’ve already done something eye-catching that will hopefully tease some of the players out where I can get a look at them. That will hopefully give me a glimpse of the bigger picture.”

Anna walked into the conference room, where an investigation team was waiting to update her. It was a six-person team, specifically put together to investigate the children’s hospital event in Sydney. Also present was Ketevan, who was leading the other hospital investigation, up the coast. Anna took the position at the head of the table.

The lead investigator of the Sydney incident was a rugged-looking man named Aram, who had a bushy beard and a large frame. He looked like he would be more at home in faded overalls than a suit and tie. Like those of the other people in the room, Aram’s outfit was a suit of mid-range quality, designed to evoke the feel of a faceless government agent.

In Aram's case, it didn't work well, but despite his appearance, he was a consummate professional. After making sure everyone was on the same page with the basics of the investigation, he detailed their progress to Anna.

"We've vetted the families and other connections of the people in the hospital," he explained. "There were a couple of hits, but we looked into it and ruled them out as instigators of the event."

"But that is only our Network personnel, right?" Anna asked.

"That's correct," he confirmed. "That's allowed us to rule out any of our people, but we don't have membership rosters for the Engineers of Ascension. As for the Cabal and the smaller collectives, there's no telling."

"But you are looking into that, yes?" Anna prompted.

"Yes, Director. We've made it very clear that we will be finding the responsible parties and the other groups seem to be cooperating. A lot of them don't like it, but they know that this kind of overt action crosses our bottom line. None of them want us coming down on their heads."

"What's your take on their responses?" Anna asked.

"My instincts tell me that this isn't coming from an established group. They may be capitulating, but they aren't hiding their displeasure at our heavy-handedness. No one's stepping on eggshells. That's not to say we aren't continuing to be thorough. My instincts have been wrong before."

"Good," Anna said. She glanced at Ketevan before turning her gaze back to Aram. "You think this is related to the other incident?"

"I'd say more likely than not, at this stage," Aram said. "The timing suggests it's not a coincidence, although everything is still on the table until proven otherwise. Ketevan does have one theory. Keti, if you would?"

Ketevan nodded.

"I had this idea about the event in the hospital," she said. "I've been looking into it, but we have limited information. It hasn't happened in centuries, that we know of. In what records we do have, I haven't found anything to contradict this idea in what we've seen."

Anna frowned, guessing Ketevan's theory.

"I won't say the idea didn't occur to me," she said. "What about the simultaneous event in France? Isn't that contradictory?"

"Not if two of them came at once," Ketevan said. "We don't know that isn't possible."

"I'm sorry," one of the junior investigators broke in. "I'm missing something, and I don't think I'm alone."

The other junior investigators nodded their agreement. Anna panned a gaze over them.

“We’re talking about outworlders.”

9
I SUGGEST YOU BE VERY POLITE

JASON WAS STANDING ON THE EDGE OF THE ROOF, ATOP A SKYSCRAPER in the Sydney CBD. Shade was beside him as they looked towards an adjacent building. To normal sight it was unremarkable, but to magic senses, the building was lit up like a candle. The top floors were a dancing flame of overlapping enchantments.

"I see what you mean," Jason said. "It does seem like a lot of trouble to go to if it isn't their headquarters."

Shade had been watching the people who had investigated the hospital incident. Jason's suspicions about the existence of native magic were confirmed when Shade spotted a pair of essence users. Their iron-rank senses had no chance of detecting the stealthy familiar and he had followed them to the building Jason was now looking at.

While Shade could evade even most bronze-rank senses, he didn't risk approaching the enchantments in place on the building's upper floors. They weren't very advanced, falling easily within Jason's level of ritual magic expertise. It was a combination of basic protection and detection enchantments, made permanent through artifice no greater than Jason's skill book-derived skills.

What the magical protections lacked in individual sophistication, they made up in the complexity with which they were interwoven. Having so many effects laid over one another without mutual interference was an impressive feat. Breaking through or sneaking past any individual effect would be a breeze for Jason, but doing so without triggering three others would be a whole other task.

Jason postulated that the simplicity of the rituals was not from lack of proficiency, but a need to work with the weakness of Earth's ambient magic. Whoever devised the protections made the most of the restriction to low-rank formations and integrated them together in ways not possible with more powerful effects. Jason might have been able to recreate any individual effect that he saw, but whoever designed the integrated array of ritual magic as a whole had far more expertise than Jason.

The more Jason examined the magical emplacements, the more impressed he became. The cumulative effect of such basic abilities would be surprisingly tricky to deal with, reminding Jason of Clive's insistence that he gain a deeper understanding of magic. Based on his early knowledge of ritual magic, coming from skill books alone, Jason would have dismissed the danger of the simple enchantments. He might well have made the decision to try and infiltrate the building and blunder into the overlapping defences. In a way, the seeming simplicity of the individual effects was a trap.

"What do they have in the way of numbers?" Jason asked. Shade had tasked one of his bodies with watching the comings and goings since finding the building.

"I have, thus far, noted eight different bronze-rankers, almost two dozen iron-rankers, and one silver."

"A silver," Jason said, frowning.

"Their auras all show signs of heavy monster core use," Shade said. "It seems to be the primary method for advancement, here."

"Where are they getting monster cores?" Jason wondered aloud. "I can understand how I didn't know about the secret society of magic people, but I don't think I'd have missed monsters spawning all over the world."

"It would appear that your world has mysteries we need to unravel."

"So it would," Jason said, fishing his phone from his pocket to check the time.

He would have preferred to keep the phone in his inventory, but that would have cut it off from the networks. This was not just a factor of the dimensional displacement of his personal storage space, but also the state of stasis objects entered while in his inventory. It was the reason watches needed to be enchanted so they didn't stop while stored away. He would have liked to experiment with the technique for his phone, but he didn't have the materials.

It was almost time for the appointment Hiro had set up for Jason with the leader of Hiro's criminal organisation. Jason didn't know how the local organised crime was structured, but he didn't much care. He had been surprised that, rather than some clandestine meeting spot, the meeting was in the heart of the city, in a building not far from the one he stood on.

Jason leapt off the roof as his shadow cloak formed around him. He had, in his personal opinion, grossly underutilised the ability to glide that it acquired at bronze rank. The only properly tall building he had encountered after obtaining the power was the tower in the astral space, which he'd been a bit busy to take advantage of. He'd only had one opportunity to jump off it, and instead of being held aloft by his cloak, he was weighed down by the nest of stone spikes impaling his body.

His cloak spread out wide, like a pair of giant wings made of darkness and stars. Shade glided alongside him, a second shadow spread out in the sky. From so far up, the sounds of the street below were distant. Mostly, the only noise came from the wind.

"This is a decidedly indiscreet practice in the middle of the day," Shade pointed out.

"What's that?" Jason asked. "I couldn't hear you over the sound of how awesome this is."

"Mr Asano, I'm not physically capable of giving a weary sigh, but if I were, I would be doing so quite pointedly in response."

Jason laughed as he tested his control over the glide. As with most powers, he had an instinctive proficiency. While he would improve with practice, basic control came to him quite naturally. He quickly got a handle on turning in a curving arc, descending to gain speed, and even catching updrafts to regain a little altitude. After playing around for a while, he opened his map ability and set a waypoint for his destination.

As he neared the ground, Jason projected his aura in a directed fashion that normal people could sense. He did so to two points, well to either side of his chosen landing point. He tried to be subtle yet attention-grabbing, so that all eyes turned to them as he dismissed his cloak and dropped the last few metres into a silent landing. The momentary flash of aura passed, leaving the people on the street looking slightly disoriented.

"This is not a reliable method for avoiding attention," Shade said quietly enough that only Jason could hear.

“You worry too much. If someone sees me, they won’t believe their eyes, especially if I gaslight them a little.”

“I am your shadow, Mr Asano, not your conscience.”

“Yet here you are chiding me,” Jason said merrily as he tugged his jacket into place. A suit generally wasn’t the best hang-gliding outfit, but Gilbert’s suit, as always, was easily up to the task. The design had more flair than a design from his own world, but Jason didn’t hate being a little flashy.

He made his way into the nearby building entrance, across a large and pleasantly light-filled atrium to the reception desk.

“Jason Asano for Victor Tollman,” he said.

Victor Tollman was a large man. In his football days, he’d been a decent ruckman. His gym work became a little harder and a took little longer with each passing year, but he maintained excellent health and physique well into his fifties. He had a friendly face and salt-and-pepper hair, with a neat beard to match.

He sat in his office, in a huge leather chair that seemed large even to his sizeable frame. If not for the swivel base, it would have made a halfway decent throne. His desk was a piece of oak the size of a single bed.

Victor was watching a live feed of the reception security cameras, centred on the man standing in front of the reception desk. The image was distorted, the figure appearing as nothing but a blur.

“Can you hide from cameras like that?” Victor asked the man standing beside him, likewise watching the screen.

“Yes,” Vermillion said.

Vermillion had pale skin, dark hair, and narrow but sleekly handsome features. He was tall and looked to be in his mid-twenties, although Victor suspected he was older. He wore an impeccable black suit that cost more than Jason’s last car. Of course, Jason’s last car had been a rather dismal bomb, which he hadn’t given a thought to with Shade on hand.

“Is he one of you?” Victor asked.

“Perhaps,” Vermillion said, “but I don’t think so. I’ll know once he gets up here.”

“What else might he be?”

“I’ve warned you about fishing for information, Victor,” Vermillion gently admonished. “Too much knowledge and too little power is a volatile admixture.”

“Instead of withholding knowledge, you could just give me power,” Victor suggested.

Vermillion shook his head, a faint smile on his lips. “You’re relentless, Victor.”

“That’s the footy player in me,” Victor said. “You’ve got to be hungry if you’re going to win.”

Jason followed a blank-faced office worker from the elevator and down a corridor that terminated in a large set of wooden double doors. The functionary dramatically pushed them both open to grant access to the room beyond. It was more akin to one of Emir’s cloud palace lounges than an office, taking up a full third of the top floor. Two walls of the office were banks of windows. The room resembled the inside of a gentlemen’s club, with multiple sets of leather chairs and couches, a movie projector, and two separate bars.

If it was a gentlemen’s club, though, the gentlemen in question were of the unrefined sort. The walls were covered in paraphernalia glorifying football. From the preponderance of Collingwood merchandise, Jason guessed that Victor Tollman was originally a Melbournian.

The only part that looked even remotely like an office was buried away in the corner, away from the windows. A leather throne sat behind what was either a well-constructed desk or a poorly constructed boat. Walking towards him from that corner of the room were two men. Jason turned his attention to them as the office worker left, closing the doors behind her.

The larger of the two men was older, but vigorous, judging by sight and aura both. He reminded Jason of Hiro’s thug, Growl, but with fewer steroids and more brains. The seemingly younger man looked like a sexy mortician. His aura was bronze rank and rather disconcerting in its familiarity. It was definitely that of a vampire, but without the wild savagery of those turned

by a monster that Jason had encountered in the past. This man was clearly a different breed, with a clean, controlled aura.

The younger man stayed back while the older one came forward to boisterously shake Jason's hand. The physical contact brought up the man's information in Jason's view.

- Victor Tollman
- Human (normal rank)

"G'day, mate," Victor greeted.

"G'day," Jason said. "If I'd known you were a Collingwood supporter, I might not have come."

Victor snorted derision.

"Go the mighty pies," he said with a grin, then moved aside, a clear invitation for the other man.

The tall, pale man stepped forward and Jason offered his hand. After a brief pause, the man shook it.

- Craig Vermillion
- Greater Vampire (Human, araneid bloodline, bronze rank)

"Jason Asano," Jason introduced himself. "Just call me Jason. Mind if I call you Craig?"

The tall man's lips pressed thinly together, but he otherwise didn't react as he let go of Jason's hand.

"I go by Vermillion, professionally."

"No worries, mate," Jason said with a grin. Jason had grown a few centimetres taller with the ascension to bronze rank, but he was still towered over by the two men.

"You can just call me Vic," Victor said. "Let's park it, yeah? One of the good things about being rich as buggery is owning good chairs."

They sat down in a trio of lounge chairs around a low table.

"Would you like some refreshments?" Victor asked. "There's nothing really worth drinking at noon on a Tuesday, but I can have someone bring in water, coffee, tea…"

“I’m fine, thank you,” Jason said. “You asked to see me, presumably because you heard about what happened with Ari.”

“Yep,” Victor acknowledged.

Jason then turned to Vermillion.

“How much does he know?” Jason asked.

“He’s had a glimpse,” Vermillion said. “He knows what I am and that there are other things out there. Enough to see that there are dangers he is unequipped to combat.”

“Dangers you are equipped to meet.” Jason chuckled. “In return for certain accommodations?”

“Yes,” Vermillion said unashamedly. “What have you told your uncle?”

“That if I tell him any more, he may find himself involved with those dangers you mentioned.”

“That is a wise approach.”

Victor didn’t show it on his face, but Jason could see the frustration in Victor’s aura. He guessed that Victor was unaware that his emotions could be read that way, which Vermillion no doubt kept secret for his own advantage. As for Vermillion himself, his controlled aura revealed none of his emotions, at least to Jason’s senses. It was an unusual level of control for a someone not an essence user.

“Those dangers may not be something you can keep from your uncle’s door,” Victor said. “The EOA have seized control in Perth and Melbourne, and now they’re making no secret of their overtures into Sydney.”

Jason had already guessed the EOA to be more than ordinary criminals, although it was postulation based on very little information. It was starting to look like his world had an entire ecosystem of hidden magic, which Jason needed to learn about before he stumbled into trouble. More trouble.

“What is it that you want from me?” Jason asked Victor.

“I have a level of cooperation with Vermillion’s organisation,” Victor said. “They are, however, unwilling to expand the scope of that cooperation when the EOA come inevitably come knocking at my door. When I heard that someone else from Vermillion’s general circle was affiliated with one of my employees, I wanted to see if we could come to an arrangement.”

“We cannot,” Jason said flatly. “I’m not going to step into your fight.”

Victor could not provide Jason with the kind of information he needed. Further, he wanted Jason to jump into a fight without understanding the

sides, which was the opposite of Jason's own intentions. It was Vermillion who had something to offer Jason.

"What about your uncle?" Victor asked.

"He is under my protection," Jason said. "That protection does not extend to you or your interests."

"I can offer you substantial benefits," Victor said. "You would be surprised at what I can accomplish, when sufficiently motivated."

"You would be surprised at what *I* can accomplish, when sufficiently motivated," Jason said in turn. He didn't reinforce his words with his aura, but it wasn't necessary. Although it didn't show in his body language, a ripple of fear passed through Victor's aura.

Jason had once fought a team in a mirage chamber, using movie-monster theatrics to stir fear and disorient them. It only worked because they were as naïve as he was, and he cringed when thinking back to what he now considered a buffoonish display.

While it had barely been a year since then, it had been a year in which Jason had walked through blood and death. He no longer had to make a foolish imitation of being dangerous; his experiences, attitude, training and transformed body had brought about a deadly transfiguration.

Jason's old, frivolous self had increasingly become a mask he had to put on, and with months of constant fighting, he hadn't put it on in a while. Wading through a sea of monsters, the only people around him had been his trusted friends and most reviled enemies. After all that, the mask didn't fit as neatly as it used to.

To the kind of people who recognised it, Jason unconsciously radiated danger. Even with his aura hidden, it was in the way he moved, the way he watched everything around him. It was in his confidence, an unassailable self-assurance. Ari had picked up on it even before Jason unleashed his aura, and Victor was a lot sharper than Ari.

"I'd like to go over some of the things I could do for you," Victor said. "And your uncle as well."

"No," Jason said firmly. "I suspected that you might have some kind of offer along those lines, but I want to be unambiguous over rejecting any kind of negotiation on that front. I know this isn't what you want to hear, and I want this to be an amicable relationship, but I've just gotten back from farther away than you know there is distance to go. I don't know the local situation or the local players and I'm not even going to consider

intervening until I have a better understanding of the water I've splashed down in."

Jason gave Victor a genuine smile to cut the tension.

"To be honest, Mr Tollman—Vic—I came here for two reasons. One was to give you some face, so as to not cause trouble for my uncle. The other was to meet Vermillion."

Jason turned to the pale man, who had been largely content to sit back, eyes never leaving Jason.

"I'd like to meet privately for a more frank discussion, Mr Vermillion."

"An information exchange?" Vermillion asked.

"Yes," Jason said. "If Vic, here, can convince you to make another pitch on his behalf once I have a better lay of the land, I'll listen. I don't see myself agreeing, but you've approached me with courtesy. It's only fair that I reciprocate."

Jason stood up. Victor and Vermillion did the same and Jason shook hands with Victor again.

"It was good to meet you, Vic. I'm sorry I can't give you what you want, but I've learned some hard lessons about carelessly picking my fights before."

"I understand," Victor said congenially.

"If you're willing to have a further meeting," Jason said, shaking Vermillion's hand, "I'm sure you can find my number."

After having one of his staff escort Asano away, Victor plopped back down into one of the room's many armchairs.

"That bloke is unnerving," Victor said. "That doesn't mean he's the real thing, though. Are you sure he's not just bluffing about being from your circle? It seemed like he was fishing for information."

"I'm certain," Vermillion said. He had never encountered an aura as strong and rigidly controlled as Asano's. It was like an impenetrable sphere, perfectly formed and revealing only what it wanted you to see. It was also stronger than any tier-two aura he had encountered by an order of magnitude.

He had almost mistaken it for a tier-three aura, and he had no doubt that if Asano wanted to hide it from him, he could have. Asano clearly wanted Vermillion to see that he was an essence magician, and not one to be trifled with. Vermillion was the front man for the Cabal's dealings with the other groups in Sydney and Asano was wholly unlike the essence magicians he had encountered from the Network. While he was still an essence magician, Vermillion had no doubt that Asano was a different breed entirely.

"Are you going to meet with him?" Victor asked.

"Yes," Vermillion said.

"Will you try and convince him for me?"

"No," Vermillion said. "If he were to pit himself against the EOA, it would cause dangerous ripple effects. I don't think he's part of the local ecology. If it weren't for the family connection, I doubt we would ever have heard of him."

"So why is he trying to sell gold?" Victor wondered.

"That is a curiosity," Vermillion said, "which is why I bought it from you. My people are analysing it, chemically and otherwise. This man may be operating independently, although I'm not sure how it's even possible for someone of his nature to get that strong without support."

"How strong?" Victor asked. "If he's alone, would he even be of use against the EOA? How dangerous can one man be?"

"Very, I suspect," Vermillion said. "But you're right that taking on an organisation like the EOA is a futile gesture. Even if he somehow overcame all their local forces, it would only bring greater threats down on him."

"Are you telling me to roll over for the EOA?"

"I know you don't like to take the easy road, Victor, but sometimes the hard road runs right off a cliff."

"How would he stack up compared to you, if it came to a fight?"

"I don't know what he's capable of," Vermillion said. "I would avoid one, if possible. My instincts tell me that if I couldn't… I suggest you be very polite with his uncle."

A LEATHER COAT AND TIGHT, BLACK PANTS

Days went past as Jason fell into a routine. In the mornings, he would do strength training with the equipment in the townhouse, which was barely adequate for his bronze-rank might at maximum weight. Then he would ride to Rushcutters Bay Park to do some running along the waterfront.

He rode Shade in motorcycle form, as he only had one of Shade's bodies on hand. Shade still kept bodies on Hiro and Taika, while four were assigned to investigating the nest of local essence users he'd uncovered. That left the last body with Jason, which was enough to take the form of a sleek, black motorcycle. Jason had gone out and purchased some bike leathers and a helmet for the purpose.

He would wrap up his daily training with some meditation. This was the third pillar of advancing abilities, along with physical training and pushing himself to the limit. As normal for adventuring, being caught up in something like the astral space was heavy on the limit-pushing, with less time for other aspects of training. Now that he was away from that, he had the time to balance himself out.

After all the monster fights and the confrontation with the Builder, he could feel the unsettled power within him, waiting to be consolidated. While he was not anticipating more monster fights any time soon, he did anticipate some advancement in his abilities in the short term.

His time in the astral space had not been without cost, but it had also massively accelerated his growth. Not only had he crossed the threshold into bronze, but he had jumped into fighting silver-rank monsters much earlier than expected. As the magic of the astral space had escalated, Jason

and his team had raced to keep pace in their growth with the increasing power of the monsters they faced.

JASON ASANO

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: bronze
- Progression to silver rank: 25%

Attributes

- [Power] (Blood): [Bronze 3].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Bronze 2].
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Bronze 2].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Bronze 3].

RACIAL ABILITIES (OUTWORLDER)

- [Party Interface].
- [Defiant].
- [Spirit Vault].
- [Tactical Map].
- [Astral Affinity].
- [Dark Rider].

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (5/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Bronze 5] 09%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Bronze 4] 12%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Bronze 4] 41%.
- [Hand of the Reaper] (special ability): [Bronze 2] 94%.
- [Shadow of the Reaper] (familiar): [Bronze 4] 98%.

Blood [Power] (5/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Bronze 4] 64%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Bronze 4] 14%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Bronze 3] 02%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Bronze 4] 89%.
- [Haemorrhage] (spell): [Bronze 3] 92%.

Sin [Recovery] (5/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Bronze 4] 15%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Bronze 4] 03%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Bronze 3] 79%.
- [Hegemony] (aura): [Bronze 5] 04%.
- [Castigate] (spell): [Bronze 4] 31%.

Doom [Spirit] (5/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Bronze 4] 97%.
- [Punition] (spell): [Bronze 3] 74%.
- [Blade of Doom] (spell): [Bronze 4] 26%.
- [Verdict] (spell): [Bronze 2] 82%.
- [Avatar of Doom] (familiar): [Bronze 4] 16%.

After his training routine, Jason would move on to the business of the day. This usually meant burying himself in the internet, catching up on all the things he'd missed. Of particular interest were the 'terrorist readiness exercises' taking place around the world, including in Australia.

They had started not long before Jason's departure, but in his year and a half absence, their frequency had massively increased. Combining with an ongoing lack of explanation from world governments, they drew more and more media attention, despite obvious attempts to downplay their importance. Given that one of these incidents had taken place very close to his home at the exact moment Jason had been sucked into another universe, he was deeply interested.

From what he could gather, the exercises involved setting up a restricted area, completely blacking out any attempts to surveil, to the point of using signal jammers and even shooting down camera drones. What they were doing was a mystery he would look into when the opportunity presented

itself. From the rates of occurrence he was seeing, it was only a matter of time.

He also did some online stalking of his family. He watched a few episodes of his sister's new cooking show, checked out the websites for his mother's real estate agency and his father's landscaping business. His father had started a photo blog where he went through the process of developing a double block he bought from a plain stretch of even land into a lush garden home. At least, that was the plan; he was still in the early stages.

There were other things Jason needed to do, such as continuing the legal process of returning from the dead. Taika had been put at Jason's disposal, serving as driver and rather excellent body man, making many suggestions for how to resolve any minor issues Jason had.

Although Taika looked like a professional wrestler, with his towering height and broad physique, he was actually a friendly, chatty, and intelligent man whose company Jason quickly came to appreciate. He would usually arrive at the townhouse in the mid-morning, after Jason's training routine was done, to see if Jason needed anything. One such morning, they sat on the couch playing video games.

"I don't like the courses in this one as much," Taika said. "I think the Wii version had the best track selection in the whole series."

"I won't argue," Jason said. "Trying to get an online game of that now is a bit rough, though."

"Tell me about it."

Jason's phone rang, which was unusual. He had, thus far, only received calls from Taika and Hiro. He got up from the couch and answered it.

"Hello?"

"Mr Asano, this is Craig Vermillion."

The vampire's tone was more personable than the controlled clip he had used when they met in person.

"Mr Vermillion."

"Craig is fine when I'm not on the job. I have to play it sinister and mysterious around the normals. Maintain the mystique, you know?"

"Sure," Jason said.

"If you're still looking to meet, are you free for lunch?"

"You're not going to explode when sunlight hits you, are you?" Jason asked, drawing an odd look from Taika.

"I'll be fine," Vermillion said, amusement in his voice.

They made plans to meet at a café and Taika and Jason went outside the building into the parking lot.

“You need a lift, bro?” Taika asked.

“No, I’ve got my bike,” Jason said, nodding at Shade’s bike form. Like all of Shade’s vehicle forms, it looked like he’d stolen the plans from Batman.

“Sweet ride,” Taika said. “That wasn’t out here when I came in.”

“My friend left it out here,” Jason said.

“I thought you were going to say it was a self-driving bike.”

“I didn’t know they were a thing,” Jason said. “I’ll have to look into it.”

While Taika moved forward to admire the motorcycle, Jason switched his outfit, mist obscuring him for a few seconds while Taika looked the other way. When Taika turned back, Jason was in his driving leathers and helmet.

“How did you…?”

“What?” Jason asked.

“You changed your clothes.”

“Nah, mate. I was always wearing this.”

Taika frowned.

“You’re a mysterious guy, bro. There’s a lot about you that doesn’t add up.”

Jason chuckled.

“Mate, you’ve got no idea.”

“When you picked a café, this wasn’t what I expected,” Jason said.

Vermillion had led him from the crowded downstairs area to a private upstairs with empty tables and a window wall looking out over the street. The décor was subdued, with hardwood floors and earthy colours.

“I own the place,” Vermillion said. “It offers comfort and convenience for private business.”

“Just give me a second to change,” Jason said, mist shrouding him to replace his bike gear with a casual winter suit. Vermillion was dressed much more casually than their last meeting, with plain slacks and a woollen sweater.

“Are you all right leaving your motorcycle on the street like that?” Vermillion asked.

“That wasn’t a motorcycle,” Jason said, but offered no further explanation. Vermillion looked out on the street and noticed that the bike was no longer where Jason had left it.

“I always envied the convenience of conjured vehicles,” Vermillion said.

“That’s a thing here?”

“Only one that I know of, here in Sydney. It’s unusual where you spent your time away?”

“Vehicles specifically, yeah, but there’s lots of magic items, magical beast riding. My mate Humphrey rides around on a shape-changing dragon.”

“A dragon?”

“It’s a baby dragon.”

They sat at a table with comfortable chairs.

“Someone will come up shortly to take our food order,” Vermillion said.

“What kind of dietary restrictions do you have?” Jason asked. “Is it a liquid diet? I don’t know a lot about vampires. The only ones I’ve met were created by a giant blood spider. We didn’t really talk, since they were trying to kill me and my friends.”

“Lesser vampires,” Vermilion said. “They were created by a giant spider? This also happened during your mysterious time away?”

“Yep,” Jason said. “It was a rough day. I mean, it was some epic stuff. Vampire monster army? But yeah, rough.”

“And where did this take place exactly?”

“Would you believe an abandoned jungle city in a pocket universe?”

“Not really.”

“Let’s just say southern Africa, then. More or less. What did my gold tell you?”

“What makes you think I have your gold?”

“I got full market price for that gold, which I shouldn’t have, given its shady origins. That means that someone higher up stepped in. It could have been Tollman, looking to make a good first impression, but he would have said something when he was trying to recruit me to his cause.”

“Why would I want it?” Vermillion asked.

“Best guess? You—or the people behind you—saw an essence user acting outside of the norm, almost like he didn’t know what was what. But how could someone like me be an independent? Where would they get the resources? Why are they doing something as petty as selling mundane gold? So you bought it and you’ve probably put it through every test you can conceive of.”

“You seem very confident,” Vermillion said.

“I do, don’t I?” Jason said with a laugh. “I’ll confess that I’m curious about what you found.”

Vermillion shook his head.

“My people are very interested in where that gold came from,” he said. “Apparently, we tried to trace the source and the results were extremely anomalous.”

“I’ll bet they were.” Jason chuckled. “Who are your people, exactly?”

“The Cabal,” Vermillion said. “I would have thought that was obvious.”

“Never heard of them,” Jason said. “I’ve been out of town.”

“The Cabal is everywhere.”

“I’ve been really far out of town,” Jason said. “I suspect your concept of everywhere is due for expansive revision.”

“Then by all means, expand my horizons,” Vermillion said.

“I can do that,” Jason said. “I’d like to get a handle on the local colour, first.”

“If you genuinely don’t know what the Cabal is,” Vermillion said, “then you certainly have some catching up to do. How much do you know?”

“Just imagine that I got sucked into an alternate universe and came back with super powers to find out there was magic hidden in my world all along.”

Vermillion raised his eyebrows.

“Hypothetically,” Jason added.

Vermillion leaned back in his chair.

“I can certainly tell you what isn’t any great secret,” Vermillion said. “To people like us anyway. To regular people, it would be the biggest secret in the world, but we’re a long way beyond regular people.”

“Vast magical power does change your perspective somewhat, doesn’t it?”

“The first thing you need to know about the magical world is that there are three dominant forces within it. There are smaller, localised groups,

scrabbling after table scraps. They know about magic, but that knowledge is fragmentary at best and they have little, if any, magic they command for themselves."

"Like our friend Victor."

"Exactly like our friend Victor," Vermillion agreed. "There are also some groups that orbit the larger organisations. Families that have known the truth for centuries, that kind of thing. They vary in power, directly related to their influence within the groups to which they are attached."

"And it's these three big groups that are the real players?"

"Exactly," Vermillion said. "The oldest, and most reclusive, is the Cabal. I'm a member, and even my knowledge is extremely limited. Most of what I do know, I'm not allowed to share."

"That's fine," Jason said. "What's the outside perspective of your group?"

"The Cabal represents the old magic of this world. Things older than history that dwell in the dark places."

"Like vampires," Jason said.

"Yes. Proper vampires, not the puppets of some essence magician."

"I've heard of essence users making vampires," Jason said. "Where I've just been, it's frowned upon."

"As it is here," Vermillion said. "These lesser vampires, running around killing people. Even putting aside the moral repugnance of murder, which I don't think you should, it just makes things harder for those of us doing the right thing."

"I was meaning to ask about that," Jason said. "I've been wondering about your views on killing and eating people, because I take a dim view on it. Enough people have tried to kill and eat me that I don't care for it as a practice."

"That is the purview of lesser vampires," Vermillion said. "They can't feed without killing, so we put them down whenever we find them."

"And what about you?" Jason asked. "You do drink blood, yes?"

Vermillion was about to answer when a waitress came in from downstairs. She only had one menu, which she handed to Jason.

"It's your place," Jason said. "What's good?"

"Beef carpaccio," Vermillion said without hesitation.

"Okay," Jason said, handing back the menu without looking at it.

"Same for me," Vermillion said. "Thank you, Anika."

The waitress withdrew downstairs.

“Blood is an unfortunate necessity,” Vermillion said. “There is no need to kill for it, though. In fact, people can’t wait to give it away.”

“Oh?”

“We’ve cultivated entire subcultures,” Vermillion said. “With a leather coat and tight, black pants, we get more blood and sex than we can consume. Literally more. I know people who have done their best to thin out the supply, as it were, but they didn’t even make a dent. There are always more young people, looking for a thrill.”

“Is it harmful?”

“No more than donating blood,” Vermillion said. “In fact, being fed on actually heightens resistance to most diseases.”

“Really?”

“Only with greater vampires. When lesser vampires feed, they release an anticoagulant into the blood that kills without drastic medical intervention.”

“Or healing magic.”

“If you can get it. This is why we stamp out lesser vampires.”

“But you actually provide disease resistance?”

“It surprised us too,” Vermillion said. “Back in the eighties, the Cabal conducted some studies into the potential dangers of blood-borne disease transmission by our more sanguinely oriented members. It turns out that rather than spread disease, the people we feed on are statistically less likely to get some of the nastier maladies floating around.”

“You conducted studies?” Jason asked.

“We didn’t have them published, obviously. They were conducted with rigour by experts in the field, however, and disseminated through our own channels.”

“And obviously, sunlight is not an issue for your kind,” Jason said. It was the kind of cold, clear winter day where the sky was pristine blue. Sunlight washed in through the large window, pleasantly lighting up the room.

“It’s a matter of magic,” Vermillion said. “Weaker members of my kind are affected by sunlight. I’ve also heard of stronger vampires being affected by it in unusual situations where the magic around them is more potent.”

“Interesting,” Jason mused. “I’d have to assume the ambient magic infuses the sunlight with properties antithetical to your condition. I have a

friend who probably understands the process. How harmful is sunlight, exactly?"

"When it's strong enough to affect us, we're weaker and slower. Not down to a baseline human level, but I couldn't speak for some of those higher-magic situations. I don't know the circumstances in which they took place, so I'm largely going from second-hand knowledge. It also makes our more unusual powers harder or even impossible to use."

"You don't seem hesitant about sharing your weaknesses," Jason observed.

"These aren't secrets," Vermillion said. "Once you've spent any time in the magical community, you won't find that information hard to come by."

"But you aren't affected by this level of magic?"

"Not at all," Vermillion said. "Only the weakest of our kind are."

"But your Cabal doesn't have just your kind, do they?"

"No," Vermillion said. "Aside from individuals looking to follow their own paths, all the old magic falls under our aegis. We have many factions within our ranks, but we unified as the normals became more dangerous with the rise of technology."

"Old magic, as opposed to new magic?" Jason asked.

"Yes," Vermillion said. "You are an essence magician, yes?"

"Yes."

"It's only been around for around half a millennium. That is why we call it the new magic."

A KNIFE IN ITS SHEATH

Vermillion and Jason paused their conversation as the waitress brought their food, along with a bottle of wine and two glasses. Jason nibbled at the food appreciatively as Vermillion opened the bottle. They refrained from continuing the conversation until the waitress had returned downstairs.

"Magic has always been a difficult and esoteric thing," Vermillion explained as he poured the wine. "Some five centuries ago, a new kind of magic appeared. People with no connection to the old ways could suddenly wield a variety of easy-to-use mystical powers. At that time, they were a limited threat. They were collected into various secret societies around the world, hoarding their knowledge. Most importantly, their strength seemed to have limitations on its growth. While it can take decades and centuries, many of the Cabal's members can slowly accrue power over time. I have been a vampire for seventy years, which is long enough to reach the second tier of power."

"How do you name the tiers?" Jason asked. While the naming conventions would be subjective, the thresholds between magical ranks were not.

"There have been many terms of categorisation, across culture and language," Vermillion said.

"I was taught to call them ranks," Jason said.

"As the magical communities have become increasingly interrelated, the need for a shared terminology has led to numeric designations that are widely recognised. Whether you call them tiers, categories, realms, or ranks, like you, the same numbers are recognised across the board."

“So, what are the numbers?”

“It starts with zero,” Vermillion explained. “That’s people who don’t have enough magic to cross the first, transformative threshold and become a true entity of magic. This is the one tier where the lines can blur a little.”

“Oh?”

“Take blood servants for example.”

“Blood servants?”

“Normal humans who have partaken of greater vampire blood, without going through the process of transformation. They gain superhuman strength and speed, depending on the strength of the blood. They may even reach the power of the first or even second tier, but this is temporary. Without regular ingestion of more vampire blood, that power fades.”

“That can’t be good,” Jason said. “I’ve never heard about it with vampires specifically, but I have been told that backsliding in rank can be quite an ordeal.”

Jason had heard about the side effects of ex-clergy who had offended their gods and been stripped of divinely gifted essences. This caused a debilitating imbalance in the body and soul.

“It is very much not good,” Vermillion said. “There is also a strongly addictive aspect to vampire blood, which is why the cultivation of blood servants is a frowned-upon practice in modern times. Just recently, we had a problem with someone quietly building up a large force of blood servants.”

“So, the other tiers are what you’d expect, lowest to highest?”

“Yes,” Vermillion said. “That puts you and I at tier two of five.”

“Not six?” Jason asked.

“Six? I’ve heard of some tier-four people within the Cabal, but I’ve never seen any. Rumour is that they’ve grown so powerful, there isn’t enough magic to sustain them and they’ve all entered forms of hibernation, hidden away for centuries. I’ve been told there is a fifth tier but never seen proof that’s anything but a myth. As for more… what’s beyond a myth?”

“A god. What you call the fifth tier is the limit of mortal power.”

“I’ve never seen evidence that any gods are real.”

“Oh, they’re real. Gods and things outside of our reality.”

“I’d be very interested in hearing more about that.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Jason said. “Consider it a teaser for what I can offer when I’m looking for a favour from the Cabal.”

“I will,” Vermillion said. “I suspect my people will be even more interested than I am, so long as what you’re saying has any validity. In the meantime, would you like me to continue my explanation of new magic?”

“Please do. You said essence magic was trapped at the lowest rung for many years.”

“Centuries. For the bulk of new magic’s history, in fact.”

“I take it that changed?”

“Yes. Our people investigated the rise of this new magic, which took place over the space of several decades, all around the world. Even amongst civilisations not yet discovered by the wider world, such as the indigenous cultures of this region of the Pacific. What our inquiries ultimately uncovered was that one person was responsible for all of it.”

“One person?”

“That’s right. One person, whose command of this new magic was far greater than anything we’ve seen since. They could speak any language and change their face. We don’t even know if they were man, woman, or even human. We believe this person seeded the secret societies of new magic.”

Vermillion gave Jason an awkward smile.

“If I may ask, are you an essence magician?”

“I am.”

“Then you know that the magic comes from magical objects. The essences that give essence magic its name. For a long time, the source of new magic was a closely guarded secret, but the practice of new magic was spreading. Eventually, the truth was revealed. This person founding the secret societies across the world was giving them these essences.”

“Did your Cabal ever get a hold of any?”

“I’m sure they did. As for what came of it, I have no idea. If there are any essence magicians in our ranks, I’ve never seen them.”

“And probably wouldn’t tell me if you had.”

Vermillion smiled, sipping at his wine before answering.

“Probably not, no. So this person provided what we now know to be the essences that facilitate new magic. For centuries, though, essence magic was limited and weak. It had few users, none of whom possessed any great power. But as you said, that changed.”

“What happened?” Jason asked.

“You can probably guess better than I, since you obviously know how to grow your power.”

“I know how to do it where I’ve been, but here I don’t know. It doesn’t seem like the conditions are right.”

“That was our assessment as well. But something changed around the turn of the nineteenth century. Some manner of global threat began to manifest, at which point we realised that these secret societies had been prepared specifically to combat this threat.”

“What kind of threat?”

“Monstrous entities. Myths come to life. These secret societies had some way of seeing them coming and preventing them from arriving. We only saw what happened when they failed, which was the appearance of strange and dangerous creatures.”

“Let me guess,” Jason said. “The more they confronted these threats, the stronger these new magicians became.”

“Indeed,” Vermillion said. “I only know limited amounts about these threats, but I know they have grown stronger and more frequent over the last century or so. Over time, travel and communication advanced. The secret societies of new magic realised that they were all akin, using the same methods and powers. The means by which they detect the threats is the same.”

“Which is what?” Jason asked.

“Some manner of mystical grid, crossing the entire globe. We believe it was set up by the person who founded the societies, in preparation for their future purpose.”

“So, these secret societies all work together, now?”

“Yes,” Vermillion said. “They call themselves the Network. Over the last century, their numbers and power have grown rapidly, overtaking my Cabal as the strongest of the major magical factions.”

“The terrorist readiness exercises,” Jason said.

“The increasing rate of these threats has made the Network stronger,” Vermillion said, “but the danger seems to be escalating faster than their ability to meet it. They needed to scale up their operations to a level they simply couldn’t as a hidden organisation. More and more creatures were slipping through the cracks. It became harder and harder to hide. A little over three years ago, they made a very dangerous decision and revealed themselves to a variety of world governments.”

“They didn’t turn to the other magical organisations?”

“The Cabal would never expose themselves to that degree,” Vermillion said. “As for the third major organisation, covering up magic is not in alignment with their principles.”

“What is the third organisation?”

“The Engineers of Ascension,” Vermillion said.

“Engineers of Ascension,” Jason repeated. “Are you talking about the EOA?”

“I am,” Vermillion said. “As you have no doubt surmised, they are much less reticent about revealing themselves than the other organisations. While their true nature remains hidden, it’s only barely.”

“Victor Tollman wanted me to stand against the EOA,” Jason said. “I’m confident in my abilities, but I can’t take on one of the dominant magical forces on the planet by myself.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Vermillion said. “The EOA is very decentralised as a movement. They tend to operate in clusters, which makes them flexible and resilient to outside attack, but they lack cohesion and are less likely to retaliate against the loss of individual members. It’s a necessary position for the weakest of the three groups.”

“They’ve butted heads with the others?”

“Mostly the Network, who are very invested in keeping magic secret.”

“So, if the EOA group here in Sydney goes down, there won’t be large-scale retaliation?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. Do enough damage and they’ll start mobilising their forces. It’s just that you can probably afford to take down a few members, should you get into an altercation, without being too worried. If you take out some Cabal or Network members, by contrast, the people behind them will come down on you like gods of old.”

“To make an example,” Jason said.

“Exactly. It’s the privilege of being hegemons. The EOA must be more circumspect. They’ve become adept at knowing when to offer a hand and when to raise a fist. For the most part. It’s the nature of a fractious organisation that there will be different people with different views.”

“What is the nature of their magic?” Jason asked. “If your Cabal is old magic and this Network is new magic, where do the EOA fit in?”

“The Engineers of Ascension are largely made up of those who came to magic from outside the normal channels. I mentioned the smaller groups, fighting for scraps left by the Cabal and the Network. As far as we know,

the EOA were formed by the strongest of those groups, looking for strength in numbers. As such, their magic is a hodgepodge, cobbled together from what they could beg, borrow, or steal. It might make them seem like poor cousins, and many from the Cabal and the Network see it that way."

"You don't agree?"

"I think that dismissing the EOA is foolish. They have been the driving force of magic innovation in modern times. New magic seems set in its forms, while the Cabal is set in its ways. The EOA are pushing boundaries. Not without consequences, but also not without results."

"The drugged-up thugs I've been hearing about?"

"Magical enhancement is the core of their magical research. In that case, old school alchemy combined with modern pharmaceutical approaches. As far as I'm aware."

"Magic steroids."

"Something like that," Vermillion said. "The EOA's desire to research blood servants has caused some conflicts with my organisation. We don't like it when someone kidnaps our people to use as research materials."

"They're willing to take that risk?"

"The EOA has been running behind the pack from the beginning. A large part of their ability to keep up is a willingness to go further than the rest of us."

"Further how?"

"Magical body modification. Reanimating the dead. Nothing is off the table in the pursuit of transhumanism through magic."

"Thus, the name," Jason realised. "Engineers of Ascension. They're trying to magically engineer themselves to a higher state."

"Exactly," Vermillion said. "The EOA knows they can't compete with the history of the Cabal or the resources of the Network. They have to chart their own path into areas the hegemonic powers won't touch. There's a price to that, but they've proven themselves willing to pay it."

"They want to be the next stage of humanity," Jason said. "What does that have to do with taking control of criminal underworlds?"

"Their driving goal is to prepare for magic being revealed to the world," Vermillion said.

"Doesn't that put them in direct competition with the organisations trying to hide it?"

“It would, if the EOA ever made attempts to reveal magic, but they don’t. They believe that the public learning about is magic inevitable, so they’re happy to play along with keeping it a secret. They’re far more loose with it than the rest of us, but they’re careful not to cross anyone’s bottom line. They’re convinced that the truth will come out, despite what anyone might do to hide it. If anything, the longer that takes, the longer they have to prepare.”

“Are they right?” Jason asked. “Is it going to come out?”

“Yes,” Vermillion said. “I know my people are becoming increasingly concerned, and the Network has already taken drastic steps. Once the Network started involving governments, we started accelerating to the point where so many people know that it’s not really a secret anymore. Add in the progress of technology and it’s almost surprising that it hasn’t come out already. In my opinion, these terrorist readiness exercises are the last gasp of the secret world before everything comes out into the open.”

Jason sat back in his chair, letting out a slow breath. Despite mostly not breathing, habits like sighing were hard to give up.

“The world’s about to change, then. In a very big way.”

“So it would seem. Everyone is preparing, but the EOA have been from the beginning. It’s their chance to close the gap on the other major powers.”

“So what do the EOA want?” Jason asked. “How are they preparing for the truth to come out?”

“They believe that once magic is out in the open, there will be a fundamental shift in how societies function.”

“They think those with magic will be a new ruling class?”

“At the very least, that magic will be on par with money and political influence,” Vermillion confirmed. “The EOA are the poor third cousin in the magical community, but they’re still swimming in the big kids’ pool. They’re looking to position themselves for when the truth comes out. The Network had already insinuated themselves with political powers, so the EOA moved on private powers, quietly inducting influential groups and individuals to the magical world. Organised crime is only a second-tier priority, to which they’ve relegated their lesser members. The real game is the extremely wealthy.”

“I can see how it would be an easy pitch,” Jason said. “Offer the people who can buy anything the thing that can’t be bought.”

“Precisely,” Vermillion said. “The EOA have made some solid strides into longevity treatments with minimal side-effects, compared to their more radical developments in body modification. Once magic comes out, they’ll be able to market it openly.”

“The other organisations aren’t competing with them over influencing the wealthy?”

“The Network seems satisfied with political influence,” Vermillion said. “I think that will cost them, but that’s their mistake to make. They seem focused on their mission, but perhaps they could easily have hidden plans to which I am not privy. As for the Cabal, we’ve had a tight grip on old money literally since the invention of money.”

“And religion too, I’m guessing.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny,” Vermillion said, prompting a chuckle from Jason.

“The global influence pie is large enough that no one is willing to go to war over a larger slice,” Vermillion said. “Not so far anyway. So long as nothing comes along to change that balance, the revelation should be fairly smooth for the magical community. As for the world at large, that’s anyone’s guess. Who knows what kind of chaos will happen? Not to mention the dangers we’ve always been wary of. Magical power and ideology have always been highly reactive compounds.”

“There have been issues in the past?”

“There have. I’m not looking forward to when aggressive countries start weaponising magic. The Russians already keep invading people and I hesitate to even talk about North Korea or the Middle East. The US is bad enough with combat drones. Do you want to see magic combat drones?”

“Does it make me a bad person if I say yes?” Jason asked. “I mean, magic, flying death robots? You have to admit, that’s pretty awesome.”

“Not if you’re some kid in Yemen who’s learned to fear the sky,” Vermillion said.

“That’s disappointingly fair,” Jason conceded.

“Those are the basics you need to know about the secret world of magic. I still have no idea how you could possibly have reached your level of strength without knowing any of this. The Network has a tight grip on new magic. You are different to the essence magicians I know, however.”

“How so?”

“There’s something in their auras that isn’t in yours. I’ve only seen one of their members of any real power that didn’t have it. He’s not the strongest, being a low-end category two, but he also seems more capable than the others.”

“Interesting,” Jason mused, absently tapping a finger to his lips. His guess was that the local essence users used monster cores heavily, while one of them was advancing himself without.

“I think my people know more about where you’ve been than they’re telling me,” Vermillion confessed.

“What did your people tell you?”

“Not much,” Vermillion admitted. “That’s par for the course with the Cabal, but I like knowing that they’ll protect my secrets as fastidiously as the organisation’s. I believe they have some idea of where you’ve been. They told me to do my best to maintain a friendly channel of communication.”

“I think you’ve done a bang-up job,” Jason said with a friendly smile. “I am going to be checking up on local vampire dining habits, though.”

“You going to appoint yourself magical sheriff?”

“No. But if the local vampires are more murdery than you’ve implied, I’m not going to stand by either.”

“You can’t fight every vampire in Sydney, Mr Asano.”

Vermillion caught something flinty in Jason’s eyes and his aura that sent a chill down the vampire’s spine.

“You’d be surprised at what I can fight, Mr Vermillion.”

A friendly smile from Jason broke the tension.

“Thank you for all this information, Craig. I owe you one.”

“Not a big one. I haven’t revealed anything that you couldn’t easily learn elsewhere. One piece of advice: If you’re going to affiliate yourself with one of the organisations, it has to be the Network. The reasons should be obvious.”

“I’m an essence user,” Jason said. “They’re the group with the means to make me stronger.”

“Exactly,” Vermillion said. “Even after learning that essences were behind new magic, we never bothered to acquire that power for ourselves, so far as I’m aware. We just don’t have the means to develop it. The EOA has a small handful of essence users, but they aren’t strong. My people are

definitely interested in you, but they wanted me to point you in the Network's direction. A show of good faith."

"I'll take it," Jason said. He stood up, his hand halfway raised to shake Vermillion's when it stopped. His expression turned cold and hard.

"Have you set up an ambush?"

Vermillion was unsure what to make of Jason Asano, who was a nest of strange dichotomies. At a glance, Asano was open and friendly, even a little hapless. This was belied by the intelligent eyes, whether they were taking everything in or focused in an incisive gaze. Although his body language was casual, Vermillion had no doubt that Asano was listening intently.

That fortress wall of an aura was nowhere on display, completely undetectable to Vermillion's senses. He was beginning to understand what normals felt like under his own aura manipulation. Asano had the feeling of a knife in its sheath, which Vermillion was not unfamiliar with. He had met many dangerous people in his long life. It made little sense, then, that Asano could be so unversed in the wider magical world.

Vermillion's initial thought was that Asano was feigning an implausible level of ignorance. As he continued to talk and Asano continued to listen, he eventually concluded that the man genuinely didn't know even the most basic aspects of magical society. That seemed impossible given that he was clearly no stranger to magic. There was something very important about Jason Asano of which Vermillion himself was not aware.

Asano's history gave away little. Until a year and a half ago, he had been, to any and all investigation, an ordinary man. He grew up in a small town, attended a private school for the kids of wealthy seachangers. He went to the University of Melbourne, dropped out after one semester and got a menial job in retail.

For the next five years, Asano was the picture of banality, outside of the occasional appearance on his sister's cooking show. Then his apartment was mysteriously destroyed during one the Network's sham terrorist exercises, in which he apparently died by magical mishap. He mysteriously returned a year and a half later, with no more explanation than his departure. What he did have was a lot more power.

The persona Asano generally affected was in line with his history, prior to his disappearance. Was it always something he put on, having held this power before he went away? Vermillion guessed not, given what seemed like an authentic lack of knowledge. Asano had gone somewhere and been profoundly changed, but where?

Vermillion suspected the Cabal knew but kept it from him. It was more likely out of habit than maliciousness, but it still rankled. Most likely, it was related to whatever threat the Network was facing off with, given that it seemed to be the source of their power. Since Asano's power was the same, that made sense.

Asano was unlike any member of the Network Vermillion had met, however, and he had met his share. Even compared to the handful of powerful tier-three essence magicians in Sydney, Asano was unusual. His aura was clearly discernible as tier two, but far too powerful for that. It was also far too controlled.

Greater vampires had an instinctive control of their auras, which was the source of their iconic charisma. Essence magicians were usually sloppy in their control, but Asano was very different in this regard. He was at least the equal of any vampire Vermillion knew of.

Over the course of their conversation, Vermilion came to believe that despite the danger behind his eyes, Asano might actually be as friendly as he put on. He was certainly easy to get along with. Then, as they were about to part, Asano's gaze turned as sharp as a knife.

"Have you set up an ambush?" Asano asked.

"No," Vermillion said. "If I was going to set up an ambush, I wouldn't do it in my own café. I'd also bring a lot more people."

"There are a lot more people."

"What are you talking about?"

At that moment, a number of magical auras came into range of Vermillion's senses. They were converging on the café from the outside, as well as the alley running behind. He recognised the auras, the blank power of the EOA's alchemically juiced-up thugs.

Vermillion frowned unhappily.

"I think things are about to go very poorly," he said.

UNDERWORLD BARGAIN

"I don't recognise the auras," Jason said.

"Engineers of Ascension," Vermillion said. "Their alchemically enhanced foot soldiers. This may not go well."

"I can live with that," Jason said. "Sooner or later, I'll have to make an example of someone."

"It isn't prison rules, Mr Asano."

"Maybe not to you," Jason said. "I'm all alone and surrounded by dangerous people who, as it turns out, are already in gangs."

Vermillion frowned.

"Will you at least allow me to try and de-escalate the situation?"

"This is your establishment and I'm your guest," Jason said. "I'll defer to you."

"Thank you."

Jason sat down again, his back to the door as he watched casually out the window and poured himself another glass of wine. Vermillion pulled out his phone.

"Anika, some people are about to come in. Please direct them upstairs immediately and try not to disturb the customers. Thank you."

Shortly thereafter, a dozen men came up the stairs. They each had the swollen musculature and vacant stare of a homoerotic action figure. Each wore a tight, white t-shirt and dark green cargo pants. They looked like someone had been cloning thugs and selling them in job lots.

Only one of the men had clear, intelligent eyes. He was just as muscular as the others, but wore a collared shirt and slacks, with leather shoes instead

of sneakers. He stood at the front, directing his gaze at Vermillion, who stepped forward to meet him.

"Mr Kissling," Vermillion greeted coldly.

"Mr Vermillion," Kissling responded. "We're sorry to intrude, but we need to take the man sitting behind you."

Jason didn't react, continuing to watch the street below with a glass of wine in his hand.

"We have no quarrel with the Cabal and will be happy to compensate you and your organisation for your cooperation in this matter."

"This man is in my establishment, at my invitation, as my guest," Vermillion said. "Your words may be polite, sir, but your actions are just the opposite. If you wish to take this man, you have to go through me."

"You may wish to think through the ramifications of denying us, Mr Vermillion. I know that your group is remaining hands-off in regard to the activities of mine. If you stand in our way now, you are making a choice for your entire faction."

"Am I meant to allow any trespass the EOA wishes to make because they claim it involves larger political forces? That is a cheap tactic, Mr Kissling."

"It is no cheap tactic, Mr Vermillion. Your Cabal has sensibly chosen to step aside as we pursue our interests, but this man has not. He is a legitimate obstacle to our intentions."

"I think, Mr Kissling, that you are labouring under a misconception. I was present when Victor Tollman asked Mr Asano for his assistance in resisting your encroachment. Mr Asano flatly declined."

"The fact remains that his uncle is a part of the regime we are going to displace. Will he just stand aside when we come for his uncle?"

"Perhaps rather than take actions we all come to regret," Vermillion suggested, "we can sit down and discuss a compromise."

Kissling rubbed his chin as he considered it, his henchman army lined up behind him like soldiers in a row.

"It can't hurt to at least talk," he said. Vermillion nodded gratefully, leading Kissling to the table, where they sat to join Jason. Jason didn't react, continuing to look out the window, sipping at his wine.

"Good day, Mr Asano," Kissling said. "We have no more quarrel with you than with Mr Vermillion or his people. The crux of the matter is whether you will interfere with our interests. If I can't get assurances from

you, then I am going to have to disappoint Mr Vermillion and become more direct."

Jason turned to face Kissling. Jason's aura remained undetectable, but his eyes were cold as they looked over Kissling like he was a slab of meat, hanging from hook.

"Mr Vermillion said that you were labouring under a misconception," Jason said lightly. "In actuality, you are labouring under two."

"And what is the second one?" Kissling asked.

"That he is protecting me from you. He is, in fact, protecting you from me."

Vermillion winced.

"I could warn you about what would happen if you and your people took action against me or my uncle," Jason continued, "but I realise that until someone is foolish enough to try, people aren't going to take me seriously."

"Do you really expect to intimidate me?" Kissling asked.

Jason let out a weary sigh, which he had to fake since he no longer needed to breathe.

"I see you're one of those people who don't listen so much as wait for their turn to speak," Jason said. "When I came home, I wasn't looking to go murdering anyone. I wanted things to be simple. I never want to kill people, but in the end, the result is always killing and killing and killing. I think, at this point, I just have to accept that it's inevitable. If it's not you, it'll be someone else."

"I think we can try and find a middle ground," Vermillion interjected. "Mr Kissling, your people are going to move in and take control of the local criminal element. I think we can all agree that this is an inexorable outcome. You, Mr Asano, want your uncle, and presumably his people, to be safe. Would you both consider that an accurate description of our current circumstances?"

"Yes," Kissling said, and Jason nodded.

"Good," Vermillion said. "Then here is what I propose. The EOA will buy out Hiro Asano's interests in the city, for extremely generous compensation. Any of Hiro Asano's people will be free to leave unmolested or transition into the new administration as they choose. The Cabal will vouchsafe Hiro and his people from reprisals from Victor Tollman and his organisation or the Engineers of Ascension. This will remove any reason for

you, Mr Asano, to intervene in Engineer of Ascension affairs, while not putting you into Mr Tollman's camp. What do we think about that?"

"A chance for my uncle to go completely legitimate and come back to the family," Jason mused, nodding thoughtfully to himself. "I like it."

"I would need to have a better definition of Hiro Asano's people," Kissling said. "You could interpret that as the entire organisation he works for. Then, moving in at all would constitute breaking the deal and the Cabal is well within their rights to intervene under the guise of protection."

"It will count Hiro Asano himself and anyone who works for him directly," Vermillion said. "It will include direct subordinates and low-level staff in his legitimate business interests, that your people, Mr Kissling, would be purchasing from Mr Asano."

"And your uncle will go quietly?" Kissling asked Jason.

"He already knows that things are changing in ways he doesn't understand," Jason said. "I'll make sure he goes along. That does not mean he'll turn against his former associates, however. He will not aid you against Tollman's organisation."

"We don't need his help," Kissling said. "We just need people like you to stay out of our way."

"Deal," Jason said, offering his hand over the table. Kissling shook it.

- Michael Kissling
- Elite Converted (bronze rank)

Jason schooled his face to not let the surprise show, but he spotted that Vermillion had noticed something. Kissling was nothing like the converted Jason had encountered in the astral space, at least to his magical senses. Kissling's followers had the familiar, automaton-like presence, but they were of an entirely different nature, magically speaking. Most importantly, he didn't sense the presence of any of the Builder's power. It was something he had been sensitive to ever since the Builder attempted to claim Jason's soul.

These were clearly augmented through methodology wholly unlike the Builder's modified clockwork cores. It would appear that the Engineers of Ascension had developed some alternate means to magically enhance people, although not without side effects. As to how harmful that process was and if people were volunteering for it, he would have to look into later.

At the very least, Kissling seemed to have gone through the process with his mind intact.

After the deal was struck, Kissling turned to Vermillion.

"Will your organisation stand as guarantor for this compact?"

"It will," Vermillion said. "We will take on the protection of Hiro Asano and his people, as well as enforce the other stipulations, should either party choose to contravene this agreement."

"Very well," Kissling said, standing up. "I'm glad we didn't have to go through any unpleasantness."

Vermillion and Jason also got to their feet.

"I would not consider your marching a small army of your drones through one of my places of business to be without unpleasantness," Vermillion said. "Although you avoided anything drastic, do not expect this to go unanswered."

Kissling frowned but nodded his acknowledgement. He led his people downstairs and away, while Jason and Vermillion watched through the window.

"How long were you in action?" Vermillion asked.

"In action?" Jason asked.

"I've fought in three wars," Vermillion said. "One as a human, one otherwise, and one half and half. I know what a man fresh from a life of constant battle looks like."

"Half a year," Jason said softly.

"Did you win?"

"Yeah. I had to die to get there, but we won."

"You died?"

"I'm trying to give it up," Jason said. "I'm worried that dying is becoming habit forming."

"Habit forming?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "Coming back from the dead is kind of my thing."

"You are an odd man, Jason Asano."

"You're a vampire," Jason said.

"It's a good time to be a vampire," Vermillion said. "Bram Stoker was a debacle and the less said about Bela Lugosi the better, but Anne Rice and *Twilight* really turned things around."

"Really? *Twilight*?"

"*Twilight* was fantastic for us."

They watched Kissling and his people climb into a series of SUVs and drive off.

"So, who do you think sent Kissling our way?" Jason asked. "Why did he approach here instead of the townhouse where I'm staying?"

"My guess would be that they were operating on very limited information."

"The obvious culprit is our friend Victor," Jason said. "If he can provoke the EOA into attacking you and me together, it draws two reluctant but powerful allies to his side."

"Possibly," Vermillion said, "but perhaps not probably. While Victor likes to amplify his larrikin persona to make others underestimate him, he is, in reality, both careful and deliberate. Setting the EOA on us would be a desperate gamble that could easily alienate the very people he's trying to ally with. Desperate gambles aren't the way he does things."

"Maybe he's desperate enough," Jason said.

"I still think not," Vermillion said. "Kissling won't be a big shot in the EOA. If he wasn't hungry to prove himself, he never would have risked this blowing up in his face. Whoever put him onto us most likely knew this and that's beyond Victor's knowledge of EOA members."

"Then who? You think the Network has found out about a rogue new magician?"

"No," Vermillion said. "That would be Annabeth Tilden's call and she definitely isn't stupid enough to provoke the Cabal like that."

"Then who is?"

"Only low-level idiots with ambitions above their station, like Kissling. No, I think that whoever sent Kissling our way doesn't fear the Cabal because they're part of it."

"Internal strife?"

"The Cabal is like an old, aristocratic family," Vermillion said. "To outsiders, we present a united front. Within, however, is turmoil, ambition, and backstabbing. We're the most fractious of the three major factions because we have history enough that some internal squabbling always takes place within a broader context."

"So you think this wasn't really about me," Jason said. "You think it's about you."

"Most likely," Vermillion said. "I'm afraid some of my fellows are looking at you as an opportunity to advance at my expense."

Two vampires met in a booth, in an upscale basement bar with old wood and dark lighting.

“Kissling was a disappointment,” one of them said. His clothes were as sleek as his youthful features and slick, dark hair.

“It was always less likely to work than not,” the other said. He looked to be a well-preserved middle age, with distinguished salt-and-pepper hair and a grey suit that complemented without being ostentatious. “I’m surprised Kissling even took the bait, to be honest. He’s more hungry than I thought.”

“So, what now?” the younger one asked. “Do we just let it go?”

“Of course not. If that essence magician really is an independent operator, that means there’s a source for new magic outside of Network channels. I’m not willing to let Vermillion take all the credit for bringing that into the Cabal.”

“Then what?”

“I think we need to see what this essence magician is capable of,” the older one said. “Let’s throw something at him and see how he handles it.”

“Like what?”

“The Blood Riders.”

The younger vampire looked askance at the elder.

“I think that is a very bad idea,” he said.

“The Blood Riders are being left to rot,” the older vampire said. “It doesn’t matter what happens to them.”

“My concern isn’t what happens to them,” the younger vampire said. “My concern is what they’ll do. They’re desperate after being cut off from their blood supply.”

“Which is why they’ll do what they’re told, if they think there’s a fresh supply on offer.”

“I don’t think they’re stable,” the younger one said. “Using them is courting disaster.”

Calmly and smoothly, so as not to alarm with sudden movement, the older one drew a pistol and shot the younger in the head.

“I just knew you’d be a tattletale.”

He put two bullets in the heart and two more in the head.

“That should hold you until I can find a saw.”

TIME TO RIP OFF THE BAND-AID

"So, that's the long and the short of it," Jason said. "The EOA buy you out. Generously. I know it's heavy-handed of me to take control of your affairs like this, but this is the only safe way out. It also means I can avoid killing a bunch of people."

Jason and Hiro were in Hiro's sprawling apartment. After Jason explained the arrangements he had made, Hiro spent a long time processing it in silence. Jason waited patiently.

"You've learned more about the EOA than before, haven't you?" Hiro finally said.

"Yes," Jason answered. "They aren't something that Victor Tollman can resist. He just doesn't have the tools. Unless people like Vermillion and myself choose to step in, and that would take more than just us."

"At which point, it wouldn't be a matter of stopping someone from taking over but choosing who does," Hiro reasoned.

"Yes. In any case, neither Vermillion nor I will be lending our assistance, let alone anyone else."

Hiro absently rubbed a hand over his mouth as he continued to think things through.

"Did you ever happen to find out what EOA stands for?"

"Engineers of Ascension," Jason said.

"Sounds like a cult."

"Not quite, but I sense a little bit of that flavour," Jason said. "I've had some experience with cults."

"You have experience with cults?"

“I’ve run into a couple,” Jason said. “One was the kind who live out in the desert and eat people. The other was more about your classic religious extremism.”

“Terrorists?”

“Basically, yeah.”

“I have to admit, I’m really curious about your time away,” Hiro said. “How did you get those scars, for example?”

Jason had two visible scars on his face, where fragments of star seed had pushed their way out of his body. There was also one at the base of his throat that occasionally poked out from the top of his shirt. The marks that experience left on his soul were now scars on his body, mostly hidden under his clothes.

“There was a local crime lord,” Jason said.

“You told me you had a run-in with someone like that.”

“I did something he didn’t like, so he had me kidnapped and handed over to someone rather extreme. He knew that... let’s call him a person, would do worse to me than anything the crime lord could dream up.”

“Were you…?”

“Tortured,” Jason said. “To be honest, I was unconscious for most of it.”

“Those aren’t your only scars,” Hiro realised.

“There might be one or two more. I got lucky, though. The bad guys had some kind of falling out. One of their henchmen did a runner and they were afraid he was going to tell people where I was.”

“And they were right?”

“Yeah. The henchman had tried to kill me once, but I let him live. He was apparently the live-by-a-code type. So, while the bad guys were getting into it over what to do, I had a chance to get free.”

“What happened to them?”

“I caught the crime lord and he caught the bad end of the barbaric local legal system. The torture guy got away, but he was way too big a deal for me to handle anyway. I did manage to scuttle some very big plans of his, later. A lot of his time, resources and people went down the drain. I still couldn’t touch him, but I managed to hurt his interests, at least. It’s a better chance than most get.”

“I knew you’d been through some things.”

“I’m looking forward to telling you more,” Jason said. “Once you’re out of the EOA’s path, I’ll be more comfortable about sharing some secrets.

You aren't going to fight me on this deal, are you, Uncle?"

"No," Hiro said wearily. "Honestly, it's a relief. I've felt the changes coming for a while; I knew something was different about it. It feels like the pressure is constantly building and I'd like to get out before something blows up."

"I'm glad you feel that way," Jason said. "I'm just one man and I don't think I can protect you against a whole organisation. Even if I hadn't made this deal, I'd be stuck with the choice of leaving you defenceless or bringing even more of them down on you as they try to deal with me. I'm glad that Vermillion was there to broker it, because I'm still all sharp edges after too much fighting. Left to my own devices, I would have made things worse."

"I feel bad not standing by Victor, though," Hiro said. "He's been good to me."

"Vermillion and I are going to talk to Victor," Jason said. "We won't support him in resisting the inevitable, but we'll back him up if we can convince him to facilitate a smooth transition. With us standing behind him, he can do very well out of this. As will you."

"I'll be starting over."

"But you'll be starting strong. You'll have a lot of capital and a lot of business experience. I have no doubt that you'll land on your feet. I'm hoping you'll come up the coast with me. The family will be happy to have you out of your sordid life of hookers and blow."

"Your entire understanding of crime comes from eighties action movies, doesn't it?" Hiro chuckled.

"I'm learning," Jason said defensively. "Just today, I discovered that not all gang-bangers are white guys in torn leather vests."

"I've actually been thinking about packing it all in for a while," Hiro said. "Heading up the coast, buying up some land and opening a resort. I know good contractors and how to wrangle a land deal. I have some connections that could really help me out. It's an idea I've been playing with, ever since things started getting weird."

"That's a good plan. Probably. My plans don't always go great."

"I don't want to leave without settling things properly with Victor, though. It feels like running away. I want to go with you when you meet with him."

Jason thought it over for a moment.

“Alright,” he said.

Vermillion was wearing a blousy black shirt and painted-on jeans as he stumbled, blood drunk, down a hallway in the back of a basement club he owned. His limbs were awkwardly entangled with a trio of very pretty young people, two women and a man. He led them from a backroom lounge into what looked oddly like an office break room. The difference was that everything was black, from the paint on the walls, to the table, chairs, and cabinetry. Even the appliances like the coffee machine, refrigerator, and microwave.

This was Vermillion’s aftercare room for people he had just drunk blood from, which he’d based on what the Red Cross did after a blood donation. He made sure all three people had biscuits and juice before arranging them rides home.

After he sent them off, he went to his private suite that wasn’t hideous black decor and stripped off his clothes. He peeled away all the black leather and showered gel from his hair and sweat from his body. He hated playing lord of the night, but blood groupies had their expectations.

He was out of the shower and changing into clothes that he was willing to be seen wearing in public when something unusual appeared in front of him. It was like a tablet screen, except that his phone and tablet were sitting on the dresser.

- You have received a voice chat request from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

“That’s highly unusual. Er… accept?”

“Craig,” Jason’s voice came into his head. Vermillion had experienced telepathy before, although this was the first time it came with an operating system.

“Mr Asano?”

“Let’s stick with Jason, shall we, Craig? Don’t want to be confused with my uncle, especially when things are delicate. I’m going to bring Uncle

Hiro along when we go see Victor, so can you swing by his place so we can all go together?"

"I know where it is," Vermillion said. "That's a good idea. Victor respects Hiro's opinion, and knowing that Hiro has taken the out will make it easier for Victor to do the same."

"Unless it backfires and Victor sees Hiro as a traitor," Jason said, playing devil's advocate.

"It's worth the risk," Vermillion said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Vermillion was back in tall, dark, and mysterious mode when he arrived on Hiro's balcony by means unknown. He wore a dark suit, his hair expertly groomed. Taika and Hiro did not notice his arrival until Jason opened the balcony door.

"Out of curiosity, do you need a formal invitation?" Jason asked.

"Only as a matter of manners."

Jason and Vermillion stared at each other.

"You're not going to invite me in, are you?"

"You could be lying. If I was a vampire, I'd be lying all the time. Sure, I don't need an invitation, but it would be the polite thing. No, that's not stench of death. Of course, tomato juice coagulates."

Vermillion looked at him from under raised eyebrows.

"Alright, come in," Jason said.

Hiro and Taika were nervous, but Vermillion's aura was toned down from the aggressive and intimidating norm he employed against his criminal associates. Both of the normal men seemed to be waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Shall we?" Jason asked, gesturing at the elevator. As they rode down, Taika kept glancing at Vermillion.

"How'd you get up on that balcony, bro?"

"Taika!" Hiro scolded.

"No, I've got to ask, boss. There's some spooky stuff going on lately and I'm not sure I can protect you properly."

"I respect your work ethic," Vermillion complimented, "but a man in my position keeps his capabilities as secret as he can."

Jason silently nodded his agreement. He had been very careful about using his portal arch because it was a powerful trump card, especially when no one knew that he had it. After testing to make sure it wasn't impaired by the weak local magic, he had refrained from using it again, relying on Shade for transport.

Taika took the wheel of Hiro's large town car, with Hiro next to him in the passenger seat. That left their backs to Vermillion in the rear with Jason. Although Vermillion's aura was subdued, out of courtesy to Jason, he still maintained a certain level of unnerving pressure. He had an image to uphold, after all.

"Could we swap aura manipulation tips later?" Jason asked quietly. He modulated his voice low enough that only enhanced senses would make it out clearly. "I'm pretty good at using my aura as a weapon, but I don't have a lot of practice using it on regular people, so it's bit of a blunt instrument. I appreciate the nuance of your fine control in projecting on normals."

"I'd like that. I'd love to pick up some of your high-end control. It's like an iron sphere."

"Sounds good."

"I have a club full of blood groupies who get off on aura manipulation. You'll get all the practice you can handle."

"Are they a bunch of emo kids?"

"Some," Vermillion admitted. "There are all manner of thrill-seekers in my circle, though. Hedonism comes in many flavours."

Hiro and Taika rode in silence, the unintelligible murmurings in the back making them all the more nervous. Then the murmuring stopped as Jason spoke out loud.

"What are those auras?" Jason asked. "I don't recognise them."

"What?" Taika asked.

"Just be ready to drive," Jason told him.

"I am driving, bro."

"I mean really drive."

"What was that about auras?" Taika asked. "Are there crystal therapists coming after us?"

Vermillion let out a dark chuckle that chilled Hiro and Taika to the bone.

"You were going to tell them after the EOA deal was done, right?" he asked.

“Yeah, but I think it’s time to rip off the band-aid,” Jason said. “There’s at least two dozen of them, so I don’t think holding back will be an option.”

“Twenty-nine, by my count.”

“Twenty-nine what?” Hiro asked.

“Blood servants,” Vermillion explained. “People who have drunk the blood of a vampire without going through the turning process.”

“Did you just say vampire?” Hiro asked.

“I don’t know about vampires or whatever,” Taika said as the car sped up, “but there’s a bunch of bikers riding up on us.”

In the thick traffic, it had taken Taika a while to notice the bikers converging on them. Although he had sensed their auras for a while, Vermillion now turned to look through the back window.

“The Blood Riders,” he said. “They’re a motorcycle gang entirely turned into blood servants. My people forced the ones behind it to cut the bikers off. It seems that someone is trying to get some final work out of them before the strength leaves them.”

“Does that help us?” Jason asked.

“No,” Vermillion said. “Vampire blood is addictive, which is how vampires control their servants. Most likely, they were told that if they deal with us, their supply gets restored. They were probably told to be discreet, but blood servants get very focused when their supply is on the line. Once the effects start wearing off, they become aggressive and unstable.”

“Not so good at following directions,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Vermillion said. “I’d bet that whoever sent them hasn’t dealt with desperate blood servants before. They’re nice and obedient while the blood keeps coming, but they get very stroppy when it stops. Otherwise, they’d never come at us in the open like this. The Network is not going to be happy, however it plays out.”

“Uh, Jason,” Taika said. “There’s two more bikes.”

“More bikers?” Vermillion asked.

“No, bro,” Taika said, sounding off-kilter as he watched the mirrors. “These look like your bike and the riders all look like they’re wearing a big black coats or something.”

“That’s my ride,” Jason said.

“Your ride?” Hiro asked, then goggled as Jason was shrouded in dark mist. At the same time, bullets started hitting the car.

BULLETS, BIKES AND BLOOD

Hiro flinched as a bullet shattered the back window of the car.

"Is anyone hit?" he asked, ducking down as he turned to check on Jason and Vermillion in the back. Vermillion was rubbing the back of his head, looking disgruntled. In spite of the sudden chaos, Hiro was startled to see a figure draped in shadow where his nephew had been.

"Taika," Jason's voice came from the impenetrable darkness of the hood. "Keep driving and I'll do my best to keep them off you. Hiro, call the police."

"You seriously think the police can help?" Hiro asked incredulously.

"No, but a bunch of bikies attacked your car. You don't want to be the guy who didn't call the police."

"What do you mean, keep them off me?" Taika asked wildly.

The traffic along the multi-lane toll road had turned into chaos as the gunfire erupted from the bikers pulling out pistols and even sawn-off shotguns. Accidents were taking place already as cars swerved into one another in the mad panic to accelerate away. Some even wiped out the bikers that were the source of the chaos.

More bullets struck Hiro's car. Hiro hunkered down, but that wasn't an option for the hefty Taika. Vermillion shifted position to shield the big man from the shots coming from behind. He winced when struck by gunfire, but while the non-magical bullets dug into his flesh, they were stopped dead by the strength of his bones. His vampiric regeneration pushed the bullets back out quickly, in any case.

Fortunately, firing a gun from a moving bike at a moving vehicle was not a recipe for pinpoint accuracy. More bullets hit random vehicles or nothing at all than landed on Hiro's car. Even so, the sheer number of bikers firing off shots meant that both Vermillion and Jason were struck multiple times. Jason's cloak, however, shot out tendrils of shadow-stuff that intercepted the bullets, stopping them dead.

"Good thing they don't have magic bullets," Vermillion said.

"You can get magic bullets?" Jason asked.

"The Network can make them. I'm not sure how."

"Small mercies, then," Jason said. "I'm more curious about where they got that many handguns. This is Australia."

"Left over from the smuggling ring that was shut down a few years back," Vermillion said. "They were having them sent from Austria to Sydney through the mail."

"How do you get guns through the mail?"

"I remember that," Hiro said. He had pushed his seat right back and was doing his best to squeeze himself under the dash to make as small a profile as possible. "Victor rose up not long after the cops busted the whole thing open. People appreciated someone who could keep a lid on things."

The two big black motorcycles and their shadowy riders pulled up on either side of Hiro's car.

"Are you sure they're with you, bro?" Taika asked nervously.

"Yep. I'm going to go do something about these bikies. Uncle Hiro, get right down."

"Way ahead of you," Hiro said in a voice shot with adrenaline and fear.

Two shadowy shapes moved away from Taika and Hiro as the bodies Shade had hidden in their shadows returned to Jason. Jason opened the door of the moving car and the two bodies slipped out to take the form of a third bike and shadowy rider, already on the move. That made three sleek black motorcycles racing alongside the rapidly accelerating car.

Now six of Shade's bodies were either bikes or riders, with the seventh and last being Jason's own shadow, which rose up and engulfed him. Jason immediately emerged from one of the dark riders on the back of a bike. The rider diminished to form Jason's new shadow as Jason took its place on the back of the bike. Under Shade's control, the bike didn't so much as waver during the process. As he raced on the back of Shade's motorcycle form,

Jason's cloak lit up with stars as it flared out behind him like the tail of a comet.

Jason had been a decent rider, once upon a time. As a boy, he had spent a lot of time riding on his Uncle Robbo's farm. It had been a number of years since then and those were dirt bikes, as opposed to the powerful, oversized street bike form that Shade had assumed.

Riding on asphalt was easier than the rough dirt trails and loose sand he had experience with, but the wild traffic and gun-toting bikers were an exciting new hazard. Jason left the control mostly to Shade, leaving his hands free and broadly guiding his familiar by shifting his weight.

Two bikers rode up on either side of Jason, firing pistols. Despite the cloak largely trailing behind him, it still shot out tendrils to intercept bullets from all angles. The bikers were ostensibly out of reach, but Jason extended his shadow arms in each direction, grabbing the handlebars of each bike. He yanked them hard to the side, causing the front wheels of both to turn sharply. At speed, this caused the bikes to flip immediately, leaving Shade to deftly slalom between the tumbling bikes before swerving in the direction of more bikers.

Jason had used his clothes-changing ability to slip on his combat robes while he had still been in the car. Unlike scholarly robes, these were designed for combat, so while they were loose-fitting, it was not so much they got tangled up in the wheels. The bespoke outfit had sheaths across the chest for his throwing darts. They were incorporated directly into the custom armour, eschewing the need for the bandoleer he had used at iron rank.

Taking a dart marked with a green cord, he threw it into the wheel of an approaching motorcycle. The bike was immediately tangled in conjured vines, flipping over violently. Using a shadow arm, he jammed a red-tagged dart into the fuel tank of another bike, which exploded impressively.

Their auras told Jason that the bikies were at the low end of bronze; they would likely survive a motorcycle crash. A motorcycle explosion, however, maybe not. He had not returned to his home world the same as he left, however, and had no qualms about killing these men.

Jason's attitude was that if someone came after him, that was the life of an interdimensional man of mystery, so he wouldn't hold it against them. Indiscriminately attacking the people around him was where he drew the line.

The traffic had started to clear, as accidents caused obstructions and lucky drivers managed to escape down exits from the toll road. As a result, the remaining cars were clear to accelerate to even more dangerous speeds, only to catch up with the traffic ahead, triggering a fresh round of chaos.

Jason's shadow again rose up into the form of a shadow rider and Jason vanished into it, emerging from another, bringing him closer to more bikers. He reached out with a shadow arm and punched a biker in the face before snatching the man's sawn-off shotgun. The disrupted bike crashed while Jason's shadow arm retracted, delivering the gun to his real hand in a firing grip.

He hadn't fired a shotgun since he was a teenager, again on his uncle's farm, but the cut-down double-barrel wasn't a complicated weapon. Using Shade's superior mobility and control, he positioned himself to fire into the front wheel of one bikie then another, causing a pair of crashes before stowing the empty gun in his inventory.

After that, Jason started testing his abilities. He started with blood magic, which he knew to be effective against lesser vampires. Blood servants should, if anything, have even less resistance.

"*Bleed for me.*"

Jason's guess was borne out as a bikie started convulsing, blood spraying from his mouth and nose. He lost control of his speeding bike, which toppled over into a crash. For the next, Jason tried a different spell.

"*Feed me your sins.*"

Jason was unsure if the vampire blood in the blood servants would count as an affliction, but suspected it might, given Vermillion's description of the side effects. This proved to be the case as the biker's life force left its body. It started bright red, with a darker red tint that was almost black; it drained out and into Jason's outstretched hand. Jason sensed the bikie's aura drop from the low end of bronze, through iron and down to normal as it did.

The holy afflictions Jason's power left behind inflicted transcendent damage with Jason's bronze-rank power on the suddenly normal-rank enemy. The biker's body lit up like a thermite reaction, cutting a trail of blinding light as his bike continued forward until it toppled over.

Jason didn't restrict himself to stealing guns and flinging spells. With a biker coming up behind him, Jason activated the gliding power of his cloak, the momentum lifting him up into the air off his bike. His own bike raced ahead as the biker appeared under him. Jason extended his shadow arms to

grab the handlebars, pulling himself down to land on the seat, behind the startled biker. He shoved the biker off and assumed control of the motorcycle.

Jason laughed like a madman, almost surprised the outlandish manoeuvre had worked. His bronze-ranked attributes had made it possible, the spatial awareness of his spirit and the agility of his speed attribute combining to superhuman effect.

Having cleared about a third of the bikers, Jason was momentarily clear of the rest. He took the chance to glance around and look at how well he had distracted the bikers from his uncle's car. Most of them were now focused on him, although a handful were still in pursuit of the car.

Through the back window, he could see Vermillion, still body-blocking bullets for Taika in the driver's seat. Jason watched as a biker drew close to the rear of the car. He sensed threads of magic emerging from the window, originating at the tips of Vermillion's fingers.

The threads were so thin as to be invisible to the naked eye, but the magic imbued into the threads was clear to Jason. The same was clearly not true of the biker, who ignored them weaving around his arms, legs, torso, and neck. Suddenly, the threads went taut, slicing through flesh and bone like a knife through vegetables. The bloody wreck that was formerly a biker tumbled to the road in neatly cut slices.

Jason swerved around the remains on the motorcycle he had commandeered from one of the bikers. It was not his familiar, so he was forced to control it on his own as he recklessly pushed towards the closest surviving biker. He jumped up, briefly standing on the bike in a dangerous balancing act before leaping to the next biker.

His foot landed on the handlebars, which he used as a stepping stone to leap again, pushing off powerfully. One of Shade's bike forms manoeuvred under Jason as the disrupted biker wobbled dangerously. Jason swerved in to finish the job with a backhand to the face. The biker lost control and crashed, Shade expertly avoiding being caught up in it.

"We're about to have eyes on us," Shade warned from Jason's shadow. Jason looked up to spot an approaching white helicopter bearing a news network logo.

"Well, at least they can't see my face. I'd best tone down the magic."

The starlight glow of his cloak dimmed to black.

Annabeth Tilden was eating lunch and playing go with her wife in the comfortable private lounge in the rear of her wife's art gallery when her phone rang. They looked at the phone on the coffee table and saw it was Anna's deputy, Ketevan.

"At least it isn't two in the morning, this time," Susan said.

"Keti, what is it?" Anna answered. Her eyes went wide at the response. She borrowed her wife's laptop to pull up a live news stream. Soon they were watching coverage of a wild, running battle between motorcyclists on a Sydney toll road.

There was a swath of leather-clad bikers on low-slung chopper-style motorcycles, many of whom fired handguns at vehicles in front of them. Most eye-catching was a man on a huge street cycle. He was wearing a hooded cloak that trailed through the air behind him in constant threat of being dragged into the back wheel of the large motorcycle.

There were flashes of gunfire, none of which fazed the dark figure, as he rapidly dispatched the bikers by means hard to make out. The news camera seemed to have a hard time keeping the man in focus, but every time he swerved into the direction of another bike, the biker crashed spectacularly.

"Dear gods," Susan said as the footage cut to the trail of crashed cars and bikes left in the rolling battle's wake.

Anna took a long, steeling breath, the phone still held to her head.

"I'm coming right in," she said over the phone.

Even in a blood frenzy, the remaining bikers finally realised that their pursuit was futile. Jason likewise took off, flanked by the dark riders. He didn't return to Hiro's car under the gaze of the eye in the sky, but instead opened a voice chat with Vermillion.

"How are they?" Jason asked. "And you."

"Your uncle and his man are intact, but my suit is done for," Vermillion said sadly. "I did take quite a few bullets, though. I really need someone to eat."

“You mean something to eat,” Jason said.

“That’s what I said.”

“Can you deliver Taika and my uncle to the cops safely?”

“Of course,” Vermillion said. “I can liaise with the Network, who I imagine are spitting blood right now. I’ll have to face the music at some point anyway, given it was blood servants that attacked us. They will be looking for an explanation from my organisation, since we’re the ones with the blood servants.”

“What will their attitude be towards me?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” Vermillion said. “You are thoroughly beyond my breadth of experience. It probably depends on how much that news helicopter saw. I’ll try and set up a meeting on neutral ground.”

“That would be good,” Jason said. “I owe you one for looking out for my uncle.”

The helicopter continued to trail Jason and the dark riders until they moved under an overpass and didn’t emerge out the other side.

A GOOD FRIEND AND A VERY BAD ENEMY

A sleep-deprived Annabeth Tilden was shotgunning coffee.

"More," she demanded hoarsely as she finished, sending her assistant to replenish her supply. One of the side effects of being an essence user was an ability to resist the effects of caffeine, leading many coffee drinkers to ramp up their intake. This was bad enough at category one, but if she ascended to category two, coffee would no longer have any power to perk her up. As it was, she was adding stamina potion to each cup like shots of whisky.

Anna was not in her office but in a conference room several floors down. She was snatching a couple of minutes rest before her next meeting, annoyed that the magic in her system purged the caffeine as fast as she could imbibe it. She was slumped forward, elbows on the desk as she rubbed her temples, which did nothing to alleviate the stress headache.

The door opened to admit the Cabal representative, Vermillion. She had actually come to sympathise with the man over the course of the day, despite his organisation being the source of her current tribulations. Not only had he been caught up in it directly but, like her, he had the highest-ranking members of his organisation dropping dissatisfaction onto him from a great height. Also like her, it was his job to somehow sort the whole mess out.

The footage had become an international news story. A violent gun battle on the streets of Sydney. A mysterious figure leaping from motorcycle to motorcycle amidst a hail of bullets, taking on a notorious biker gang by the dozen before vanishing without a trace. There were countless bizarre details, all of which were being overanalysed by media organisations around the world at that very moment.

Why did the rider seem impervious to bullets? Was his strange outfit some kind of body armour? What was the large, intimidating motorcycle he was riding? It was powerful, agile and did not conform to any model of bike that anyone could find. It had to be either heavily modified or completely custom.

The only thing that barely salvaged the debacle was that while there were a lot of phone camera recordings coming out, on top of the news helicopter footage, barely a few seconds of clear footage was captured. Be it the news camera or the phone cameras of the people involved, none were able to focus correctly on the enigmatic rider as he dealt with the bikers one by one. Aside from a few scattered moments, every record had strange, unfocused distortion.

This made the few clear images get all the more attention. The strange spectacle of a biker seeming to spontaneously combust, burning up from the inside atop his bike, had been posted online and picked up by the news.

Another short scrap of phone footage was causing particular problems. By the time the news helicopter started recording, the rider's cloak was black, trailing out behind him. Someone in one of the cars, though, had captured several seconds of the cloak lit up with shifting stars before their recording likewise became distorted. It was the only clear image of the rider, their unusual outfit, and their unique bike. Most importantly, it was the only clear image of the rider trailing a comet tail of stars behind him.

The inevitable comparisons to Batman Anna could live with, since it muddied the waters. After the footage of the cloak of stars appeared online, though, the figure was dubbed the Starlight Rider by the media. Immediate comparisons were drawn to the stories of an angel made of stars from just a few days earlier, the incident that became known as the Sydney Children's Hospital Miracle. With the connection made between the SCH Miracle and the rolling gun fight, Anna's job was made all the harder.

Vermillion not only had to work with her to keep a lid on things, but also bear the responsibility of the Blood Riders instigating the latest and most public debacle. As much as she hated her situation, she was glad not to be in his shoes. This whole affair could—and probably would—get her demoted. She had heard stories about the ways that the Cabal showed their displeasure. While they were only rumours, she did not envy Vermillion, whatever the truth. Her sympathy for the man did not mean she would let up in getting what she needed from the Cabal, however.

“Well?” she demanded of him.

For his part, Vermillion was having as bad an afternoon as Anna. A figure from the murky reaches of the Cabal’s upper levels had arrived to take charge, reducing Vermillion himself to a glorified message boy. It left him off the hook for cleaning up the huge mess, but also without a means to redeem himself after what happened under his watch. He would be held to account for the Network being handed the very last thing the Cabal wanted them to have: a justification to interfere with the Cabal’s affairs.

“A delegation of my people has agreed to come in to answer for the Blood Riders,” Vermillion said.

“When?”

“Our own investigation is ongoing. You will have answers when we have answers to give.”

“And how long will this investigation take?”

“We are confident we know who did this,” Vermillion said. “They have already been taken in hand and we are confirming the details now.”

“That quickly?”

“It was not a grand scheme. It was the ambition of a fool who did not realise what they were setting in motion.”

“And how do I know that you aren’t just drumming up a scapegoat?”

“As you know,” Vermillion said, “we do not like outside influence in our affairs.”

“You have always been fastidious about handling internal affairs privately,” Anna acknowledged.

“In this instance, however, we recognise that our internal affairs have significantly impacted the Network’s core tenets. I’ve been told that we’ll be handing the perpetrator completely over to you.”

“Perpetrator, singular? You expect us to believe that one person is responsible for all of it?”

“The person in question did try to rope in an ally,” Vermillion said. “As best we can determine, this prospective ally immediately saw how wrong the affair would go and tried to stop it. He was killed for trying to interfere. You don’t have to take our word for it, though. You can use whatever means are at your disposal to get the truth from the man in question.”

“Any means? You’re truly giving him up instead of just a supervised interrogation?”

“Normally, we protect our own,” Vermillion said, “but this man has violated our own fundamental rules. No one is happy about how these events have gone. You will not be expected to show this person the courtesy you would otherwise extend to our members. How you question him and what to do with him when you’re done is up to you.”

“And if we choose to give him back?”

“That would be one of the crueller choices,” Vermillion said.

The decision had been made to cut out the cancer and leave it to the Network, in hope of avoiding more painful procedures down the line. The man in question was never a Cabal elite; he was a relative made into a vampire out of compassion. Without being turned, he would have died from a fatal medical condition.

Anna was satisfied with the Cabal’s gesture, at least until she actually got her hands on the man in question to learn more. She turned the conversation to another topic.

“Why did you just let these blood servants keep running around?” she asked. “You had to understand that depriving them of blood would make them dangerous and volatile. I’m surprised your people didn’t kill them.”

“It was discussed,” Vermillion said. “In the end, it was Cabal members who approached the gang with promises and offers. Even if the members in question were far outside what would have been permitted, the Cabal was nonetheless responsible. Killing these men for becoming the thing we made them was ethically unsound.”

“You’re going to talk to me about mercy?” Anna asked. “Even disregarding the dead bikers, we have six civilian fatalities, and we aren’t even done counting the injured. This disaster has been broadcast to every corner of the globe, on my watch. Everyone from the Steering Committee to the Network Council to the goddamn Prime Minister has crawled up my arse and formed an orderly queue at the ‘punch Anna in the colon’ booth. That’s what your mercy has done.”

“Some violent lashing out would not fall outside the expectations of a known criminal motorcycle gang,” Vermillion explained. “If not instigated to this, they would have remained contained. I was already in the process of arranging to have them arrested so they could go through the withdrawal period in custody, where they could be locked up without hurting anyone.”

“That didn’t really work out, did it?”

“No,” Vermillion conceded. “Unfortunately, I was overruled on who should administer the winding down of the Blood Rider project. The one who started all this was the same one placed in charge of closing out the Blood Rider affair. It was meant to save face and be a lesson.”

“That seems like a recipe for disaster,” Anna said. “And now that recipe has been followed to the letter.”

“Quite,” Vermillion agreed.

“What about this rogue essence magician?” Anna asked.

“He is not opposed to meeting you,” Vermillion said. “I had already advised him to seek you out prior to this affair.”

“Out of the kindness of your heart, I suppose.”

“A weapon you are not equipped to wield is at least as much a danger to you as to your enemy,” Vermillion said. “I don’t know where this man came from, but he’s a naked edge, fresh from battle. A well-sharpened edge, at that. He went through the bikers like a chainsaw through pudding. Thirty blood servants and I don’t think he even saw them as a threat. It’s almost like he was testing out different ways to kill them, to see which ones worked. As it turns out, all of them did.”

“So, he’s a maniac.”

“I told you, Mrs Tilden, he’s fresh from some kind of battlefield. His instincts are still to react to any threat with definitive force.”

“You think being bloodthirsty gets him a pass?”

“I think that if we can help him rehabilitate, he’ll be a valuable ally,” Vermillion said. “If we forcefully suppress him, on the other hand, we’ll make a profoundly dangerous enemy. I suggest trying to understand him before taking action.”

“Well, if it’s understanding I need,” Anna said, “I know where to start.”

In a police station, Vermillion and Anna watched Hiro from the next room, through the interrogation room security camera. Hiro’s body language revealed none of the turmoil they could both read in his aura. From the moment he arrived in the police station, Hiro had played confused victim flawlessly. Once he found himself in an interrogation room, he had asked for a lawyer and said not another word.

“Hiro Asano has not been inducted into the secrets of our world,” Vermillion said. “By your own rules, that makes him hands-off.”

“I’ll acknowledge that if his nephew kept him in the dark like you said, that’s a good sign that the boy can act with decorum,” Anna conceded. “Will he continue to do so after today, though? He’s certainly going to tell his uncle, now.”

“Of course he will,” Vermillion said. “But Hiro hasn’t been told yet. Is today the day to play fast and loose with the rules?”

“There is such a thing as discretionary power, Mr Vermillion.”

“Mrs Tilden. You, like everyone else, saw this man’s nephew take apart a magically empowered gang of hardened bikers like they were a nice, crumbly cheddar. What you didn’t see was how he reacted when that situation began. He wasn’t scared when they came on us. He wasn’t worried, or even concerned. He was annoyed, maybe even a little excited.”

“He killed a dozen people.”

“Easily, and without hesitation. I would be very careful about how you treat his uncle.”

“You need to bring him to us,” Anna said.

“I told you that I’ve already agreed to set up a meeting. We can discuss the terms of that meeting now, if you like.”

“Terms? He can’t go running around using magic to kill people on television. He comes to us or we go get him.”

“Despite the nature of his power, Mrs Tilden, he isn’t one of your people. Somehow he gained the power that only your people wield without learning of your organisation before I told him about it yesterday.”

“Do you think I care? Do you think that the people I answer to care?”

Vermillion turned his head from the viewing window to look at Anna, his face softening.

“Mrs Tilden. Anna. We’ve known each other for a number of years and have, I think, a good working relationship. As such, I hope you take this advice in the spirit it is given: Do not provoke Jason Asano. I’ve seen only a little of his power and a little of his mind, but it has been my experience that he treats kind with kind. Show him courtesy and you’ll receive it in turn. Come at him with force and you might end up smeared across a highway on the news.”

“The Network is not a gang hopped up on vampire blood, Craig. If we decided to deal with him, there’s nothing he can do to stop us. Even if he’s

inclined to stand against us, he won't try once he realises the magnitude of what he's up against."

"Perhaps," Vermillion said, "but I don't think so. He may have the blood of the Japanese, but he has the spirit of Ned Kelly."

"Ned Kelly made a stand against the authorities, getting friends, family and innocent bystanders killed in the process."

"And became a folk hero, none of which invalidates my point. In case it sways your decision, it is the official position of the Cabal that Jason Asano's liberty and independence be respected."

"How did you get your people to agree to that?"

"I convinced them that a favour today will pay dividends tomorrow. I strongly recommend that you take the same attitude."

"If the Cabal thinks they can use him to establish their own branch of essence magicians, they're in for disappointment."

"That kind of ambition is above my pay grade, Mrs Tilden, but if that is their intention, then I'm confident that you're correct. I'm simply of the opinion that Jason Asano will make a good friend and a very bad enemy."

Anna gave a weary sigh.

"Do you know where he is now?"

FLAVOUR TEXT

THE ART GALLERY DISPLAYED NO MORE SIGNAGE THAN A PLAQUE beside a nondescript door. It was the kind of place that if you didn't know it was there, then you weren't meant to. For many years, it had served as a money laundering operation for some of the Network's shadier revenue streams. Now that the government was secretly but wholeheartedly involved in the Network's activities, such clandestine operations were rarely necessary. The gallery was free to operate without dabbling in illegality.

Jason was strolling through, browsing the paintings. As he lingered in front of one, the gallery owner, Susan, approached. She was an elegant woman whom Jason judged to be in her late thirties or early forties. She cut an impressive figure of poise and grace, in appealing but understated attire.

"This is my wife's favourite piece," she said, joining him in looking over the piece. "Is there something in particular that you're looking for?"

"I'm looking to make a very specific statement."

"This piece is from Taverny's 'Seychelles Gothic' series, where he seeks to visually recontextualise the archipelago. This is a quintessential example of Taverny's use of framing and light contrast. If you told me what kind of statement you were looking to make, perhaps I could point you in the right direction. Only a fragment of the collection is on display, so I'm sure we can find something to fit your needs."

"My intention is to make a potent statement on the sanctity of family," he said. "I thought I would have more time to arrange things, but events are moving apace. Sadly, nuance must give way to blunt symbolism to make my position swift and explicit."

“I’m not sure that the Taverny sends that message,” she said. “I have a number of works that touch on the theme of family and may interest you.”

“It doesn’t have to be depicted in the art. Show me something unconventional,” he said. “Something whose very purchase makes it worthy of discussion.”

Susan gave him an assessing look. His suit was sharp and flattering, but also slightly strange. The cut defied contemporary trends in tiny ways; a lapel angle here, a seam line there. The result gave the odd illusion of an arrow in flight. The man wearing it was young and Asian, probably mixed-race. His accent was Australian, clearly educated, but with a rural twang he had mostly eliminated. His sharp features were slightly spoiled by a too-prominent chin, but his dark, penetrating eyes were compelling.

“I might have a work that interests you,” she said. “I cannot guarantee I can sell it to you, however.”

“Oh?”

“There is an unusual condition attached to this painting.”

She led him through to an office tucked discreetly into the rear of the gallery. Upon entering, he stopped dead still, eyes transfixed on a painting. It depicted four uniquely stylised pillars situated between two planets, on a background of stars. The content arrested his attention, and while it had no trace of magic, something about it left him completely convinced that it was not the work of an ordinary artist.

“The most enigmatic piece in the collection,” Susan said. “The artist is new and critical reaction is split. Some find her subjects prosaic, while others find her brushwork almost hypnotically beautiful. The two works in our possession were sent to us only days ago, by the artist herself.”

“Who is she?”

“The artist is as mysterious as her art,” Susan said. “We know almost nothing about her, not even her full name. She simply goes by Dawn.”

“How much?”

“There is no price,” Susan said. “We were sent two paintings by the artist, along with a generous service fee, on the condition that this one be hung and given to the person who can name the four pillars depicted within it. Extremely unusual conditions, as you can imagine.”

“What about the other picture?”

“That one is for sale, but only to the person who claims this one. As for how anyone is meant to know the names of the pillars—”

“Jason, Colin, Gordon, Shade,” he said without hesitation, not taking his eyes from the painting.

Susan was a woman of composure but flashed a startled expression.

“That’s right,” she said. “How did you know that?”

“Because I’m the subject. Show me the other painting.”

Hiro and Taika walked out of the police station to find Vermillion waiting for them in the parking lot. They were nervous but felt none of the bone-deep fear he normally induced. Since Jason had arrived, Vermillion had shown them nothing but politeness and respect, although he remained as mysterious as ever. Hiro spoke quietly to his lawyer, who quickly made himself scarce.

“Vermillion,” Hiro greeted. “Are you responsible for getting us out? I was worried once they put me in an interrogation room, but they released us surprisingly quickly.”

“As far as the civil authorities are concerned, you were just one more victim trying to escape,” Vermillion said. “By the time anyone started recording the incident, the bikers were primarily after your nephew and yours was just one of many vehicles attacked. The lack of firearms or other contraband in your car saved many awkward questions and I barely had to step in to see things smoothly through.”

“I told you, boss,” Taika said. “Not having guns will solve more problems than having them.”

“As for less conventional authorities,” Vermillion continued, “I have convinced them to leave you be, at least for the moment. It’s Jason they want to speak to.”

“Do you know where he is?” Hiro asked. “Is he all right?”

“He’s fine,” Vermillion said. “I’ve been keeping in contact with him via unconventional means, so he knows what’s happening and he’ll meet us shortly. For now, he’s sending a car. The police are keeping yours, for the moment. Because of the bullet holes.”

“Speaking of which,” Taika said, “we need to have a talk about what happened. Why aren’t you all shot up? What was that you were saying about vampires?”

Without Vermillion's aura pressing down on him, Taika's exasperation about the strangeness he had been caught up in came out.

"Jason has asked that I help him explain everything to you, given that there are certain gaps in his knowledge base," Vermillion said. "There are still things to be done first, however. I've rescheduled the meeting with Victor Tollman; we'll be going there directly from here."

"Can't that wait?" Hiro asked.

"No," Vermillion said. "Today's events are a riptide, creating dangerous waters that you can't see unless you know what you're looking for. Jason wants you out of those waters as quickly as possible, and I want the same for Victor. He's become something of a friend and I believe you have the best chance of persuading him to get out of the water before he drowns."

A black town car pulled up. It had sleek and aggressive lines, clearly a luxury car but not a model Hiro recognised.

"This is Jason's car," Taika said, having ridden in this variant of Shade in the past.

Hiro didn't even recognise the manufacturer's badge on the front, even after stepping up to examine it. It looked like a starry sky with a floating cloak containing a daylight sky. It didn't belong to any car maker he was familiar with, and he was familiar with most, at least at the high end.

He guessed that it was from one of the boutique companies that made short production runs of wildly overpriced custom cars. The license plate was in the thin, European style, white on black. He noticed the plate number: 5H4-D0W.

"Shadow?"

"What's that, boss?" Taika asked. "Oh, right, the plates. I noticed that too. The numbers for letters thing is a bit naff, though, right? It's not 2004."

Vermillion got in the back with Hiro, while Taika took the passenger seat.

"There's no driver," Hiro said. He had heard about Jason's self-driving car, but it was still startling when the car pulled into traffic with no one in the driver's seat. "Are we sure this is safe? I've heard these self-driving systems can go wrong when faced with unexpected situations."

"I think you'll find," a voice came from the dashboard, "that this self-driving system is quite capable of handling any situation you can imagine, along with many that you cannot."

"Boss, the car is talking," Taika said. "It's like *Team Knight Rider*."

"*Team* Knight Rider?" Hiro asked.

"Yeah, boss. It's the best one."

"It's really not," Hiro said.

"The best what?" Vermillion asked.

"TV show about talking cars," Hiro said.

"I don't watch television," Vermillion said.

"Bro, you're missing out. You know, if someone told me last week I'd be talking to you about *Team Knight Rider*, I'd have said they were crazy. You're all right, bro. It's a bit weird that you think vampires are real, though."

"They are," Vermillion said.

"You know any vampires?" Taika asked.

"I am a vampire."

"The sun's out, bro. If you were a vampire, you'd catch fire or blow up or something."

"It would be best, I think," Vermillion said, "to wait until Jason is with us before we get into explanations."

"This is too much," Hiro said. "A few hours ago, there were people shooting at us from motorcycles. Now we have talking cars and people claiming to be vampires? I need time to stop and sort all of this out in my head. Time and answers, not this deluge of new questions."

The car stopped at a traffic light and Jason slipped into the driver seat.

"I'll do my best," he said.

Anna managed to carve out a few minutes to call her wife.

"I'm probably not going to be home tonight," she told her.

"I knew that was coming when I saw the news," Susan said. "I bet the conspiracy theorists are all over it."

Anna groaned.

"You have no idea how annoying they are when they're right," she said.

"Well, it doesn't match up to your day, but I had an interesting encounter of my own."

"Oh?"

“You know that strange painting I told you about? Someone claimed it. He was a rather odd man. Very intense. He claimed to be the subject of the painting, even though there were no people in it.”

“Oh?” Anna asked, her instincts tingling. “Tell me about him.”

The car took off again as the light turned green. Jason was in the driver’s seat but was leaving control to Shade.

“Uncle, Taika,” he greeted. “Thanks for looking out for them, Craig.”

“Craig?” Hiro asked, looking at Vermillion.

“Sorry, Vermillion,” Jason said. “I’ll keep it professional, yeah?”

“I think the mystique went out the window when we started talking about *Team Knight Rider*,” Vermillion said.

“Ick,” Jason said. “Why they kept trying to use Mustangs instead of a Trans-Am is beyond me. I’m certain that’s why all the follow-ups failed.”

“Could we please stop talking about *Knight Rider*?” Hiro asked. “There’s something somehow even less plausible we need to discuss.”

“There is,” Jason acknowledged, the amusement gone from his voice. “Shade is taking us somewhere we can have a talk, given that what I have to tell you is the kind of thing that requires proof.”

“Shade?” Hiro asked.

“The car,” Jason said. “I’m assuming you were talking about *Knight Rider* because he spoke to you.”

“Jason, what’s going on?” Hiro asked.

“Well, you know those things I said I didn’t want to tell you about? It’s time to tell you about them.”

“Because of the people that attacked us?” Hiro asked.

“Yes,” Vermillion said. “The public nature of the attack has kicked the hornets’ nest. Although the attack didn’t involve the EOA, they’re going to approach things differently in the current climate. When they move in on Sydney’s underworld, they’ll be less tolerant of the resistance Victor is looking to put up. I want you to help me convince him that his efforts are futile.”

“At which point Vermillion will handle Victor’s next move, and I’ll see to your safety. For now, I’ll get you out of Sydney. Today. You too, Taika,

now you're caught up in this. We can organise the details of the handover to the EOA later. For now, I'll explain what's going on and then we'll go see Victor."

Vermillion's phone rang. He pulled it out to check the caller.

"I have to take this," he told them. "Mrs Tilden," he said as he turned his attention to the phone.

Anna's voice came angrily through the phone without preamble. Jason's bronze-rank hearing was easily able to make it out.

"Do you know where your friend Asano was while we had his uncle in custody?" she asked.

"He was laying low after what happened," Vermillion said. "I would have thought you would appreciate that."

"I don't suppose you know where he was laying low."

"I do not," Vermillion said, his gaze moving to Jason.

"My wife's art gallery! At the very moment you were convincing me to treat him respectfully, he was standing next to my wife."

"Ah," Vermillion said. "Jason, did you threaten the wife of my counterpart at the Network?"

"He's there?" Anna asked. "Where are you?"

"Hand me the phone," Jason said.

Vermillion gave Jason an assessing look, then passed it forward.

"Mrs Tilden," Jason said into the phone. "This is Jason Asano."

"What do you hope to accomplish by threatening my family?"

"I'm not threatening anyone," Jason said cheerfully. "Susan's great, by the way; you did well there. I merely wanted to make it clear that while I don't have the resources or personnel to protect my family from an organisation like yours, anyone who tries to use them as leverage will start a wave of reprisals that stains Sydney Harbour red with blood."

Hiro and Taika looked on, wide-eyed, as Jason cheerfully threatened to slaughter people's families.

"You think it's that easy?" Anna asked.

"Of course not," Jason said. "When the time comes for us to meet, I simply want to avoid the tedium of explaining why trying to use my family against me is a Very Bad Idea."

"Why are you treating us like an enemy, Mr Asano?"

"Because I've dealt with forces more powerful than myself before, Mrs Tilden. They have this habit of thinking they can get what they want from

me without repercussions. Disabusing you of that notion now will be less costly for us both than doing so later."

"Your power is only at category two, Mr Asano. That is strong, but we have stronger just here in Sydney, let alone around the country and the world. That's what you would be pitting yourself against. A global power. We've been building up for twice as long as this country has existed, and you think you can stand up to that with what you picked up in a year and a half?"

"Mrs Tilden, Australia has been inhabited for more than sixty thousand years. It doesn't impress me that your organisation has been around since before white people got here. I've faced an enemy that makes your organisation look like a molecule. He's more powerful than you can comprehend and it's two-to-one in my favour. Your group isn't a potential enemy, Mrs Tilden; you're flavour text. If we can get along, maybe even work together, that's great. But I don't need you and I don't fear you."

"Are you quite done with the monologuing, Mr Asano?" Anna asked.

"It felt good, I won't lie," Jason said. "Maybe I'm wrong and your organisation will spank me like a baby. You don't want to test me and be wrong, though, Mrs Tilden."

"You need to come in and talk to us about what happened today."

"I really don't, but I'll let my new friend Craig set something up. In the meantime, I have some affairs to attend to, so I'm going to go. Congratulations on Bella getting the lead role in the play, though. That niece of yours is a real go-getter."

Jason hung up the phone and handed it back to Vermillion.

"Can they track that?" Jason asked.

"No," Vermillion said. "I thought you didn't know anything about the Network."

"I didn't," Jason said. "After I arrived, I did something to draw them out and started having their people followed. That was some good work, Shade. Nice and thorough."

"Did you just threaten that person's niece?" Hiro asked.

"I'm just keeping them from threatening my family," Jason said. "I'm not going to hurt anyone else's. It's why I need to get you out of the EOA's path. If they see you as a part of my family, rather than an independent obstacle, they won't come after you."

TIME FOR CONTEXT

Shade pulled into an underground parking structure where they wouldn't be seen, and parked. Jason and Vermillion got out of the car, the others following suit. Hiro and Taika both looked stressed.

"I know things are coming thick and fast," Jason said. "It's overwhelming, but I'm afraid that there are miles to go before you sleep."

He looked at Vermillion.

"Have you ever done this before?" Jason asked.

"Inducted someone? I have, and it's rarely a smooth process. The gullible ones are the worst, because they'll believe in the supernatural nice and quick, but convincing them the supernatural stuff they already believe in is wrong can be tricky."

"Supernatural?" Hiro asked. "Are you going to tell us that you're a vampire too, Jason?"

"No, I'm more of a ninja warlock. I know how it sounds. Long story short: Magic is real, the soul is real, vampires are real. Lots of stuff is real. Werewolves?"

"Not in this country," Vermilion said. "There are some werecrocodiles, up north, but they were mostly wiped out during colonial days. You don't see them much anymore."

"No kidding," Jason said. "Anyway, magic is real, is the gist of it."

"This is some crazy stuff, bro," Taika said. "If you want us to believe magic is real, then you're going to have to show us some magic. Like, proper magic."

"That's why we're here. Shade, why don't you start?"

The car they were standing next to exploded in a mass of darkness that was drawn into Jason's shadow like he was sucking it in with a vacuum cleaner.

"My car isn't a car," Jason said. "It's my friend Shade. Come out and say hello."

Shade's shadowy form rose up from Jason's shadow, taking on depth and substance while remaining a figure of manifested darkness.

"It is nice to formally meet you," Shade said.

Hiro and Taika glanced over from where they were waving their hands through the space the car had just occupied.

"I knew…" Hiro started before trailing off. Jason waited patiently for him to continue. "I knew there was something going on that went beyond normal understanding," Hiro continued. "None of what I came up with seemed believable. Even seeing your car disappear, I mean… magic? Really?"

"It does seem pretty out there, bro," Taika added.

"I know," Jason said. "You need to see something truly impossible."

He waved his hand over the ground, creating a line of crawling darkness like black fire. At an upward gesture from Jason, an obsidian arch arose from the dark line, which itself moved up to fill the arch.

Hiro and Taika walked around it.

"I'd ask how you did that, but you're going to say magic, right?" Hiro asked.

"Yep," Jason said.

"What is it?" Taika asked.

"A door," Jason said.

"It doesn't go anywhere," Hiro said, shifting his gaze from one side of the portal arch to the other.

"If you step through, you'll see the truth," Jason said. "I'd call it a leap of faith, but faith isn't really my thing. So, let's call it a step into a wider world."

"You want us to walk into that?" Taika asked.

"Yes," Jason said. "Think of it as your last chance to turn back. If you want, you can ignore everything I've just said. Go live a normal life and try not to think about it. Or, you can move forward."

"When you said you weren't going to tell me," Hiro said, "you said that one of the reasons was that I wasn't ready to face the dangers involved.

What's changed?"

"I said I couldn't do it in a reasonable time frame," Jason said. "Once you're out of the EOA's path, we'll have the time."

"To do what?"

"To give you magic powers," Jason said.

"You can do that?" Vermillion asked. "Turn them into essence magicians?"

"Yes," Jason said. "If it's something they want."

"What's an essence magician?" Hiro asked.

"Step through the arch and find out," Jason said.

"Boss," Taika said. "This whole thing is messed up. I'm just gonna go with it. See where it takes me."

"Taika!" Hiro called out.

But Taika had stepped through the arch and vanished. He didn't have to worry about fitting, as he did with most doors. The arch was large enough to accommodate even a leonid or a draconian, to which the mountainous Māori was comparable in size.

"Vermillion, would you check on him?" Jason asked.

"That's a portal," Vermillion said. "I've heard that some of your kind have them, but I've never actually seen one before."

"Then this'll be fun for you."

Vermillion shook his head with a chuckle.

"Knowing you is an exciting lifestyle, Jason Asano."

He shared a grin with Jason and stepped through.

"Jason, this is insane," Hiro said. He was still walking around the archway, staring disbelievingly at the space that Taika and Vermillion had vanished into.

"Yep," Jason agreed. "Just be lucky that you're getting a nice, gentle introduction to magic."

"This is gentle?" Hiro asked. "We were attacked by a bikie gang!"

"Just be glad no one tried to eat you. I'll tell you about my introduction to magic later. For now, it's time to go. You aren't going to leave Taika hanging, are you?"

As he said it, Taika came back through, looking around wildly, then throwing up.

"Holy crap, bro!"

He went back through the arch, vanishing again.

“See? No worries,” Jason laughed.

Giving Jason a trepidatious look, Hiro steeled himself and stepped through. Passing through the veil of darkness in the arch, he emerged atop a tall building in the CBD. Jason followed him through, to find Hiro also emptying his stomach. Vermillion was nearby looking peaky. Eventually, Hiro recovered, wiping his mouth on a handkerchief.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“On top of Victor’s building,” Jason said.

Hiro looked at the arch, walking unsteadily around it.

“Can I go back, like Taika?”

“Go for it.”

Hiro went back through the arch, returning moments later and throwing up again. He staggered to the edge of the building, gripping the railing as he looked out at the city.

“This is crazy. It’s not possible.”

“That’s why I used magic,” Jason said. “Being impossible is kind of the point.”

“You said you’d give us magic,” Taika said. “Will we be able to do stuff like this?”

“Maybe,” Jason said. “There’s an element of randomness to what kind of powers you end up with.”

Jason turned to Vermillion. “I’ve shown you one of my trump cards, here.”

“I recognise that. You know I won’t keep it a secret from my people, but I will remember that you were willing to share this.”

“Consider it thanks for looking after my uncle,” Jason said.

“There is one more thing,” Vermillion said. “Victor.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Uncle Hiro, I know you just had your understanding of the nature of reality rewritten, but we have things to do. So, ask any questions you have now and I’ll answer them. Once you’ve had time to process, you can ask me some more. There will be plenty of time for that.”

Hiro rubbed his temples.

“I don’t know where to start. How did you find out about magic?”

“I was in a magical accident.”

“Your apartment.”

“Yes. It sucked me into a magical alternate universe.”

“What?” Hiro asked.

“You were serious?” Vermillion said.

“Bro, everything you say is weirder than the last. And the last thing was that magic is real. This is trippy.”

“This is… I don’t know what to ask,” Hiro said.

“I do,” Taika said. “You said we could get magic. How?”

“There is more potential power in your soul than you can imagine,” Jason said. “I can use objects to unlock that potential.”

“Is that where your power comes from?” Hiro asked.

“Yes.”

“Will our powers be like yours?” Taika asked.

“No,” Jason said. “I don’t have the right items to give you powers like mine, but you don’t want them. I’m very specialised.”

“In what?” Hiro asked.

“Things best explained when I have time for context,” Jason said.

“I’m not going to lie,” Victor said. “This feels like a betrayal.”

With Vermillion, Jason, Hiro, and Taika lined up in front of him in his office, it had the feel of a confrontation.

“Victor,” Vermillion said. “Things in my world just got a lot more complicated. If you don’t let me negotiate a way out for you, things will end badly.”

“So now you’re spruiking for the EOA?” Victor asked.

“No, Victor,” Vermillion said. “I don’t need to. No one who can stop them is willing to stand in their way, and any support you might have been able to wrangle has gone now.”

“Because of that rolling fight on the news?” Victor asked.

“Yes. The people who keep that kind of thing off the news are on the warpath. Everyone else is hunkering down until the storm passes.”

“And I’m the one who suffers.”

“Victor,” Hiro said. “The things I’ve seen today. If that’s what’s coming for you, there’s no stopping it.”

Victor’s gaze panned from Hiro to Vermillion.

“He knows?” Victor asked.

Vermillion nodded.

"How much?" Victor followed up. "Did you tell him more than you've told me? What happened to needing dispensation from your people?"

"I was the one who told my uncle, Victor," Jason said coldly. "I don't belong to Vermillion's group. If you have a problem with that, you can take it up with me. I'm here because Vermillion and Hiro don't want you in the path of what's coming. I don't care if the EOA bury you, so long as my uncle is well out of it."

Victor paced back and forth, angrily rubbing his forehead.

"You're telling me I have no recourse, but won't tell me why. You realise that sounds like you're feeding me a line, right?"

Jason sighed.

"Gordon," he murmured.

A cluster of darkness appeared, hovering near the high ceiling of the office. It shifted into the form of a cloak, within which a nebula of orange and blue light lit up in the shape of an eye. Around the nebula, four spheres, likewise in the form of glowing eyes, floated slowly around it.

The others in the room were all wide-eyed at the sudden manifestation of the familiar. The floating cloak-entity was unmistakably alien and unfathomable, seeming to contain mysterious depths.

"This is my friend," Jason said. "Notice that he contains what looks a lot like the Helix Nebula. The one they call the Eye of God. I won't show you what he can do because it would be rather destructive."

Jason gestured with his hand and Gordon vanished again. Hiro, Taika, Victor and Vermillion all stared at the space it had just occupied.

"I speak from experience when I tell you that standing up to vastly more powerful forces comes with a price. If you're willing to pay that price, then I won't stop you. But if you try, expect to fail. You pay the price either way. Vermillion can't tell you, Victor, but I can. There are forces out there far more powerful than you know, and sooner or later, the world is going to find that out."

"Victor," Vermillion said, "You have three options here. Option one is fight and die. Option two is to take the money and run. Grab everything you can and get to high ground before the wave hits. Option three is throw your lot in with the EOA. If you want to go deeper into the world you've only caught glimpses of, they're the only ones who can offer that."

Victor frowned and Vermillion turned to Jason.

“I think you’ve done as much as you can,” Vermillion told Jason and Hiro. “Leave me with Victor, for now. Mr Asano, I’ll contact you to sort out the specifics of your own arrangements with the EOA.”

“How long will it take you to put your affairs in order?” Jason asked Hiro.

They were driving back to Hiro’s apartment building, once again in the care of Shade’s car form. Taika and Hiro had shown some hesitancy when the car appeared from a swirling mass of darkness, but they had, after all, ridden in it before. Jason was in the driver seat, with Hiro and Taika in the spacious and comfortable rear.

“I keep my business affairs legitimate and well-administered,” Hiro said. “If they are really going to come in and take over, the process involved is quite legal and organised.”

“You’ll be fairly compensated for everything,” Jason said, “or they’ll find my next negotiating position to be significantly more aggressive.”

Hiro and Taika shared a glance at the sinister expression on Jason’s face.

“My real concern is my people,” Hiro said.

“I made it clear that they were to be treated well,” Jason said. “Whether they want to stay under the new management or move on, they’ll be taken care of.”

“It won’t be just a matter of signing some papers and walking away,” Hiro said. “I need to speak to my people, explain the transition to them in person. Even if I get out of Sydney, I’ll need to make repeated trips back to go through it all.”

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “You just need to get the ball rolling well enough that we can leave town for the moment.”

“I can get the administrative affairs ready today and take tomorrow to talk to my people. I can be ready to go the day after.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “I need to deal with the ramifications of today’s excitement. We leave in the morning, the day after tomorrow.”

BROWN TROUSERS TIME

Jason was perched on a rooftop, looking at his uncle's townhouse from across the street. Shade appeared next to him.

"Find anyone else?" Jason asked.

"No," Shade said. "Just the one iron-ranker inside."

"So he's either alone or whoever else they sent is powerful and capable enough to escape our senses."

Jason had no intention of staying in the townhouse under current circumstances but wanted to retrieve his mana lamps if possible.

"I only spotted one silver-ranker during my investigation of the Network's personnel," Shade said. "Her aura control was insufficient to avoid my detection."

"It's the ones who can escape your senses we need to worry about," Jason said.

"I agree," Shade said. "I would recommend either having me go or sending Taika."

Although incorporeal, Shade's bronze-rank vessel could exert enough physical force to manipulate objects. He could also store limited amounts in his own dimensional storage space.

"You go," Jason said. "I can use you as a conduit to talk to whoever's in there. It's possible they sent an iron-ranker in the open to show they want to talk without applying pressure."

"The influence of Mr Vermillion?" Shade posited.

"Or wariness. They don't know what I can do."

"I don't think finding out will make them any less cautious."

"No." Jason chuckled. "Probably not."

Shade sent one of his bodies into the townhouse, silently collecting the mana lamps. The iron-ranker didn't sense Shade but noticed the change as the lamps stopped absorbing ambient magic. Standing in the middle of the townhouse, he looked around. Suddenly, there was a shadowy figure that hadn't been there a moment earlier.

"Did the Network send you?" Jason asked, speaking through Shade. There was no friendliness in the cold flint of his voice.

"Yes," the man said, looking over Shade. "Am I addressing Mr Asano?"

"Yes."

"My name is Michael Aram. Annabeth Tilden asked me to speak with you. We didn't think you were likely to come back here but hoped you might."

"I came to retrieve something I left behind."

"I did notice a change in the magic. May I ask what that was?"

"Mana lamps," Jason said. "Is that a thing you have here?"

"We do," Aram said. "So, you really did… go over there. The other world."

"What do you know of other worlds?" Jason asked.

"Wait, worlds plural?"

"Not that much, then. What do you want, Michael Aram?"

"Mrs Tilden asked me to open a dialogue. If you really are an outworlder, you no doubt acquired knowledge and resources along the way that would be of immense value to us. We, in turn, are essential to you."

"Is that so?"

"We are the only source of monster cores."

Jason let out a murderous chuckle.

"You think I need monster cores?"

"If you want to get stronger."

"I don't need cores to get stronger, just sufficiently powerful enemies to fight. Which means I might have some use for your organisation, even if you don't like what I do with it."

"You've only been gone a year and a half," Aram said. "How can you have gotten as strong as you have just from fighting? We have a member who refuses to consume cores, and it's taken him eight years to reach category two. Since then, he's been bottlenecked."

"You really do need what I know, don't you?" Jason asked, his voice becoming more relaxed. "There are things you can help me with, and I am

inclined towards collaboration. My concern is that your organisation will try to hold me upside down and shake all the goodies out. I'm not going to just waltz into that spider's nest of enchantments on your headquarters, without a care in the… what the…?"

The shadowy figure of Shade's body dashed away, leaving Aram alone.

"Mr Asano?"

Jason knelt on the sloped roof with his eyes closed, channelling his sight and voice through Shade as he conversed with Aram. With his heightened senses and ability to sense both auras and magic, he was far from oblivious to his surroundings, but he only sensed the attack at the last moment. It came fast and seemingly out of nowhere. Jason only detected it as an aura bore down on him, trying to shock him with silver-rank suppressive force.

It was almost the exact same manner as the last time he was attacked out of nowhere by a silver ranker, but Jason was a very different person from the time he was kidnapped. The attacking aura smashed into the iron shell that was Jason's own aura and rebounded, giving Jason a warning instead of freezing him in place as intended.

Even so, Jason's silver-rank attacker was faster than him and already moving as he reacted. He managed to avoid the hand reaching for his head but was unable to avoid it gripping his shoulder.

- You have been attacked. Attacker has been afflicted with [Sin].

- Special attack [Dark Slumber] has inflicted [Sopor Toxin] on you.
- You have resisted [Sopor Toxin].
- [Sopor Toxin] does not take effect.
- You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
- You have gained an instance of [Integrity].

- Special attack [Dark Slumber] has inflicted [Vulnerable] on you.
- An instance of [Resistant] has been consumed to negate [Vulnerable].

- Special attack [Dark Slumber] has inflicted [Sluggish] on you.
- You have resisted [Sluggish].
- [Sluggish] does not take effect.
- You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
- You have gained an instance of [Integrity].

Jason's affliction specialisation paid off against the special attack. His stacked resistance effects and ability to ignore rank disparity allowed him to resist two of the three afflictions and negate the third.

He reacted instantly, slipping free of the hand and dropping off the nearby roof edge, not even bothering to take a moment to look at his attacker. His cloak formed around him as he dropped, but he didn't reduce his weight to slow the fall. Instead, he formed a shadow arm and used it to grip the roof as he dropped, letting it stretch out before using it to spring back upwards. He leapt back over the rooftop just as his attacker peered over the edge. The attacker caught a raking slice across the torso from Jason's conjured dagger, stumbling back as Jason landed lightly on the rooftop.

- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Network Assassin].
- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Price of Absolution] on [Network Assassin].

- Weapon [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation] has inflicted [Ruination of the Flesh] on [Network Assassin].
- Weapon [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation] has inflicted [Ruination of the Blood] on [Network Assassin].

- Weapon [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation] has inflicted [Ruination of the Spirit] on [Network Assassin].

- [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has bestowed five instances of [Guardian's Blessing] on you.

Jason alighted back on the rooftop, his cloak floating around him. He eyed his opponent, satisfied at the silver-ranker's failure to resist even a single affliction. His ability to identify people didn't give him a name even after coming into contact with the man. His ability to extract information was hampered by the enemy's superior rank, although the more generic label of Network Assassin told him a lot too. Just as Landemere Vane had been described by Jason's power as a Builder Cultist, knowing their affiliation could be more useful than a name.

The silver-ranker looked to be around thirty, but there was no telling with an essence user. He had short-cropped hair and black, paramilitary attire. His tactical armour wasn't magical and was easily sliced through by Jason's dagger.

The man glanced down at the wound on his chest and back up at Jason. He looked startled that his silver-rank flesh had posed little more resistance than his non-magical armour.

"You should come with me, Asano. We want to work with you, not force you into anything."

"I could tell from the way you sneak-attacked me on a rooftop," Jason said. The man had a slight French accent, but that could have been a ruse. If Jason was a German assassin, he'd probably fake a French accent too.

"I don't have time to convince you. We couldn't take the chance you'd say no. Don't do this the hard way."

"You don't know me, but the hard way is kind of my thing."

"It isn't a question of whether you get away, Asano. It's a matter of how much you get hurt coming with me."

"Pain I can handle. *Your fate is to suffer.*"

- Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Network Assassin].
- Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inescapable] on [Network Assassin].

- [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has bestowed two instances of [Guardian's Blessing] on you.

"The hard way it is," the man said, holding up his hands to conjure knuckledusters on each hand, with three sharp tines sticking out of each. He leapt into the attack as mirror images appeared around him, all springing on Jason.

Jason lifted his hand, which oozed blood from the palm. A cone of leeches sprayed out over the images. Most passed through illusory doubles, including one in the position of the original body. His attacker's real body staggered back as leeches clamped on to it, while the rest of the leeches were scattered across the roof by the spray.

- [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Network Assassin].
- [Bleeding] already in effect, [Bleeding] is refreshed.
- [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Leech Toxin] on [Network Assassin].
- [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Necrotoxin] on [Network Assassin].
- [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Network Assassin].
- [Bleeding] already in effect, [Bleeding] is refreshed.
- [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Leech Toxin] on [Network Assassin].
- [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Necrotoxin] on [Network Assassin].

Jason regretted that Colin didn't trigger his amulet, but he was satisfied enough with his familiar's storm of afflictions. Jason was a true affliction specialist now, able to lay on plenty of afflictions himself.

The enemy was only briefly startled and didn't bother futilely plucking at the leeches easily biting through his clothes. He didn't fail to notice Gordon manifest into being and nimbly dodged the four beams of energy firing at him from Gordon's floating eyes.

The assassin jumped back while throwing out his hands. His own swarm of creatures appeared. Tiny metal hummingbirds with long needles for heads buzzed with the flapping of their tiny metal wings as they darted, spreading out to engulf Jason.

"Gordon," Jason said calmly. Two of the familiar's orbs launched forward, coming together just as they met the swarm. The resulting explosion of resonating-force annihilated the metal creatures, although many of the leeches scattered over the roof were likewise eliminated.

The assassin used the explosion to mask another special attack, with a storm of needles raining on Jason. His cloak intercepted the projectiles, but their silver rank power still pushed through more often than not. Their damage was diminished, however, and by the time they chewed through the Guardian's Blessings, the damage was minimal.

An instance of [Guardian's Blessing] has been consumed to absorb damage.
[Guardian's Blessing] has bestowed [Blessing's Bounty] on you.

Even that damage was quickly repaired by the ongoing healing effects of the Integrity buff, which continually replenished his health, stamina, and mana, along with the healing of the Guardian's Blessing. The needle storm was never intended to be the real threat, however, just keeping Jason off-balance to set up the assassin lunging in with his claw-like weapons.

Sophie would have been more than a match for the silver-ranker, in speed and skill both. As it was, the silver ranker had the clear edge in speed, while Jason's experience and technique were dominant. Month after month, day after day and even hour after hour of battle in the astral space had sharpened Jason's skills to a razor's edge.

When he had first started training, he had naïve ideas about being some kind of perfect counter-attacker. Then, the practical realities of combat slowly pounded into his head that he was not an anime character. Training with Rufus and Sophie, then battle after battle after battle had allowed him to refine that original idea into a more practical form.

Jason and Sophie practiced the same, highly versatile combat style, but they did so in different ways. Sophie used the versatility to constantly dominate, adapting her attacks into what was worst for her opponent at any given moment. It was her style before gaining powers and piling on speed and mobility only enhanced its effectiveness.

Jason likewise moulded his approach to his powers. With his cloak and his stretching arms, his approach leaned heavily on deception. Hiding unconventional movement and posture behind his abilities, he was hard to pin down and full of unpredictable attacks. The fact that he rarely went for more than superficial wounds with his daggers also opened up a world of attacks that others would find inconsequential.

Jason used all this to full effect against the assassin. Leaping between Shade's bodies. Masking his posture and movements behind his voluminous cloak. Reaching out with his shadow arms to make attacks that shouldn't be possible.

Jason dominated the fight. Despite the assassin's advantage in speed, his claw weapons never landed on Jason, even getting caught up in the cloak, which Jason used to yank him off balance. When the assassin tried to yank the cloak back, it passed through his fingers, insubstantial.

This did not mean that Jason was relaxed. He was fully aware of the power disparity and knew that only a handful of blows from the silver-ranker would breach the protection of his amulet and take him down.

The assassin continued to strike out literally and figuratively, hitting air as his attacks passed through the cloak. Jason's body was never exactly where it seemed, and every failed attack was followed up with a counterattack. Realising he was outclassed, the assassin tried to back up and regroup his thoughts. Jason didn't allow that, however, as he moved to the offensive.

Every moment that ticked by was gold for Jason as his afflictions became more and more entrenched on the enemy. Likewise, Gordon was lashing out with two beams from his remaining eye orbs. The disruptive-force damage was specialised against magic, though, adding only minimal damage to the silver-ranker. If Gordon didn't share Jason's power to ignore rank disparity as Jason's familiar, the damage would have been almost ignorable.

Eventually, the assassin became aggravated at Gordon and threw out a stream of shimmering force needles that managed to harm the incorporeal

familiar. Jason recalled the familiar, Gordon bolstering Jason's aura strength as the familiar disappeared into him. Neither Jason nor the silver-ranker could suppress one another despite the ongoing struggle, so they were each affected by the other's aura. In this, Jason had the advantage, as his aura seemed to take full effect. The assassin's aura inflicted a weakening debuff that Jason's continually resisted, actually making him stronger.

Although he had seen it before, Jason was still amazed at the resilience of a silver-ranker. His opponent was fighting through what would have killed the most resilient bronze-rank monster, let alone an essence user. The man looked almost undead under the ravages of Jason's necrotic damage.

Jason had more skill, not just with his combat skills but also in the tactical use of his abilities, outplaying one power after another despite his own being lower rank. The assassin, like most humans, was heavy on special attacks, and Jason was unsure if he was holding back the more dangerous ones. The idea seemed to be capture, rather than kill, after all.

Ultimately, Jason was not Sophie. Stand-up fights were where she excelled, while he was all about making the most of complex environments. The rooftop on which they fought offered nothing more than a slight slant, the open space very much to the assassin's advantage. If not for Shade's bodies spread over it for shadow jumping, the fight would have gone far worse.

Jason's original plan had been to turn the fight into a chase. Drown his opponent in afflictions, then flee for more complex environments to buy time as they worked. Unfortunately, not all of the assassin's powers were effectively handled by Jason. Just one made his plan unworkable.

The most effective power the assassin employed was a tether power, much like the one used by Belinda. It did not impede Jason as long as he remained close, but trying to leave the rooftop brought about dangerously escalating damage. The tether even tracked him through teleports and he wasn't willing to risk a portal.

If the power managed to follow him, that kind of distance would cause the tether to kill him instantly. It would be possible to destroy the conjured rod to which the tether was affixed, but that would likely cause a powerful explosion. He could survive the silver-rank blast, but it would hit him hard enough that the silver-ranker would have a chance to end the fight.

Jason was willing to stick out the fight, as his position improved with every passing moment. He was accumulating power while his opponent

accumulated afflictions. Crucially, this included an affliction from his Hand of the Reaper power that simultaneously chipped away at the assassin's speed advantage and ability to hold off his afflictions.

- [Rigor Mortis] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Penalty to the [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Each time a new instance is inflicted, deals necrotic damage for each existing instance.

Jason was satisfied with how the fight was progressing. The silver-ranker was a monster core user, with the typical weaknesses that entailed. Rufus had long ago explained that without being forced to use all their abilities in order to advance, monster core users tended to develop certain flaws.

One was that they weren't as intimately familiar with their powers as someone better trained, using the abilities less effectively and often as an addendum to their combat instead of an integrated aspect. The big one was they developed a habit of using whatever subset of their powers had proven the most useful early in their careers, often ignoring the others and missing out on the powerful synergies of a comprehensive power set.

Jason, by contrast, had used almost every ability in his repertoire. His perception power let him observe the magic of special attacks and dodge them. His array of afflictions, the powers of his familiars; Rufus had taught Jason to fight in a comprehensive manner.

His only regret was that he had been forced to blow up much of Colin's leech supply before the apocalypse beast could have a definitive impact. Colin was normally Jason's strongest weapon. He didn't regret the explosive attack, however. He'd seen the effects of a swarm attack too often to underestimate one from a silver-ranker.

Jason had forced the assassin into a race against time—silver-rank speed and endurance against circumstances that turned the fight further and further against him with every passing moment. Even when he managed to land an occasional hit, the afflictions were multiplying so much on the assassin that Jason's amulet quickly replenished the shields.

Jason used his Punition spell for a burst of damage, harming the assassin further for each of the afflictions on him. Then Jason drained the afflictions away with Feast of Absolution, leaving a brutal mess of holy

afflictions in their place. The assassin felt the power burning away at his insides and saw the light shining from under his skin.

Knowing that his one advantage over Jason was the raw power of his rank, the assassin bet everything on a last-ditch, desperation move. He had hoped that Jason would be stupid enough to smash the tether rod, but he hadn't. Betting on his own resilience, battered though it was, the assassin smashed the rod himself. The resulting blast unleashed a shockwave that sent both Jason and the assassin tumbling off the roof and down to the street below.

The assassin realised that his gamble had paid off; he was the first to recover and push his way painfully upright. Despite the ravaging power still coursing through him and all the shields and healing Jason had put up, the sheer superhuman fortitude of a silver-ranker was something Jason couldn't match.

That was not to say that Jason wasn't recovering quickly. He was, by that point, drenched in ongoing healing effects from the afflictions he absorbed and the power of his amulet. The assassin wasted no time, conjuring his fist weapons without spikes before leaping on Jason and brutally wailing into his head, relying on the healing Jason was clearly getting to leave him alive.

As for keeping himself alive, the assassin pulled out a cleansing potion worth more than most cars and tipped it down his throat. His possession of two such potions was what had kept him from abandoning the fight as Jason layered affliction after affliction on him.

To the assassin's horror, the potion he expected to wash every injury away like a cleansing flood only partially eliminated the afflictions. The terrifying light continued to glow under his skin, though greatly diminished. He wouldn't be able to take the other cleansing potion immediately without poisoning himself, so he took out and drank a powerful healing potion to buy time.

Aram had recorded almost all but the earliest moments of the fight on his phone. At a far remove, neither his aura nor his non-magical recording device had been spotted. He had been watching in disbelief as Asano fought

not just evenly but at an advantage against a category three, their ranks clear to Aram as he felt their powerful auras clash. The category three looked to be on his last legs when he blasted them both off the roof to land heavily on the empty street. The assassin's superior endurance turned the tide as both men were hit hard. The category three recovered faster and brutally attacked Asano, who was still on the ground.

Aram watched the assassin take a potion, which diminished the eerie glow coming from within the man. It was followed by another that partially healed the man's ravaged body. Even after both potions, however, the man looked less like a living being and more like a glowing zombie. As he was taking the potions, three men pulled up in a pair of cars. Clearly, they knew the man, who yelled a series of angry instructions, although Aram was too far away to make them out.

The man jumped into one of the cars and tore off at speed, leaving the three men behind with Asano still splayed out on the asphalt. Aram wanted to step in, but the three men were all category twos. He couldn't have handled one, let alone all three. He watched one of them inject the contents of a huge syringe into Asano before they placed a collar around his neck and bundled him into the boot of the remaining car. They then took off in the opposite direction to the man that had fought Asano.

Aram sent the video file to Anna and then immediately called her.

"How did it go?" she asked, not bothering with a greeting.

"Ma'am, check the file I just sent you," Aram said gravely. "I think it might be brown trousers time."

THE COMPLETE SET

"Look at the way he moves," said Nigel, the combat instructor of the Network's Sydney branch. "That fighting style isn't an extension of ordinary martial arts."

A cluster of Network analysts and investigators were watching the footage Aram had captured of Asano's rooftop fight. They had already seen it three times.

"It looks like stage combat," Ketevan said. "Like the whole thing was choreographed."

"His fighting style is designed from the ground up to incorporate superhuman capabilities and supernatural powers," Nigel assessed. "I don't think he learned that on our world."

"You think this supports the outworlder theory?" Aram asked.

"I do," Nigel said. "The category three is completely outclassed in terms of skill. He only won because of the vast gulf in power between categories two and three. Trying to jump categories at that level is dancing on a knife edge. When facing that kind of strength alone, you can't make any slip-ups. Let them outpace you, you're done. Fail to counter one ability, to anticipate one move, and you probably won't get a second chance. Asano made one mistake and that was all it took to turn the tables, because a category three's bare hands are stronger than most special attacks."

"Alright, that's enough," Anna said as the footage finished again. "Nigel, work with the analysts, get me anything and everything from that footage I can use. Aram, get me an update on the search for that car. Keti, with me."

Anna marched out of the room, Ketevan in tow.

“Keti,” she said wearily, “update me on the biker siege.”

“The police standoff with the survivors of the tollway fight is ongoing. Media presence is exactly as bad as we projected. We’re coordinating with the Cabal on resolving the outcome. Mr Vermillion has assured us that the bikers are all going to have a violent drug reaction and die very shortly, including the ones in police and medical custody.”

Anna took a short moment to play out the scenario in her mind.

“The story will be an undirected, mass reaction to a bad batch of drugs leading to tragic and violent outbursts,” she said thoughtfully. “We can work with that. It’ll play well with the conservative crowd; let them distract everyone with a crackdown on drug enforcement. The premier will love it; she loves looking strong.”

“I’ve scheduled your meeting with her for two thirty.”

“Video conference or in person?”

“She wants you to go to her.”

“Great. What else?”

“Mr Vermillion wanted to express that the Cabal takes responsibility for the problem. He also wanted to know where Jason Asano was.”

“Don’t we all. What about this vampire they claim is responsible for unleashing the Blood Riders? Are they any closer to handing him over?”

“Mr Vermillion says it will be by the end of the day.”

The biker battle footage was still being looped on the international news and now phone footage was cropping up depicting flagrantly magical events. Fortunately, the central figure was just as blurry and indistinguishable as in the news footage and the panicked, amateurish camerawork made it all the less clear. The problems stemmed from the few scraps of clear footage, along with eye-witness accounts gaining media coverage. Fortunately, the outlandish claims were being widely dismissed.

Then came the revelation that one of the French branches of the Network had snuck a category-three operative into the country without notifying them and had kidnapped someone without any of the Australian branches being any the wiser. If Aram hadn’t been present, the operative could have spun any kind of tale he wished as to why they arrived on the Sydney branch’s doorstep on the verge of death. If not for Australia’s strongest healer being stationed in its largest city, the French agent would be dead.

Anna stormed into medical, looking for said healer. She found her sprawled on a couch in the medical admin, looking like she'd run a marathon. There were a few empty potion bottles lying on the floor, along with a pair that still contained mana potion. Gladys had an old lady name and an old lady age, but her category-three powers gave her the looks of an Olympic beach volleyballer, with an athletic body, vibrant skin, and dark, lustrous hair.

"Well?" Anna demanded.

Gladys forced her eyes open unhappily.

"It's done."

"Did you tell him you were too exhausted to fully heal him, like I said?"

"I am too exhausted to fully heal him. Otherwise, I'd have ignored you."

"Good. Just being collared doesn't stop him from being dangerous and I doubt the shackles will hold him. Keti, have him moved to containment. Do not give him a spirit coin if he asks."

Ketevan left and Anna turned back to Gladys, still lying back on the couch.

"He was really that damaged?" Anna asked.

"I'm amazed he survived long enough to get to us. I'm constantly astounded at the resilience of category-three essence magicians, and I am one. I just never want to test that kind of trauma on myself. I completely tapped myself out keeping him alive."

"What made it so hard?"

"For one thing, those conditions were too resistant to my abilities. I should have been punching down on category-two magical ailments. The real problem, though, was the condition type. It was holy."

"We don't say holy, Gladys. We say luminous."

"Stick your nomenclature guidelines up your arse, Anna. It was holy and it was brutal. I only have one power that removes holy conditions, and I can't use it in quick succession. I had to keep healing him between uses to keep him alive while I slowly cleared the conditions off in chunks. Even then, if the damage condition hadn't been dropping off by itself, I'd have run out of steam before the job was done, even with mana potions."

"What about cleansing potions for him?"

"He took one before he came, which is the only reason he got to us still alive. I shoved another one in him every time he could take it. What the hell

did this to him?"

"You saw the news?" Anna asked. "The man knocking over blood servants like bowling pins?"

"It was that guy?"

"Yeah. I really want to get a hold of him, but our French friend had accomplices bundle him up and take him away. Answers are only the beginning of what I want from the Frenchman. I'm going to juice him like an orange."

"Are you allowed to do that?"

"He didn't even request entry to Australia, let alone notify us. I'm very much looking forward to discussing protocol violations with whichever French prick has the plums to pick up the phone and complain."

"And the man who did this to him was taken away?"

"Yes," Anna said unhappily. "We have people looking, but we don't have a lot to spare while we scramble to clean up the original crap storm. I told the Steering Committee that letting the EOA get their hooks in the media barons was a bad idea. Anyone with a functional brain could see that, but them? No, they're too clever to bother with a blatantly obvious threat."

"You have an issue with the Steering Committee, Mrs Tilden?"

The cool, amused voice was a stark contrast to Anna's increasingly wild ranting. She whirled around, trying to school her expression before giving up and letting the rage spill over. As Director of the Network's Sydney branch, Anna was in charge of its day-to-day operations. Like every branch, however, there was a steering committee that directed the overall agenda and made high-level decisions. Those decisions were normally relayed to Anna by the Steering Committee's most junior member, Keith Culpeper.

"You know what, Keith?" she asked. "I do have a problem with the Steering Committee. I've got a list of emails so long, you could deforest a national park and not have enough paper to print them all out. Every one of them is a warning about the problems we need to solve today so they don't blow up on us tomorrow. The EOA's influence in the media. The federal government weakening our position with other branches internationally. THE FRIGGING BLOOD RIDERS! I warned the committee about the Cabal playing fast and loose months ago, and do you remember what you told me, Keith?"

"Not precisely," Keith said, his amusement gone in the face of his unhinged subordinate.

“You said ‘don’t rock the boat, Anna. We don’t want to cause trouble with the other factions, Anna.’ Well, the boat’s capsized, Keith, because I warned you yesterday. Now it’s today and everything blew up! And I know who’s going to eat it for this, and it sure as hell won’t be you, will it, Keith?”

“Anna—”

“Keith, did you come here to tell me what a terrible job I’m doing? To replace me? No, no, you didn’t, because you need a goat you can stake out to shoulder all the blame when the International Committee comes slavering for meat. You think I don’t know that I’m done after this? You’ve got two options, you little prick. Kick me out now or shut your face while I do my last job however I damn well please.”

The young man in the sharp suit looked like he’d been blasted by a gust of wind, while Gladys tiredly clapped from the couch, even letting out a feeble, laughing cheer.

Keith turned a glare on Gladys, who fired an insolent glare right back.

“Go on, little boy,” she told him, getting up from the couch to stand next to Anna. “Try and tell me off. Then go explain to the Steering Committee how their category-three healer heard about their intentions for my good friend Anna and we ran off to join the Fiji branch and live on a beach. I’m pretty confident they’ll take us.”

Keith frowned unhappily.

“You’re right that people are watching, Anna,” he said, “but you and I both know that if anyone can salvage this, it’s you. Yes, if this goes wrong, I can’t shield you. If you manage to get the lid back on the pot, though, this is your way up. Committee membership. A say in all those decisions you keep protesting.”

A lot of the hot air deflated out of Anna.

“Are you blowing smoke up my arse, Keith?”

“Regardless of what you might think, Anna,” Keith said, “there are those of us that believe you can be a valuable voice on the committee. I know you’re having a rough day, but I need a little less conversation and a little more action, please. A seat at the big table is on the line and not every committee member is as accommodating as I am.”

“If you say hysterical woman…” Gladys warned.

“Wouldn’t dream of it. I’m going to take one of the small offices until this thing is sorted. If you need any extra resources, come to me and I’ll

clear it. Today, you get anything and everything you need. Just ask and I'll make it happen."

Anna looked a little sheepish after blowing up at someone who came to give her exactly what she wanted.

"Thanks, Keith. Sorry I kind of exploded on you."

"Kind of?" Keith asked with a chuckle. "I get it, Anna. You were proved right about all the wrong things and now you're the one stuck holding the bag. Now that you've blown off some steam, are you ready to get back to work?"

"Yeah," Anna said. "I'll get it done. Can you figure out who the hell sent this French operative here?"

"I'll even figure out why," Keith said.

"Oh, I know why," Anna said. "The French caught their outworlder and they wanted the complete set before anyone could confirm what they were."

"You're convinced this Asano is an outworlder?"

"Go take a look at the footage Aram took of their fight," she told him. "Talk to Nigel. He thinks the guy's fighting is literally out of this world."

"I'll do that," Keith said. "I'll stop interrupting and let you get back to it. Just remember that some of us do have your back, Anna."

He left, leaving Anna and Gladys together.

"Am I crazy, or did he quote Elvis in there?" Anna asked.

"Yep," Gladys said. "I actually slept with Elvis. Young Elvis, too, not pudgy Elvis."

Anna gave her a sideways look.

"He was rubbish," Gladys continued. "Now Marlon Brando, that guy knew his business. Turns out he was cheating on Rita Moreno with me, though, and then she went and slept with Elvis. She didn't like it any more than I did."

Jason groggily came to in the boot of a moving car. From the rough ride that finally shook him awake, he knew they were on a gravel road. He felt the familiar sensation of a suppression collar, but that didn't worry him. At this point, he used them on himself for aura training.

Even a powerful version like the one the Builder had crafted he could negate for at least a few crucial moments. Short of a collar designed to suppress gold-rankers, he was confident that he could deal with it. The problem was that once he did, anyone nearby with aura senses would know about it, while he wouldn't sense who was in the car until he pushed off the suppression.

He didn't know what condition the silver-ranker was in after their battle. He knew the man had to be in a bad state, but what healing did he have access to? Even if he survived, it should have taken a powerful ally or significant resources to keep him alive. He might not be fully recovered.

Jason, to his surprise, felt physically in top form. Much of Colin's biomass had been destroyed and would need to slowly recover before restoring Jason's full regenerative power, which left him wondering why he felt so good. He would need his system interface back before he got answers.

He knew that the best time to act was while they were still on the move, when his enemies had limited resources in place to deal with him. When he made his move, it would need to be definitive. Once he did, his enemies would learn that suppression collars couldn't truly suppress him. That was not information he was willing to reveal.

He pushed out with his aura, negating the bronze-rank suppression collar with ease. Immediately he sensed three bronze-rank presences in the car, but not the silver-ranker. Given that the silver-ranker had snuck up on Jason before, though, it did not mean he wasn't present.

With the return of his interface power, a system message popped up.

- You have been afflicted with a massive dose of [Carfentanil].
- You have resisted [Carfentanil].
- [Carfentanil] does not take effect.
- You have gained multiple instances of [Resistant].
- You have gained multiple instances of [Integrity].

Apparently, his attackers had tried to sedate him before putting the collar on, allowing his Sin Eater power to absorb the affliction. That had given him enough stacks of Integrity to heal him up, explaining his current condition. Even after the collar suppressed the ability that bestowed them, the buff already in place continued to work, restoring Jason to full health.

He sensed the reactions from the auras in the front of the car as they became aware of his own. Shifting himself around, he got some leverage and pressed his legs against the lid of the boot. After only a few seconds, his superhuman strength was enough to force open the lock and the boot popped open. He conjured his cloak as he pushed himself out of the moving vehicle, which allowed him float into a gentle impact on the gravel road.

The car pulled to a rapid stop. It was night and Jason could immediately tell it was somewhere in rural New South Wales. The maternal side of Jason's family were scattered around the region, and it was all familiar, from the grass and trees to the gravel road and even the smell. There were no lights other than from the car, but Jason could see easily through the darkness. The overcast winter sky blocked out the stars, the moon a diffuse glow behind the clouds.

Jason could clearly make out the three people in the car, one for each of the bronze-rank auras. The silver-ranker was not present. For the moment, it didn't matter if he was dead or just absent, so long as he wasn't around to pose a threat. As for the others, Jason was about to fill the final moments of their lives with misery, torment, and fear.

MORE VALUABLE THAN A LIFE

THE BUILDING LOOKED LIKE ANY OF THE OTHER INDUSTRIAL warehouses around it. The inside, however, was an operations centre for the Cabal. Three reinforced security doors lay between the exterior and a set of concrete stairs leading down to a square, concrete room, behind a fourth, even more secure door. The room was empty apart from a cot fixed to the wall and the vampire sitting on it. His hands were held in alchemically treated handcuffs, his legs chained in similarly treated manacles.

His clothes were bloody and bedraggled, although the injuries that left them in that state had already been healed by his vampiric regeneration. The effort of doing so had left him hungry and only blood fresh from the source could slake vampiric thirst. They had only allowed him to feed on a live goat which, compared to human blood, was like drinking raw sewage.

The door opened to admit Vermillion. He had a folding chair that he opened and placed facing the prisoner.

"Hello, Clinton."

"You must be loving it," Clinton said, sneering at Vermillion. "Seeing me like this."

Vermillion sighed.

"You think any of this is good for me?"

"You have the satisfaction of seeing a rival brought low."

"Rival?" Vermillion said with a pitying look. "That's what you think? Clinton, before you perpetrated this spectacularly woe-begotten disaster, I never gave you a second of thought any time you weren't standing right in front of me. Is that what this is all about? Trying to prove that you're better than me?"

“My lineage alone makes me better than you,” Clinton said. “My uncle turned me, and you know who he is. We don’t even know who made you into one of us.”

Vermillion shook his head.

“The Cabal doesn’t care where we came from, Clinton. We each have to prove our worth. You gave the Cabal your measure yesterday, and this is where it’s gotten you.”

“My uncle won’t stand for this.”

Vermillion shook his head, not bothering to respond. He stood up, left the cell and walked up the concrete stairs. Another man waited at the top with a grave expression.

“Craig,” the man greeted.

“Franklin.”

“Sorry again about all this.”

“It is what it is,” Vermillion said. “Instead of complaining about what we can’t fix, we need to get on with fixing what we can.”

Franklin nodded soberly. He made his way down the stairs and into the cell.

“Hello, Clinton,” Franklin said, claiming the seat left by Vermillion. Franklin’s features had a vague resemblance to Clinton, but Clinton’s appearance was middle-aged, while Franklin looked no more than thirty at most.

“Uncle Frank, you have to get me out of this.”

“I tried to keep you from getting into it,” Franklin said. “You never met the requirements for the clan to consider making you one of us, but I convinced them to be compassionate. The only reason they let me turn you was that without it, you would have died.”

“I’ve proven myself.”

“Yes,” Franklin said. “You’ve certainly made your value clear. Your ambitions have outstripped your abilities at every turn. The unrelentingly disappointing results of every task assigned to you has demonstrated the value of the clan’s recruiting policies. Getting involved with the Blood Riders was very nearly the final straw. I had to fight to give you the chance to clean up your own mess. I warned you that this was a final chance for you, and what did you do? You caused a disaster.”

“It’s just a few dead bikers.”

“Innocent people are dead, Clinton. The Network is on the warpath. We’re burning political capital like kindling to stop this from permanently hurting the Cabal’s position in this city. This entire country. The world is watching, and not just the magical world.”

“It wasn’t my fault. If people didn’t show so much favouritism to Vermillion, I never would have needed to make such bold moves.”

“Bold? It is that what you call the most idiotic act of self-destruction I can conceive of? Did someone put you up this? I know you’re not smart enough to be a conspirator, but if someone used you, then they found a fine tool indeed.”

“It was Vermillion that pushed me to this!”

“Vermillion? I suppose I can see that. He draws favour because he’s competent, cautious, and meticulous, with excellent foresight. A poster child for everything you lack. He may be careful and patient enough to set you up for this without it being tracked back to him, but he’s smart enough to know that this has a million unseen ways to go wrong. He’s in the doghouse now for failing to stop you before you caused this debacle.”

Clinton sneered, only to be startled as Franklin slapped him hard across the face.

“You’re happy? Do you have any idea of what I owe him now? You’re my responsibility, which means the blame for your actions falls on me. I’m in a worse position than Vermillion because of this. So now I have to make a gesture to prove my loyalty and contrition, both to the clan and to the Cabal.”

“What kind of gesture?” Clinton asked warily.

“A sacrifice. After all the trouble you’ve caused me, you will finally demonstrate some worth. Like everything else about you, it’s only your relationship to me that gives you any value at all. The Cabal and the clan are both severing ties with you. You’re being handed over to the Network. My facilitation of this is my show of loyalty and contrition. One of many that will continue until long after you’re dead.”

“You can’t.”

“It’s already done, Clinton. You were never going to get out of this with a clean death after killing Julius. He had some actual potential, which is why we had him riding herd over you. We wanted him to see what not to do, but you taught that lesson too well. Then, true to form, you mess up disposing of the body. I mean, bloody hell, boy. If you’re going to saw a

man into pieces, get some garbage bags or a plastic sheet or something. I mean, pillowcases? You can't even fail properly. You are the worst vampire in the world."

"My actions were decisive and ruthless," Clinton argued. "Those are the things a vampire should be."

"In control is what a vampire should be, Clinton. That was never you. I should have refused my sister. I apologise for not letting you die the death of a normal man. You would have died quietly and been remembered fondly."

"Surely there's something that you can do," Clinton begged.

"I will be paying for your sins for a long time, Clinton. I have neither the ability nor the desire to absolve them. Even before this, you were baiting the EOA into making a move on Vermillion. That is an act directly in contravention of Cabal interests, in service to your personal ambition. If Vermillion hadn't defused the situation, you'd have antagonised the Network, the EOA, our own people and a potentially valuable ally all in one fell swoop. Thankfully—and true to form—you failed. But for some inexplicable reason, this was the one time that you didn't let one knock back stop you and did what it took to aggravate them all anyway. You even went above and beyond, throwing them into a frenzy. At least you can die knowing that your actions left a large footprint."

"You can't hand me over," Clinton said angrily. "I'll tell the Network every clan and Cabal secret I know!"

"I know," Franklin said sadly. "As much as I hoped that time would temper you into steel, I knew from the beginning that you were pig iron. This is why you were never inducted into our greater secrets. You can't give the Network information they don't already know, although I expect they will be very thorough in making sure."

Franklin got to his feet.

"This is the last time we'll meet, Clinton. Anything you have left to say, say it now."

"Uncle, it wasn't my fault…"

"I meant something new, Clinton. I've heard that many times before."

Franklin made his way back upstairs, where Vermillion was waiting for him.

"That can't have been easy," Vermillion said.

“It was a long time coming,” Franklin said. “All of our problems today can be laid at the feet of my mercy. How bad is it?”

“Bad,” Vermillion said. “Magic came within a hair’s breadth of being revealed today. Annabeth Tilden is in what amounts to a berserker rage. The big question mark is this man Asano. I don’t know what he’ll do after what happened.”

“Didn’t the Network take him?”

“I believe the answer to that is complicated,” Vermillion said. “Not least by the question of whether or not they can hold him.”

“I don’t like that Sebastian isn’t with us,” Luc said.

“You think any of us like it?” Paul asked. He was driving the car along the gravel road, through the open landscape of the Australian Bush, with Luc in the passenger seat. The dark sky hid the panorama, forcing him to drive carefully.

“You saw the condition Sebastian was in,” Paul said. “I’ve never seen anyone more in need of healing.”

“That’s exactly my problem,” Luc said. “We all saw what the target did to Sebastian. What if he wakes up?”

“He’s not going to wake up,” Nicolas said from the back seat. “With what we pumped into him, I’m amazed he’s still alive, category two or no. When he finally comes to, I won’t be shocked if we need to get the brain damage healed.”

The three Frenchmen drove along a gravel road in rural New South Wales, heading for a rarely used airstrip. With an overcast night sky and an absence of population centres, the light from their car was a lonely ship in a sea of black.

“What I hate is that we have to fly back out,” Paul said.

“Nothing to be done about it,” Nicolas said. “You can’t force someone through a portal, even if they’re out cold.”

“What about Sebastian?” Luc asked.

“What about him?” Paul asked. “He told us to go without him.”

“I know he said that, but are we really going to just leave him?” Luc asked.

“You’re damn right we are,” Nicolas said. “At this point, he needs to be extracted diplomatically, not tactically. It’s out of our hands. Our job is to get the target home without the locals pinning us down. Sebastian left us his phone so that none of us…”

He looked pointedly at Luc.

“…would be stupid enough to try and make contact.”

“Is the target going to stay unconscious all the way to France?” Paul asked.

“I have some top-ups to keep him out,” Nicolas said. “He’s not waking up any time soon.”

Suddenly, all three felt an aura sweep over them from the boot of the car.

“That’s not possible,” Nicolas said. “Even if he did somehow wake up, he’s collared.”

“Maybe there was something wrong with the collar,” Luc said.

“You think they sent us all this way without checking the collar?” Paul asked.

“Pull the car over!” Nicolas ordered.

As they argued, they heard the boot spring open. Paul pulled the car to a rapid stop, throwing up gravel as he braked hard. The three piled out of the car. They saw the open boot and looked around in the darkness.

“I can’t see a thing,” Luc said.

“He’s going to be a pain to track down like this,” Nicolas said. “Paul, give us some light.”

As they peered out into the black, Paul raised an arm above his head and a large, flaming sphere appeared, floating in the air and shedding a red light. Shockingly, it revealed that the group was surrounded by figures of inky darkness, almost on top of them.

They all reacted immediately. Luc transformed his body into solid stone, while Paul summoned a whip made of fire. Nicolas conjured an assault rifle and started wildly spraying bullets all round them. Bullets were directly conjured into the gun, so he didn’t have to stop and reload. He fed mana into it as quickly as the conjured weapon would take it, spraying out a ceaseless stream of ammunition. The muzzle flash caused a blinding strobe as he swept the gun back and forth, spewing bullets in every direction. When Nicolas finally stopped and the blast of gunfire was replaced by eerie silence, the dark figures were gone, as if they had never been.

“What were those things?” Paul asked.

“You think I know?” Nicolas asked.

“I think you killed them, or drove them off,” Luc said.

As he did, blue and orange lights lit up in the distance, drawing the attention of all three. Focused on the distance, they only noticed the shadowy figure moving behind them in the red light after feeling the sting of a blade slicing along their skin. Nicolas and Paul both received cuts on the neck, but Luc’s bubble shield briefly flared into visibility. It intercepted the attack before it even reached his stone flesh.

The light that had distracted them had dimmed into nothingness.

“Not much of a wound,” Paul said, patting his neck. “I’ve had plenty worse.”

“I bet Sebastian had too,” Nicolas said. “This prick uses poison, genius.”

“Should we start searching?” Luc asked.

“Forget that,” Paul said. “We knew going in that this mission had a high failure chance. I’m not fighting in the dark against the guy that did that to Sebastian.”

“Agreed,” Nicolas said. “Let’s just get in the car and go.”

As their short debate over what to do came to an end, the blue and orange lights appeared again. There was one larger light, with four smaller ones orbiting it. Two of the smaller lights broke away from the others and flew towards them, closer to the speed of an arrow than a bullet.

The two unshielded men scrambled out of the light’s path. The two luminous points made a direct line for their car, merging together just as they impacted it. The resulting explosion blasted Paul and Nicolas who, even having fled, were concussed and sent tumbling.

Luc was closer but also barely hurt. His bubble shield absorbed enough of the blast, which seemed poorly suited to penetrate the magical shield. The sheer power of the blast made it collapse, but what little force remained splashed against Luc’s stone body, leaving small cracks in it. Luc felt a flicker of panic. The blast was clearly more effective against his stone body than the magic shield, but it was a spent force.

Like the stone of Luc’s body, the metal car proved highly susceptible to the power of the blast, being far more than superficially damaged. It had been torn open like someone with fat fingers and no coordination had tried

to split a sandwich with someone by pulling it in half. It was certainly no longer driveable.

Lying in the light scrub off the side of the road where he had been thrown by the explosion, Paul yelled out in fresh pain. Nicolas scrambled to his feet as Luc went to check on him, only for a shadowy figure to appear behind Nicolas. It lashed out several times before vanishing as Nicolas echoed Paul's exclamations.

"What's going on?" Luc asked in a panic as he helped Paul to his feet. "This shouldn't be possible! He's meant to be collared!"

"What do we do?" Paul called out to Nicolas, but Nicolas had no answers. He stared at the wreckage of the car in the bloody illumination of the fiery orb. The headlights of their vehicle had died with the car.

The only answer came from a voice as cold and dark as the black winter night.

"*Bleed for me*."

Luc had strong defensive powers, with his magical shield and his earth form powers. His means of attack were powerful but simple, and he generally relied on his teammates to pin down the enemy for him to finish off. His teammates had died around him, however, without his catching more than a glimpse of their attacker. There had only been the merciless voice chanting sinister incantations. Paul and Nicolas fired powers wildly into the dark to no discernible effect, until they succumbed to death.

Luc broke down as his companions ended their screaming, leaving dark carcasses of blackened flesh with the unnerving stillness of death. More lights lit up on the empty road, this time not blue and orange but the silver pinprick of stars. The night sky, hidden beyond the dark clouds of winter, had taken the form of a man. Luc remembered the stories of the starlight angel that had been on the news. For him, this would be no angel of mercy.

He didn't fight back, merely watching the approaching figure with defiance. He wasn't even thinking of it as the target anymore. It was more like a monster, born of the night. It moved slowly, finally appearing before him, all darkness and stars. The figure moved over Paul's body, then over Nicolas. It reached up and pulled a suppression collar from the

impenetrable dark of its hood. The collar then vanished from its hand, and it turned its attention to Luc.

"You're going to tell me the things I want to know," came a hard, ruthless voice.

"I don't care if you collar and torture me," Luc said. "Even without my powers, my body can take the pain."

"I believe you," the voice said.

Luc felt something crushing down on his aura like a fist squeezing an egg.

"Can your soul?" the voice asked.

Jason discovered that the advantage of holding a person's soul in his hand was that lies and evasions could not go undetected. He didn't feel good about executing the man in cold blood after exhausting his knowledge. Being honest with himself, though, he didn't feel all that bad, either. The ability to negate the effects of suppression collars was a trump card for Jason's most vulnerable moments, as his current circumstances neatly demonstrated. That secret was more valuable than a life—at least the life of a man that had kidnapped him.

Before he died, the man filled in many important details for Jason, both about why the men had come for him and about the Network. For centuries, the Network had been a series of independent secret societies and apparently old games of competitiveness and resource-hoarding continued through to the present. It was a more fractious organisation than Vermillion's description had led him to believe, although Vermillion was an outsider and total accuracy was not to be expected.

This did not automatically mean that the local branch would be an ally, rather than an enemy. Given what the man had revealed, Jason hoped they would be. The most important thing he had learned from the Frenchman was that the Network branch in Lyon had the other outworlder in its custody. Jason hoped that the factional conflict was sufficient that the local Network would help him take the outworlder from the Lyon branch. Whatever threats he might have made to Annabeth Tilden, he knew that trying it alone was suicide.

Jason failed to learn anything else about the other outworlder; the Frenchman knew nothing about them. He suggested that their leader, Sebastian, might, but he had gone to the local Network branch for healing. The man Jason questioned suspected that the local branch would detain Sebastian to squeeze some concessions out of the French, given that they were not meant to be in the country at all.

Jason had already looted one of the bodies, retrieving the key to the collar around his neck. He had crafted some single-use keys that probably would have worked, but he wasn't entirely confident that his sloppy, self-made product would be effective. He looted the rest, their bodies not sufficiently composed of magic to dissolve into rainbow smoke, but his power did save Jason needing to rifle through their pockets. They didn't have much on them, but he did get both his own phone and theirs.

He allowed Colin to dispose of the three Frenchmen. It would help the familiar reconstitute the biomass expended in the fight against the trio's leader, now in Network custody. As for the car, Gordon's beams broke the car down into little pieces that Jason tossed away into the scrub. It was possible someone could use a GPS record to track the spot, but there was nothing left that could cause him any problems.

Getting rid of the bodies sent his thoughts drifting to his own corpse, left behind in the astral space. It probably did dissolve into rainbow smoke, at least partially. He had known for a long time that he was no longer a human, but thinking about his body dissolving like a monster brought it home in a fresh way.

Jason opened his map ability to check his destination. He could get back to Sydney in a couple of portal jumps, as he had visited places in his range in the past. He was even within range of his uncle's farm, where his mother grew up. He could use some time to think, to consider what he'd learned and weigh his options. He had Shade take a car form and take off back towards Sydney.

His demolition of the biker gang and what he did to his attackers, even the one that most likely survived, demonstrated the kind of threat he presented. Now was the time to show that he wasn't just a mad dog and could be reasoned with. He'd shown plenty of big stick and it was time for some juicy carrot. He needed to test the waters with the local Network branch and, if possible, ask Sebastian some pointed questions. It was time for a meeting with Annabeth Tilden.

As he sat in thought, Shade driving, Gordon manifested in the seat next to him. Unlike normal vehicles, Shade was able to contain Gordon's incorporeal form without him passing right through. Gordon's floating eyes looked at Jason expectantly and Jason nodded, pulling out his phone.

He had used a precious droplet of crystal wash to prevent his phone from picking up a corpse smell. He loaded up a movie, which Shade, in the form of a high-tech car, was able to project onto the windscreen.

"This one's called *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*," Jason told Gordon. "It's a good one."

UNCONTROLLED FACTOR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He took a big bite of his sandwich.

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

"You're Jason Asano."

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

He frowned at the sandwich in his hand.

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

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

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

"Silver-rankers?"

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

"What about the people that took you?"

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

"What do you want with him?"

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

"So you broke into my house?"

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

"You know about that?"

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

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

"One of these belongs to Sebastian, the other to one of his flunkies. I reset the unlock codes to zero-zero-zero-zero."

"You can hack phones?"

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

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

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

“We call it minor threshold advancement.”

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

“No.”

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

“There is.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That was the Lyon branch.”

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

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

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

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

“She does help regular people, then?”

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

“That’s… traditionally been a weak area for me,” Jason acknowledged. “I like the idea of that clinic you mentioned. I’d like to get in on that, if we end up working together.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason paled, bowing his head.

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

“It’s why we have rules.”

Jason nodded.

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

"Then we need to have a conversation somewhere other than my kitchen," Anna said. "While I'm wearing clothes."

"Do you sleep in a bra?" Jason asked. "That can't be comfortable."

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

"Well, I woke up in the trunk of a car with veins full of poison, so I guess that neither of us is getting any rest tonight."

He plucked a fistful of spirit coins from his inventory and slapped them onto the kitchen counter. "By way of apology," he said. "For disturbing you at home."

"So, what now?" she asked.

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

"War?"

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

"You lost to one category three. You can't take us all on."

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

"I can talk cooperation," Anna said. "I have people that I answer to, though. They don't like uncontrolled factors, and you're an uncontrolled factor in an absurd shirt."

"Hey, I fought cannibals to get this shirt. I'll admit I do have a way of frustrating authority figures, but they frustrate me, so I'm not what you'd call sorry. I do recognise that my personal proclivities can make me difficult to work with. Talk to your people and ask what they'd like to see as a gesture of good faith. I'll see what I can do."

"You'll want a similar gesture from us too, right?"

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

“What do you know already?”

“Nothing,” Jason said. “All I know is that when I came back, someone hitched a ride. I don’t know who or why we didn’t arrive together. I learned where tonight.”

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

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

“Your sister’s a TV chef, isn’t she?”

“Yeah.”

“Does she know you’re back?”

“I wanted to get things settled before I came back from the dead. I don’t want to bring my mess down on my family.”

“Yet here you are in my home.”

“Just a reminder that I’m not the only one with family.”

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

“You’ll use Cabal personnel?”

“They owe us big, and they know it.”

“I can work with that,” Jason agreed. “I’m going to operate under the assumption that I can walk down the street without the Network trying to drag me into a van. But don’t think that I’ll keep letting your people come after me without reprisal.”

“And don’t think that we’ll just let you keep running rampant.”

“We understand each other, then. I’m going to let you get back to bed now. Stay in touch.”

He closed the fridge, which was the only source of light. Anna found the light switch in the dark, but he was gone by the time she flipped it. Her supernatural senses hadn’t been able to track him when he was standing in front of her, let alone when he vanished in the dark.

“Go to bed, right,” she muttered.

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

"I should have shot him."

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

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

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

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

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

"It didn't look like you were expecting it this time either," Taika said. "What happened, bro?"

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

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

"They gave you good terms?"

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

"How did he get Victor on board? Do you know?"

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

"That makes sense," Jason said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vortex Accumulator requirements (bronze rank):

- 1 [Magic Essence].
- 1 [Gathering Essence].
- 100 bronze-rank [Vortex Quintessence Gems].
- 1000 [Bronze Spirit Coins].

- Bronze-rank vortex accumulator will allow for cloud constructs of up to current rank (bronze) forms to function in zones of extremely low magical density. Higher-rank materials will be required for it to operate in higher-rank forms.

“That’s suspicious,” he muttered to himself.
“What is?” Hiro asked.

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

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

“I get that a lot.”

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

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

In the only instance of it ever happening in his experience, the blood weaver his team fought in the astral space had produced not one but three essences when looted. While not an unheard of event, it was a less common occurrence than even a legendary essence appearing.

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

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

Vortex Accumulator requirements (silver rank):

- 1 [Magic Essence].
- 1 [Gathering Essence].
- 100 silver-rank [Vortex Quintessence Gems].
- 1000 [Silver Spirit Coins].

- Silver-rank vortex accumulator will allow for cloud constructs of up to silver rank forms to function in zones of extremely low magical density. Local magical density in insufficient to support operation of gold-rank or higher vortex accumulators.

"A thousand silver coins," he muttered. "That'll take a good chunk out of the supply."

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

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

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

"You're a weird bloke, bro," Taika said and headed back inside.

AGENDAS

"Finally," Jason said. He stood in front of Hiro's apartment building with the cloud flask in his hand.

- Vortex accumulator (silver rank) complete.

- Available forms (iron rank): Cloud house (grand), cloud house (adaptive).
- Available forms (bronze rank): Carriage house (grand), carriage house (adaptive).

"Alright," Jason said happily.

"Are you certain you should do this in front of the apartment building?" Shade asked from his shadow. "We are fully exposed to the street."

"Yeah, I'd best take it around the side," Jason said. "Flaunting it out in the open might not be the best idea."

"What are you doing exactly?" Hiro asked.

"I told you," Jason said. "Sorting out a ride."

"Will it be like a magic carpet or something?" Taika asked. He had luggage for himself and Hiro piled outside the building entrance.

"Sadly, no," Jason said. "It will be a bit more roomy, though."

Jason made his way around the side of the building, between the apartment complex and the townhouse in which he had been staying. He

pulled the stopper from the cloud flask and two wisps of cloud stuff came snaking out to form two separate shapes, floating above the opening. One was a house and one was a long, wheelless vehicle, looking oddly like a hovercraft tour bus. He waved his hand through the vehicle image and then set the flask on the ground where cloud stuff started streaming out in earnest.

"It'll take about ten minutes," Jason said to Hiro and Taika.

The three men watched as the stream of cloud stuff slowly compressed itself into the form of a huge recreational vehicle. It was double-decked and generally enormous, at four metres high and fourteen metres long. The driving station was visible through a glass bubble sticking out from the top level of the vehicle's front.

"Bro, that's one of them super-expensive motorhomes. How'd you fit it in a bottle? Oh wait, magic. I'm still getting used to that."

"These things are basically a luxury yacht on wheels," Hiro said. "They normally go for upwards of three million, but I'm guessing this one cost a little more."

"I'm not clear on the exchange rate," Jason said. "I won this one in a competition and I'm still sinking money into it. Often literally."

"What kind of competition?" Hiro asked.

"Retrieving the symbolic weapon of an ancient order of assassins from a pocket universe."

"I have no idea how to respond to that," Hiro said. "I no longer have any basis for what ridiculous is."

"What's with the license plate?" Taika asked, prompting Jason and Hiro to look. It read RPR-MAN.

"Are you a repair man?" Taika asked. "That seems odd to put on an expensive magical motor home."

"Nope," Jason said. "I'm not sure what that's about."

"It's not repair man," Shade said, emerging from Jason's shadow. "It's Reaper Man."

"Shade, have you been messing with my cloud flask?"

"No," Shade said. "I think it recognises that I'll be the one driving."

"That's fair," Jason said. "I'm starting to have some suspicions about the cloud flask, though. It seems awfully reactive for a magic item."

"The cloud flask is a profoundly sophisticated item, bound to your soul. What you perceive as reactions to its environment are, in fact, affected by

your unconscious control."

"So you're saying that I'm the repair man," Jason reasoned.

"It's Reaper Man," Shade insisted. "I am quite certain it refers to me."

Hiro and Taika were watching the pair converse, their eyes glued warily on Shade. It was not the first time they had encountered him, but they were still unnerved by having the magical entity in their midst. Jason glanced in their direction.

"Blokes, I know this is all still fresh, but you're in the shallow end of the pool. You haven't even met Colin yet."

"Colin?"

"He's my other mate. He's still recovering after fighting with that prick who kidnapped me."

"Is he going to try again?"

"I don't think so," Jason said. "The local authorities have him in custody. Of course, those local authorities might try and kidnap me themselves, but hopefully, they decide to go in another direction."

A sleek, black two-door car pulled up in front of the apartment. Jason wasn't a car person and didn't recognise it, but it was clearly an old classic. Vermillion emerged, walking around the side of the building where the others were gathered. His attention was immediately drawn to Shade, while Jason eyed Vermillion's car.

"Nice car," Jason said.

"1967 Maserati Ghibli," Vermillion said proudly. "I've actually had it since '67 too."

"It's a little on the nose, isn't it?" Jason asked. "I mean, if you asked me what kind of car a vampire drives, that's exactly what I'd think of."

"I do have an image to maintain," Vermillion said. "And I don't think you're the one to go throwing stones over ostentatious black cars. Hello, Shade."

"Mr Vermillion," Shade returned the greeting.

Vermillion greeted Hiro and Taika, inquiring how they were handling the recent revelations they had experienced. Their still-uneasy reaction to the vampire, an object of fear even before they knew his true nature, told Vermillion more than their mumbled responses.

"Is this yours?" Vermillion asked Jason, looking over the huge white motorhome.

"Yep."

“Is it that crazy expensive European model? I didn’t pay you that much for the gold.”

“No, it’s custom,” Jason said. “Very custom. I brought it back with me.”

“You brought a motorhome back from an alternate reality?”

“I brought the power to teleport back from an alternate reality and this is what surprises you?”

“It’s a matter of perspective,” Vermillion said. “Teleport powers I can see in a magical alternate universe. RV dealerships seem like they’d be less prominent.”

“They had all kinds of magic vehicles,” Jason said. “There were magical carriages that were kind of like old-timey cars. I had a friend who used to drive us around a river delta on an airboat to do jobs. It was great.”

“An airboat? Like an Everglades-style airboat?”

“Yep. There was kind of a hover version for travelling through the desert too. Oh, and giant sand barges. It was very Jabba the Hutt. And an underwater subway. That was awesome.”

“I’d love to see all that,” Vermillion said.

“I have recordings of a lot of it,” Jason said. “I’ll show you some time. So, what brings you by? Is it about the Network, or are you just sending us off?”

“Annabeth Tilden did contact me.”

“What do you think of her?” Jason asked.

“She’s one of the good ones,” Vermillion said. “Be aware that she has people she answers to, however. She may oversee direct operations for her branch, but the people above her have the ultimate oversight.”

“Is that why she wanted you to play go between?” Jason asked. “Someone outside her chain of command?”

“I think she’s sensitive to what happens if you get pushed too far. She was very happy that you didn’t lay your kidnapping at the feet of the entire Network.”

“I’m not ruling anything out, at this stage,” Jason said.

“How are you holding up?” Vermillion asked.

“It’s not like I’ve never been kidnapped before.”

“It’s not?”

“I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

“We might have that chance sooner rather than later,” Vermillion said. “I actually came to tell you about my demotion. After everything that

happened, it's been decided to give someone else oversight of the Cabal's Sydney operations. I'm being moved to somewhere more modest."

"They're banishing you to the middle of nowhere?"

"It shouldn't be too bad," Vermillion said. "It's a little tourist town up the coast. We're anticipating a rise in magical activity in the near future, so they've decided to assign someone to keep an eye on things. Namely, me."

Jason laughed.

"I see. Well, would you like to travel with us, then?"

"I have my car," Vermillion said.

"Oh, I can sort that out," Jason said.

The size and weight limit of Jason's inventory slots had increased with his rank, and he successfully managed to fit Vermillion's car. He lifted the front end with his formidable strength and pushed it into the inventory window. The car vanished.

"What did you do to my car?" Vermillion asked.

Taika and Hiro goggled at the space it had been in. They were still far from inured to Jason's casual use of magic.

"I just stored it," Jason said. "It's fine. Probably."

"Probably?"

"I'll pull it back out when we get there. Come on, let's check out the new wheels. I haven't had a chance to test this thing out yet."

"I'm certainly curious," Vermillion said. "Why does the license plate say repair man?"

Anna stood at the end of the table addressing the Steering Committee.

"Asano knows his value to us," she said. "Or at least he's made some good guesses. Look at the coins I just handed out. He left those for me on my kitchen counter. We've had them checked and they're authentic, category-one spirit coins. Note the personalised design."

Keith peered at the coin between his fingers, depicting a man giving a thumbs-up. On the other side was embossed text.

PRODUCT OF JASON
G'DAY MATE!

“He didn’t just leave these on a whim,” Anna said. “He wanted us to see them. These are personalised, which means he not only has however many coins he brought back with him, but a looting power. If he’s figured out that looting powers are the only source we have for spirit coins in our world, and that our branch doesn’t have one, he knows that his value to us is immense. Even if he doesn’t, the actions of Lyon branch highlight how valuable he is. If we get Asano on board, our reliance on the International Committee for spirit coins is ameliorated, if not eliminated entirely.”

“That’s attractive, certainly,” a committee member said. “But in return, he wants to put us at odds with the Lyon branch. The European branches are just as strong as the Asian branches. I’m not willing to accept that kind of risk.”

The committee member, Miranda, had once been Anna’s counterpart at the Melbourne branch. Her overly aggressive methodology was viewed as a problem, but her political connections made getting rid of her less than easy. Instead, she was promoted to Sydney’s Steering Committee. This was an increase in authority but removed her from direct operational control. It also allowed the rest of the committee to balance out her inclination for direct action. Since her arrival, Miranda had been at constant loggerheads with Anna, to the point of her default position being to resist anything the other woman proposed.

“We have leverage to push the Lyon branch,” Keith said. “They massively violated protocol in sending operatives here. Especially a category-three assassin. Who we have in custody, for even more leverage.”

“But we have to answer for the other operatives,” Miranda said. “We have to assume they’re dead.”

“I’m sure they are,” Anna said, “but we aren’t responsible for that. They made a move on a politically independent entity, outside of our knowledge and in violation of our territory. If anything, their death in our backyard is another mess the Lyon branch has to answer for.”

“We’d still be making a political enemy of a powerful branch,” Miranda said. “All for someone you admit won’t join our ranks and capitulate to our authority.”

“We wouldn’t be unleashing him on the world,” Anna said. “He’s already out there. Check the news. Every behavioural concession we get from him is a win.”

“We can take him in hand forcibly,” Miranda said.

“Go to the holding cells and ask our guest how well that went for him,” Anna said. “He came crawling to us just to survive.”

“We know he cares about family,” Miranda said. “We can leverage them.”

“And he can leverage magic itself,” Anna countered. “What happens when he starts a national tour of children’s hospitals and talk shows? Are you going to threaten the family of the guy curing adorable kids of leukaemia?”

“Then we act directly,” Miranda said. “If we take him alive, we can extract his resources. The Lyon branch clearly thinks he’s valuable enough, even unwilling, to take the risks they took.”

“Are you suggesting we kidnap and torture him?”

“Of course not. He’s already threatened the secrecy of magic and left a trail of bodies behind him,” Miranda said. “Bringing him in is our responsibility.”

“Miranda,” Keith said. “No one at this table believes you want to bring him in out of duty. Let’s at least be honest with one another.”

While Jason had added enough extra materials to the cloud flask to have the interior of the adaptive form mask itself as thoroughly as the exterior, he declined to have it do so. One thing he had missed since reviving on Earth was the luxurious comfort of cloud furniture. As they boarded, the sides of the vehicle extended out to create interior space, like an ordinary, high-end motorhome.

Vermillion frowned oddly as he stepped inside. Jason realised why as he followed, immediately feeling better about the exorbitant resource cost of the vortex accumulator.

- You have entered a region of normalised magic. Your recovery rates will remain at normal levels without spirit coin consumption.

The interior of the motorhome was a mansion on wheels: two levels of opulence plus a roof deck on top. There weren't stairs, but an elevating platform moving between the three levels.

"Bro, your magic RV has an elevator."

On the lower floor was a luxurious lounge, bar, and kitchen and dining area, all surprisingly roomy once the walls were extended. The level above had a main bedroom with a sprawling bed, plus a second one with single beds and a bathroom. It also had the driving station at the front, which felt more like the cockpit of a spaceship, looking out through the curved glass oval. The roof deck had comfortable seating and another bar.

Jason had a large amount of control over the interior, able to reconfigure entire rooms. The four explored the vehicle, and Jason relished the chance to introduce the others to the luxuriant joys of cloud furniture. The interior was mostly cloud white but with embellishments in glorious sunset colours of orange, gold, blue, red and purple.

"It feels like I'm in the womb," Taika said happily from his cloud chair. "Except there's a bar. It's not easy finding chairs that are comfy for someone my size."

"Don't drink anything from the bar," Jason warned him. "It's magic-infused alcohol. It'll probably kill you."

"Even your booze is magic?" Taika asked. "That's hardcore."

Once the cloud flask had been ranked up to bronze, Jason had been able to store things in the cloud constructs even when it was in the flask. He didn't have the chance to stock up on amenities, since he had ranked it up in the astral space. It had some drinks his team had used to celebrate their rank-ups, but mostly just lower-value loot that was stored in the motorhome's discreet storage spaces. They themselves were dimensional spaces that could be contained within a dimensional space when the cloud construct was stored in the flask, which had excited Clive immensely. It was a feature only something as sophisticated as the cloud flask was capable of.

"This is nice," Vermillion said. "Really nice, but why aren't you just teleporting?"

"A few reasons," Jason said. "For one, I've been hankering to test this thing out for a while. For another, things have been chaos over the last few days."

"That's a severe understatement," Hiro said.

“Exactly, Uncle Hiro,” Jason said. “Some luxurious, uninterrupted hours on the road is a chance to give you a proper explanation of what happened to me and how we ended up where we are. So, let’s get going, yeah? Shade, get behind the wheel. You can drive this thing, right?”

“I am certain I can manage, Mr Asano.”

Despite what the other organisations believed, there was a peak leadership structure that existed within the Engineers of Ascension. It had been quietly preparing for years and a group of the top leadership were meeting in an office in New York City. There were four of them, two men and two women, each in an immaculate suit. They sat at a conference table, watching footage of the Sydney tollway shoot out, intercut with images from phone footage of the Starlight Rider and coverage of the hospital miracle.

“This man threatens our agenda,” Mr North said. “We cannot allow him to beat us to the punch.”

“Do we kill him?” Mrs West asked.

“He’s an unknown factor,” Mr East said. “Too much could go wrong. The better response is to accelerate the timetable.”

“That will still take months,” Mrs West said. “What about a more immediate response?”

“The Network will not allow these public displays to continue,” Mrs South said. “We keep our hands clean and allow them to deal with it.”

“Agreed,” Mr East said. “I formally propose we move up the timetable. All in favour?”

HEGEMONS

THE MAGICAL MOTORHOME MADE ITS WAY NORTH ALONG THE COAST. On the bottom floor, the windows had turned opaque as Taika, Hiro, and Vermillion watched some of Jason's earliest recordings on a hologram-like recording crystal projector. Jason's clean-shaven, iron-rank appearance was somewhat different from his current visage.

"What's going on with your nephew's chin, boss?"

Vermillion sensed an unusual surge of magic from above. He got up and rode the elevating platform up through a veil of sound-suppressing mist to the middle floor. There, in a room with three single beds, he found Jason's disconcerting magical companion, the nebula within a floating cloak. Its four disembodied eyes were fixed on the television on the wall, which was playing the old *Music Man* movie from the sixties. Vermillion had actually seen it during the original cinema run.

He felt the magical surge coming from the next room and touched the orange patch of mist on the white wall, next to the door. The mist door dissipated, allowing him access.

Jason was sat cross-legged on a large bed. There was an amber light shining from within his body, just dimming as Vermillion entered. It was clearly the source of the magic as he sensed the surge dim with it.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," Jason said. "Just consolidating the gains from my recent fights."

"I don't suppose you'd care to tell me how essence magicians get stronger?"

"You, I'd tell," Jason said. "The Cabal, though, they have to pay for the good stuff."

“I think they know already,” Vermillion said. “Institutionally, I’ve found that we overvalue secrets as a commodity. Maybe you could answer another question.”

“Sure,” Jason said.

“Why is a whatever-your-friend-is watching *The Music Man*?”

“Gordon likes old movies,” Jason said. “Mostly family movies and musicals. I have no idea what he gets out of them.”

“Gordon?”

“That’s his name.”

“His name’s Gordon.”

“Yep.”

“You live an odd life, Jason.”

“You have no idea,” Jason said with a laugh.

“Did your magical recreational vehicle come with the television installed?”

“Are you familiar with quintessence?” Jason asked.

“No.”

Jason plucked one that looked like a sapphire from his inventory and tossed it to Vermillion.

“I’ve seen these,” Vermillion said, peering at it closely. “We call them affinity gems. I’m pretty sure the Network is the main supplier.”

“Well, I collected a truckload of them where I’ve been. Since the magic flask that makes this vehicle can absorb items to gain new functions, at some point, I just started shovelling in the low-rank stuff to see what happened. I’m still figuring out all the utility options, like the crystal recording projector you were watching downstairs.”

“You might want to keep quiet about this thing,” Vermillion said. “People will come after you for this alone.”

“It won’t do them any good,” Jason said. “It’s bound to me and me alone. I don’t suppose people will believe me if I tell them that, though, will they?”

“No,” Vermillion said with a chuckle.

“What do you think of these paintings?” Jason asked, gesturing at the wall behind Vermillion.

Vermillion turned to examine the art, hanging side by side on the wall. He could immediately tell that the artist was the same and the brushwork seemed familiar, confirmed when he checked the signature in the corner.

“This is by Dawn,” he said. “An unusual new artist. Polarising, enigmatic.”

“You know her work?”

“A passing familiarity. When you get to my age, you develop a variety of interests, and art is timeless.”

He more closely examined the first painting, which showed two planets. At first glance, they both seemed to be Earth. Then he noticed that one had an accurate representation of the continents, while the other was slightly, but noticeably, off. In between the two planets, against a dark void, were four pillars.

The leftmost was filled with indistinct dark shapes and bright stars. The next depicted a grotesque, Lovecraftian mass of monstrous leeches with rings of lamprey teeth. The third was dark but contained an eye-like nebula, immediately reminding him of the entity in the next room. The last was similar to the first with its dark and indistinct shapes, but without the stars shining within.

He turned his attention to the second picture, which he realised depicted the planet from the first picture with the distorted versions of Earth’s continents. Orbiting the planet was a swarm of strange, floating cities. They ranged in style from ancient, with castles built of stone, through industrial age to modern and even sleekly futuristic. There was a nameplate in the frame giving the painting’s name.

“The Invasion of Pallimustus,” he read. “A lot of her critics have dismissed her work as fantasy kitsch because of works like this.”

“I don’t think she’s painting for art critics,” Jason said. “Do you know how long she’s been working?”

“I think her works first appeared around a year ago. A year and a half maybe.”

“I need to find this woman.”

“She’s famously reclusive, but I can make some inquiries.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

Vermillion’s gaze went back to the first image and the pillar that reminded him of Gordon. Then he glanced at the first pillar of darkness and stars. His thoughts drifted back to Jason’s spectacular demolition of the Blood Riders and his startling appearance as he did so. If the first pillar represented Jason, then, and the third Gordon, Shade would fit the dark

column at the end. That left the most horrifying of the four, with the mass of toothy leeches.

"Do you have a third mysterious companion?" Vermillion asked.

"Colin," Jason said. "He took a hit when that category three came after me, so he's resting up."

Vermillion turned from the painting to look at Jason.

"Mind if I sit?"

The cloud bed shrank into an armchair and another one rose up under Vermillion.

"That's handy," Vermillion said, settling into the chair. "So, you fought a category-three essence magician."

"Yeah, but he was crap. Last time I fought one, it took my whole team and we barely managed. I almost took this guy down solo. If he was even halfway decent, he would have kicked the snot out of me."

"If you get the chance, will you kill him?"

"No," Jason said. "As long as people come at me and not my family, I'm not going to hold grudges."

"That's good," Vermillion said. "You killed the others, though. The ones that took you away."

"I could have just gotten away. But as I warned my uncle, some secrets are dangerous to learn. They learned one of mine."

"I see," Vermillion said.

"What is it you're working up to?"

Vermillion nodded to himself.

"I watched you handle those bikers. You would have done the same to the EOA muscle in my cafe, right?"

"They came after me."

"And you would have killed them, just like the bikers. I haven't known you long, Jason, but I've seen people like you before. I've been where you are."

"You have not been where I've been."

"No? Drenched in battle? Possessed of powers that make you a danger, yet people keep coming, no matter how many you put down. Sound familiar?"

"A little," Jason conceded.

"I understand where you are, Jason, and I'd like to give you some advice. But I also understand that we don't know each other well and it will

probably come across as patronising."

"You know what?" Jason said. "Last time I switched worlds and friends gave me good advice, I was stupid enough to think I knew better. If you have some words of wisdom, I'm willing to at least listen."

"Alright," Vermillion said. "You need to stop killing people."

"I know."

"No, you don't," Vermillion said. "You tell yourself that you do, but there's always a good reason to kill the next guy that comes along. Maybe you need to stop them from coming back for revenge later. Maybe they're the kind of bad that the world is better off without. Maybe you need to keep a secret. There's always a reason, but the real reason is that it's just easier. Somewhere along the way, you lose that revulsion you had for taking a life. But you need that thing to be a person."

"You're saying I'm not a person?"

"I'm saying you won't be, if you keep going down this road you're on. Take it from someone who already walked it; the further down you go, the harder it is to come back. You need to start choosing not to kill people. Not just when killing them isn't the right choice but even when leaving them alive is the wrong one. If you can get away with not killing them, even if that comes with a price, then let them live."

"I'm not some wild killer who can't stop myself."

"No? Turn on the news, Jason. It's been nothing but all the people you killed for days, and they aren't even the latest people you killed."

"I'm not good at leaving people alive," Jason said. "Once the fight starts, my powers aren't designed to leave survivors."

"Then that's all the more reason to avoid fighting altogether. I know hitting back is your instinctive reaction, but you're not at war. You need to stop dealing with the world like you are."

Vermillion got up from his chair.

"I'm going to leave you be," he said. "I'm sorry if I crossed a line. It's just something I wish someone had told me a long time ago."

Jason sat staring at the four columns in the painting. His senses detected no magic, yet it felt like there was something hidden away, like the embedded

image in a magic eye poster. He couldn't shake the feeling that if he could look at it in just the right way, then secrets would be revealed.

Eventually, he gave up, although only for the moment. He rode the elevating platform up to the roof deck and looked out at the Pacific Ocean. The winter air was cold, but his bronze-rank body would not be uncomfortable even in almost any climate that Earth could offer. He would no longer need the bracelet in his inventory that had shielded him from the desert heat during his time in the other world. That said, he would certainly not throw it away, given the sentimental value.

Once again, his thoughts turned to the magical world and the friends left behind. He hoped they fared well and that they knew he was gone but not dead. He was troubled by the second painting, the one he had purchased after claiming the first under such odd conditions. The world it depicted was quite obviously the magical one on which his life and very nature had changed forever.

The symbolism was clear and the continents matched up with those on his map ability. Although he was no longer there, he was still able to call up the map of it. Even more, once he had two world maps to access, his inventory had labelled them. One, Earth, and the other Pallimustus, the name marked on the painting. He had never learned the name of the planet while he was there, as the inhabitants all just called it 'the world.'

He would need to find the artist, Dawn. Whatever connection she had to the other world, it was the closest he had to a clue on how to get back. In the meantime, though, his own world had affairs that needed tending. He had once thought to come home and resolve old wounds of the heart before leaving again, perhaps forever. Inevitably, life had become more complicated.

He had no idea what the World-Phoenix wanted out of him, and for the moment, he didn't care. The revelation that his world was full of magic, weak and thin though it may be, meant that he would not be satisfied leaving his family unprepared. If the revelation of magic to the wider world was truly inevitable, he wanted his family to be ready for the changes to come.

In this regard, dealing with the magical hegemons was an inevitability. The Cabal was the one to which he had the least inherent connection, but they were the group he had the more pleasant encounters with, through Vermillion. One man, however, was not the same as the organisation behind

him. This was especially true when, by his own admission, they kept many secrets to which Vermillion himself was not privy.

The Engineers of Ascension represented the closest to Jason's own motivations. They were preparing for the coming changes, which was what Jason wanted for his family, but he was deeply hesitant regarding the group. The strange drone men he met, and the circumstances under which he met them, left him deeply wary of the EOA's methodology and values.

That left the Network. They were the best fit for Jason, being essence users, but he had many well-founded reservations. For one thing, there was the mystery of how they made their members stronger. From his few brief encounters, it seemed that advancing through monster cores was the norm. Anna had not infused her aura with cores, but she had the anaemic aura of a fresh iron-ranker. He suspected that a set of essences was mandatory for executives of the Network.

He could forgive some of their heavy-handed approach in regard to Jason himself. He had certainly caused some very public trouble and was even responsible for a number of innocent deaths. While he had never invited the biker attack, he had gotten caught up in his own power trip instead of putting an end to it as quickly and efficiently as possible. People without the power to protect themselves had been the ones to pay the price of that.

From the Network's perspective, he was a powerful and reckless force that had appeared out of nowhere. He had trouble arguing against that assessment. It was not a surprise that they wanted to rein him in. His problem was that there did not appear to be a unified set of values. One branch might be acceptable to work with, while another would try and throw him in a hole.

Annabeth Tilden seemed to be a more or less decent person trying to do a job he had only made more difficult. That was a long way from the assassin who attacked him from ambush. Although ostensibly united, his interrogation of the man who was trying to transport him back to France revealed that the branches were caught up in often deep rivalries, especially across geographical lines.

Each continental zone apparently had rivalries within it, ranging from the friendly to the stark. Across continental boundaries, branches might be even more antagonistic with each other than with the local arms of the other hegemonic powers. The arrival of the assassin and his attempt to take Jason

had apparently been as much an attack on the Sydney branch as on Jason himself. This was according to the man he questioned; Jason felt differently on that particular point.

The complicated interplay of the Network's internal factions made Jason wary of becoming involved, but he was choosing to do so for several reasons. One was that the Sydney branch, from what he could tell, seemed decent. He was reserving final judgement until he saw more of how they operated. Another was that an affiliation might stave off some of the other groups who saw Jason as an opportunity rather than a danger. Their inclination to follow the Lyon branch in taking a shot at him might be curtailed by a Network connection.

Most importantly, the Network apparently had access to monsters. Monster cores were coming from somewhere, and Jason had developed a rough hypothesis. Vermillion had already told him that the Network was somehow intercepting monsters. Jason suspected that these monsters, unable to manifest normally, were somehow appearing in astral spaces, which the Network was entering in order to exterminate them. The terrorism readiness exercises would be cover for mobilising against those threats in populated areas as they seized control of apertures that were forming.

Jason had studied enough astral magic to know that regular astral spaces were unlikely to be the culprits. There was such a thing as a proto-astral space, more unstable and short-lived than a regular astral space. He postulated that for some reason, these proto-astral spaces were forming on the border of his world's physical reality with accelerated frequency.

One of the key reasons Jason felt confident about this was one of the many effects of the racial gift evolution he had still neither accepted nor refused.

- You will be able to directly enter proto-astral spaces coterminous with your location or directly leave a proto-astral space to a coterminous location.

The power to access those spaces for himself certainly seemed like solid bait for taking the power. Until he better understood the World-Phoenix's motives, however, he still declined to even consider taking the power.

For the moment, his intention was to do exactly what the Network wanted and quietly go away for a while. Once they had some kind of framework for cooperation, things could move forward from there. He had caused the Network a lot of trouble and was not opposed to extending them some of his resources by way of apology. He would not forget, however, that the Network had their own amends to make.

The possibility of cooperation came down to two factors, both related to the Lyon branch. If the locals were willing to stand up for their international counterpart's actions, he was done with them. If they were willing to stand against them on his behalf, though, he would reciprocate that goodwill. The second factor was the related issue of the other outworlder. He needed to know if the locals would help him, remain neutral and stay out of his way, or actively obstruct him. This was the crucial element that would determine his relationship with the local branch of the Network.

For the moment, it was time to put that aside. He was on his way home and his sister's birthday was tomorrow. He needed to figure out exactly how to make a grand reappearance.

GUILTY CONSCIENCE

"How long since you've been back?" Jason asked Hiro as the motorhome drew closer to their hometown of Casselton Beach.

"Your memorial service. There wasn't a body, obviously, so no burial or cremation."

"The body is just a vessel," Jason said. "It probably sounds weird, me talking about a soul, but I know more intimately than most."

"It still…"

Hiro shook his head.

"It still doesn't seem possible. I mean, you've shown me the impossible and I still have trouble believing it."

"Good," Jason said. "Don't go losing your sceptical outlook just because your nephew turned out to be a wizard."

"See, this doesn't help," Hiro said. "You go out of your way to make it seem absurd."

"It is absurd," Jason said. "We're in a magic motorhome made of clouds being driven by the son of Death."

"The what?"

"Actually, that might be a bridge too far," Jason said. "There's still a lot to ease you into. How's Taika doing?"

"He's gotten on board weirdly fast," Hiro said. "His father did me a good turn and I promised to keep Taika out of trouble. Give him a good job, make sure he doesn't get pulled too deep into the life. I have no idea how I'm going to explain all this to his dad. Have we pulled him into something dangerous?"

“That’s on me,” Jason said. “I’ve been treating this world like the rules are the same as the other one and they’re not. I need to get my head around that before even more people get hurt. I’ve been on a war footing in my head and that needs to stop. If I keep being violent, then I’ll just bring violence down on us all.”

Jason sighed.

“I got you and Taika caught up in my mess. I’ve been telling myself that I’ll do what it takes to keep you safe, but in my head, that meant being willing to go further and hit harder than the other guy. I’ve realised that’s less about being willing to do whatever it takes and more about getting caught up in a story I’m telling myself. It’s an ongoing problem I have that always seems to blow back on the people around me rather than myself. A willingness to do what it takes means that if what it takes is eating some humble pie, I have to be willing to do that.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out,” Hiro said.

“I used to think I was so clever. A natural politician. The reality is, even in a simpler society, I was out of my depth. Here I’m just flailing, like an angry child with a gun.”

“Maybe going home is what you need,” Hiro said. “Step away from all the magic and madness. Let yourself get grounded for a while. No one brings you down to Earth like family.”

Jason suddenly burst out laughing.

“What?” Hiro asked.

“I just realised that I’m more nervous about seeing my sister than when I had to go see a bunch of gods.”

“What?”

“Oh, yeah; gods are real. Just not local, that I’m aware of. I mean, they could be. I won’t know unless one of them rocks up to say g’day, which puts me in the same boat as everyone else, I guess. I think I might go check in with Taika and see how he’s doing.”

“Wait, gods?” Hiro asked incredulously as Jason wandered towards the elevating platform.

“Don’t feel bad,” Jason said. “Atheism’s a valid position to hold, based on the information you had available. It’s wrong, though. I’ll tell you all about it later.”

Jason rose to the upper level, where Taika and Gordon were sitting in front of the television on the wall.

“The reason it’s the best one is because there’s five of them,” Taika said. “If one man can make a difference, then five people can make five times as much difference.”

“Taika,” Jason said disapprovingly. “Are you introducing Gordon to the wrong *Knight Rider*?”

“Your magic bus yacht has good internet, bro. Who’s your provider?”

In winter, Casselton Beach went from sleepy tourist town to outright hibernation. The marina was at a fraction of capacity, with only a few charter boats still operating, catering to seasonal fishers. With the warmth of spring, luxury pleasure boats would return as wealthy holidaymakers arrived like bears emerging after their winter slumber.

Jason had hired out a marina berth for his cloud house, much as he had done in Greenstone. Shade drove the motorhome directly onto the water, to the alarm of Taika and Hiro, but it floated perfectly well. Then Jason ushered everyone off and he pulled out the flask to start the transformation from motorhome to houseboat.

“That’s quite a magic item,” Vermillion said. “Are there many like that… where you’ve been?”

“It’s pretty special, even over there,” Jason said. “I won it in a contest.”

“Like a raffle?”

“Not exactly.” Jason laughed. “Where are you staying?”

“The Cabal bought a place. It turns out there are a lot of expensive homes around here, once you get out of the town proper.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Lots of rich people keep holiday homes here.”

“I have to go see your mother,” Vermillion said.

“You bought it from my mum?”

“She is the pre-eminent upscale realtor in the Greater Casselton area.”

“Just because it says that on her website doesn’t make it true.”

“The house is close to town, but apparently secluded enough that people won’t notice the donors coming and going.”

“As in blood donors?” Jason asked.

“That’s right,” Vermillion said. “I only need to feed around once a week, unless I get very active. Recruiting locals is not a good idea, so each

week, the Cabal will send along one of the people we've cultivated for the purpose. They get a nice drive and enough money to live on for a month, so they aren't exactly losing out. They don't even have to do the driving themselves, since we aren't going to send them on a road trip woozy from donating. They get a driver."

"You know, I did check out that club of yours," Jason said.

"You did? My people didn't notice."

"They weren't meant to," Jason said. "I wanted to make sure you weren't lying about not killing people."

"Where's the trust?" Vermillion asked.

"I trust," Jason said, "but I also verify. Tell me your people didn't run my whole life through a sieve and I'll apologise."

"You're not worth that kind of effort."

"Is that right?"

"Yes, it is."

"What's my mother's middle name?"

"How would I possibly know that?" Vermillion asked.

Jason looked at him from under raised eyebrows.

"Okay, it's Marie," Vermillion admitted. "Can I have my car back, please?"

"You know, I'm going to be dealing with your mother a lot as well," Hiro said as they watched Vermillion drive off. "If I'm going to start up a development here, working with her commercial office just makes sense."

"Is that going to work out?" Jason asked. "As I recall, *my* mother came down firmly on *your* mother's side regarding your vocational choices."

"Once your grandmother comes around, Cheryl won't be a problem."

"And Grandmother Yumi's going to come around, is she?"

"She cares more about being right than anything I might have done. The prodigal son contritely returning home having learned his lesson is exactly what she wants."

"Yeah, good luck with that," Jason said sceptically.

"You know, we're both here to make awkward homecomings," Hiro said. "I'm going to start by going to see Ken."

“I’m going to wait until tomorrow night and pay Erika a visit,” Jason said. “I’ll wait until her birthday celebration wraps up. It’s falling on a Friday, so she’ll probably be having a party. If you go see Dad, he’ll probably drag you along.”

“Yeah,” Hiro said. “To annoy your mother, if nothing else.”

Jason sighed.

“I want to say that I can’t believe they got divorced, but I can.”

“What will you be doing before tomorrow night?” Hiro asked.

“Oh, I have some things to do.”

Kaito was on his way home when the phone affixed to his dash rang and he tapped the screen to answer.

“Hey, Ames,” he said in greeting.

“G’day,” Amy said, Kaito recognising that particular brand of weariness in his wife’s voice.

“Council meeting?”

“They’re all morons,” she said. “Why did I run for mayor again?”

“Because the mayor was a moron.”

“Right. Can I just dissolve the senate and rule with an iron fist?”

“I don’t think the Casselton Regional Council has a senate, Ames.”

“Boo. How are the girls?”

“They’ve been good,” he said.

“You sound weird,” Amy said. “You all right?”

“I’m having a… I thought… I don’t know. I’m having a weird day.”

“Weird how?”

“I’ll tell you about it tonight. I’m on my way home now.”

“You should go talk to Erika,” she said.

“Maybe I will.”

“See if you can talk her into cooking,” Amy said.

“Your ulterior motive is revealed,” Kaito said. “You know it’s her birthday tomorrow.”

“Tell her I’ll get her TV show a tax break.”

“We’ve told her that before,” Kaito said.

“Tell her I’m not lying this time.”

“But you are lying this time.”

“Of course I am. I can’t force that through the budget.”

“I’ll see what I can do. We’re coming up on home; see you tonight, love.”

“Love you.”

He ended the call and pulled into the driveway of his house. A glance in the mirror showed that he was looking haggard. He looked over to the house next door, seeing his sister sitting by the window in her lounge room, typing away on her laptop. He pulled out his phone and called her.

“Hey, brother,” Erika greeted, waving through the window. “What’s up?”

“Mind if I come over for a cuppa?”

“No worries. I don’t need to pick Emi up from football practice for an hour.”

Kaito extricated his two daughters from their safety seats, leading Hana by the hand and carrying Jace across the yard and up to the door, where Erika opened it to greet them. Erika brewed some tea while Kaito settled the girls in the lounge. Erika and Kaito then sat in the dining area where they could keep an eye on them.

“What’s got you so frazzled, brother? You don’t look so good.”

“I’ve been… seeing things. Since this morning. The first time, I thought it was a weird reflection, then that I just saw something wrong. I mean, it had to have been my imagination, but I just kept seeing him, over and over.”

“Him?”

“Jason. I went out, late this morning. Some shopping, some chores. Everywhere I go, there he is. I know I’m just seeing things, but I can’t stop seeing them anyway.”

“Well,” Erika said. “Maybe you should talk about this with your wife. See if you can’t figure out some reason you might feel guilty about something.”

“Erika.”

“Don’t ‘Erika’ me. You know what this is, Kaito. Ultimately, it’s better that she ended up with you than Jason, but that was going to be a train wreck in the best-case scenario. The way you actually did it? It’s like you found a psychological warfare specialist to devise the most effective way to hurt him, and you never had the chance to make amends for that.”

“He’d never agree to see us.”

“Because he knew that he’d stab you in the face.”

Kaito sighed.

“You really think that she’s better with me than him?”

“Long term, yeah,” Erika said. “Jason was a lot to deal with. He had a lot of hard edges and he never stopped pushing. I like Amy, I do, but she was always going to get consumed by Jason. You’re Jason with the hard edges sanded down. You know when to stop.”

“There was no stopping Jason,” Kaito agreed.

“Yes, there was, Kaito. You and Amy stopped him like a speeding car hitting a wall. He was finally starting to get it together when…”

She shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I know you’ve heard this from me before and I don’t mean to go dredging up the past. We all have sins behind us.”

“I just never had the chance to make amends.”

“I hate to break it to you, Kaito, but that isn’t the tragic part.”

“I know, I—”

He was interrupted by his phone.

“It’s Benny,” he said. “I should take this.”

“Go ahead,” she said.

Kaito took the phone into the kitchen. Shortly after, Erika started hearing incredulous sounds coming from Kaito.

“They what? Yellow? Wait, the bad guy from those movies? I’m not coming in if there’s paint fumes. I have the girls with me. Because she’s the frigging mayor, Benny.”

Kaito came out of the kitchen looking disgruntled.

“What happened?” Erika asked.

“Benny’s been maintaining the helicopter in the off season, but he went in today and someone had painted it bright yellow.”

“Someone painted your helicopter?”

“Yeah. They got into the hangar somehow, painted it yellow, and wrote the name of the villain from those superhero movies across it. What do superheroes have to do with my helicopter?”

“Are you talking about Thanos?”

“Yeah, the purple one with the weird skin beard.”

Erika erupted into laughter.

UNCOMMON MISTAKE

"YOU SHOULD COME TO YOUR SISTER'S PARTY TOMORROW NIGHT instead of just showing up after," Hiro said.

"Not a good plan," Jason said. "Ooh, smell that. I missed garlic."

They were in the kitchen of Jason's cloud houseboat as Jason prepared an evening meal.

"How much garlic are you putting in there?" Taika asked.

"Sopa de ajo literally means 'soup of garlic,' so a lot."

"It's a costume party," Hiro said. "You could come in disguise."

"Erika does love those," Jason said. "What would I go as, though? I'm not looking to steal Erika's thunder on her birthday. I wouldn't want anyone finding out who I was in the middle of it and causing a huge commotion. It's not like I packed a Zorro outfit and I'm not running around in the outfit they keep showing on the news."

"I got you this," Taika said, putting a shopping bag on the table. He took out a spring-action lightsaber toy. "I went with the red blade because your outfit seemed pretty dark."

"You think I should go as a lord of the Sith?"

"Bro, you pretty much are a lord of the Sith. You look less evil without the villain beard, though."

"I needed to shave it for something I was doing today. I'll grow it back after dinner."

"You can just grow back hair?" Taika asked.

"I have some magic hair growth ointment."

"Of course you do," Hiro said. "So, are you going to go to the party?"

“I’ll think about it,” Jason said. “I would like to see how they’re doing before I come back from the dead.”

While the meeting with his sister awaited him in the evening, the morning found Jason uncharacteristically restless and nervy. He went through his training routine, including combat training with Shade. Shade had a comprehensive expertise with the Order of the Reaper’s techniques, and his ability to generate physical force and create multiple bodies made him a useful instructor.

Jason used his meditation session to settle himself. Afterwards, to keep himself distracted, he decided to undertake a project he’d been thinking about and created a simple but original magical item. The magic theory collection he had inherited from Farrah didn’t have any advanced materials on artifice, the study of magic item creation. It did have some comprehensive, foundational works, however.

Farrah’s ritual magic specialty was related to formations and arrays, which had some interdisciplinary crossover with artifice. Formations were permanent or semi-permanent ritual effects. Arrays were formations layered in sequence or even atop one another. The array of ritual effects on the Network’s headquarters was beyond Jason’s ability to decipher, but he had no doubt that Farrah would have handled it easily.

After Clive’s months of tutelage, Jason was able to take in the fundamentals of artifice theory in a few hours. His existing skill book knowledge was incredibly useful in enhancing comprehension, as was his spirit attribute. Improved memory and learning speed were both aspects of spirit attribute enhancement that frequently went overlooked by adventurers. Jason learned of it from Clive, during one of many early attempts to get Jason more engaged with magical theory.

Jason’s project was to create a new variation of his throwing darts, the simple magic item he knew best. His plan was to combine some simple magic with materials produced by the chemical and engineering knowledge of his own world.

After plotting out the initial test design, he needed some materials. Some were basic stuff he had taken into the astral space and of which he

had a decent amount of left over. He'd done a good job of hoarding his limited resources, always prioritising powers over wasting his consumables. Many of the non-magical materials for his project would require a trip to the hardware store.

He left the houseboat and was walking along the pier when he heard someone yell out.

"Kaito!"

Jason turned at the sound of his brother's name. Someone was jogging along the pier, waving at him. Jason recognised him as Lawrence, one of his high school contemporaries.

"Kaito," Lawrence greeted as he caught up. "Hey, man. I haven't seen you in what? Six years."

"Something like that," Jason said. "How've you been, Lawman?"

Lawrence laughed.

"Lawman," he said, shaking his head. "I haven't heard that in a long time. I'm just back in town selling my old man's boat. You're looking good, man. I've heard you've got, what? Three kids now?"

"Two," Jason said.

"Right. I never picked you for the settling down type. With that Amy girl too. She did get hot that last year of high school, but hadn't you left by then? I thought she'd end up with your brother."

"So did he."

"Oh, you dog," Lawrence chortled. "I was sorry to hear about your brother, though."

"Thanks."

"We should catch a drink while I'm in town."

"Wouldn't that be nice," Jason said. "Two kids, man. Just getting a good night's sleep is a win."

"Yeah, no thanks," Lawrence said. "This is why I like a nice, clean child support payment. I haven't seen any of mine and I'm not going to. I make sure the baby-mamas know better than to let the little filth-balls anywhere near me if they want those payments to clear nice and promptly."

"It sounds like you've found the lifestyle that's right for you," Jason said.

"Damn right. All it took was a few loans from my dad and I've got a thriving business. Alright, I'll see you around, brother!"

Jason watched with distaste as Lawrence walked away. It felt like the man's personality somehow left an oily residue.

Jason went to a hardware store to make some purchases. When he arrived at the one he knew, it had been replaced by a fish shop. Jason was reminded that the world hadn't sat still in the six years since he last came home, and he had to look up a new hardware store on his phone. He could only find one of the big warehouse chains that presumably had squeezed out the local proprietors. At least the large store was able to supply him with the things he was looking for.

After returning home, he didn't immediately dig into his purchases. He found himself processing having been mistakenly recognised as his brother. It was a little unnerving; that was usually a mistake made only by the deeply racist. For all of Lawrence's many faults, being racist was not one of them. Lawrence hadn't known Jason or his brother well and high school had been a long time ago, but it was still startling.

Jason found himself in front of a mirror. Now that he looked, he could see the resemblance. The physique-refining process of going up two ranks had significantly enhanced the family resemblance. His skin was clearer, the chin less pronounced. Jason's face was still more angular than his brother's. His mouth moved more easily into a grin than Kaito's signature easy-going smile. He flashed that smile in the mirror with the open, inviting casualness that Kaito naturally exuded. Jason had spent years working to emulate it.

Looking at that smile in the mirror, he really did look like his brother. The smile fell away, the sparkling eyes replaced with a cold stare. He frowned unhappily and the mirror dissolved back into cloud-stuff, sinking into the wall.

"What are you doing?" Hiro asked as he and Taika returned to the houseboat. Jason was on the deck stirring the contents of a large tub with a stick.

“Making a ballistic gel mixture,” Jason said. “I couldn’t get exactly what I was after at the hardware store, but I picked up what should be a good substitute. Once I make some adjustments based on what I found on the internet anyway. Did you get a good car?”

Hiro’s last car had not been released from the police after being shot a number of times, so they had been out procuring a new one. Hiro’s brother, Jason’s father, had driven them to Castle Reach, which was the wealthiest of the small towns making up the Greater Casselton area.

“Wasn’t a problem,” Hiro said.

“That Castle Reach is a fancy town,” Taika said. “It’s all boutique stores and big houses. You don’t see a lot of small towns with European car dealerships.”

“I called in on your grandmother while I was there,” Hiro said.

“Yeah?” Jason said. “How did your mum respond to you turning over a new leaf?”

“It’s a work in progress,” Hiro said evasively. “Your father wanted to come check out where we were staying. I told him I’d show him around on Sunday, so no getting nervous and backing out on the big reveal.”

“It never crossed my mind,” Jason lied.

Jason sat on a chair in his room. He’d distracted himself with his project for a while, but once again, his mind was occupied by the upcoming reunion with his family. If it were just that he’d been away, that was one thing. But even without them thinking he was dead, there was a lot of baggage to deal with.

Upon first arriving in town, Jason had sent Shade to watch over his sister, his father, and his niece. If the Network or anyone else made a move against them, he wanted to be ready to respond. Thus far, he had respected their privacy enough to have Shade keep what he saw to himself.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “Your niece seems likely to become involved in an altercation in the immediate future.”

“Is it Network?”

“Not that I am aware of,” Shade said. “Perhaps you should see for yourself.”

Jason closed his eyes and sank his consciousness, projecting his senses through Shade's distant body. It occupied an innocuous shadow on the grounds of Jason's old school. He immediately spotted his twelve-year-old niece, Emi, in the same academy uniform he once wore. She was marching up to a group of boys picking on another student.

"Leave him alone, Bryce," she said to the obvious ringleader. Bryce was quite a bit larger than her, but she positioned herself between him and the boy slinking against the wall in fear. She planted her feet in front of Bryce and tilted her head back to glare up at him.

"Screw off, Emi," Bryce said.

"Not going to happen, Bryce," she said.

"Are you looking to get beaten up?"

"Where did you learn to bully people?" she asked. "Eighties movies? Do it online like a regular person."

"I'm not afraid to hit a girl, Emi."

Emi smiled at him like he was an idiot.

"The way I see it, Bryce, you have three options. One, you walk away. Spoiler: this is the smart choice. Option two is that you and your friends beat up a girl, which will not go well for you. Option three is a girl beats you up, which will go even worse. So, are you going to back it up or get yourself in more trouble than your daddy can get you out of?"

"You think I'm afraid of you?" Bryce snarled.

"No," Emi said. "I think you're afraid of what happens when my mum changes her mind about catering your mum's party, though. How does your dad normally take it when you stop your mother from getting something she wants? Sorry, stepmother. The new one is quite pretty, isn't she?"

Bryce paled.

"I'm going to let you go this time," he said, and started to leave. "Count yourself lucky."

Emi turned her gaze to the boy up against the wall.

"Thanks, Emi," he said miserably.

"Grow some balls, Hunter," she told him. "Your name literally means someone who kills things."

Jason withdrew his senses from Shade with a chuckle.

"She hasn't changed," he said happily.

"She seems quite intelligent for her age," Shade said. "I believe I recognised some behavioural traits there."

“Yeah, she’s smart like her mum.”

Jason opened his inventory to the outfit tabs. His old iron-rank combat robes had significantly more grey than his black bronze-rank one. The outfit was distinct enough from the images of the Starlight Rider that he was satisfied. He closed his inventory and went out where Hiro and Taika were watching more of Jason’s interdimensional travel vlog.

“Bro, your friend looks like Ron Perlman from that show with the woman from *Terminator 2*.”

“Gary? Yeah, he’s a great guy. Where did you put that lightsaber?”

“Still in the kitchen,” Taika said.

“So, you’re going to the party?” Hiro asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said.

“I wanted to go too,” Taika said. “I don’t have a costume or know any of your family, though. I just like parties.”

IT'S COMPLICATED

THE NAKED WOMAN'S FEET TRAILED ON THE FLOOR AS SHE WAS dragged through concrete halls, not cooperating even enough to stumble along. The closest thing she had to clothing was the collar around her neck. They only used category-two guards for her, which tied up some of their most valuable personnel. After what she had done to the category ones in her first escape attempt, though, it was a necessary allocation of resources. They dumped her in a plain concrete room. They moved her around a lot, never anywhere better.

The magical array securing the complex had been engraved right into the concrete. Every door was magically locked, which meant that the collared inmates would be unable to open them, even if they had the chance. Her captors were unconcerned about letting the inmates see it; they were all collared and unable to so much as explore the array with their mystical senses, let alone grasp their function.

The guards were trying to keep her on edge, never giving her anything reliable or consistent, even in the miserable conditions. Sometimes there was a steel cot with no bedding, other times a plain mattress on the floor. She was never left in the dark and her sleep never went uninterrupted by blasting music or being hosed down with water. They knew she could handle the wet and the cold, and consistently denied her bed, blanket, or clothes. All she wore was the suppression collar.

The only exceptions were short periods when she was given a warm bed and uninterrupted rest. These brief interludes were only given as fleeting samples of what capitulation could offer.

Two men watched her through a security monitor. Adrien was older, his stern features unflinching as he observed the woman on the screen. Michel was younger and visibly uncomfortable.

"We don't even know if she can understand what we're saying to her," Michel said.

"She understands," Adrien responded without turning his gaze from the monitor. He had no need to look to sense his subordinate's distaste for the methodology being employed.

"This isn't working," Michel said.

"She's strong," Adrien said, "but that's good for us. The impediment is hope. It's only been a few days and she still thinks there is something other than surrender. In time, the hope will die."

In her concrete box, the woman bided her time, reserving her strength. Her collar-suppressed senses were unable to explore the magic engraved into the walls and floors and ceilings. Instead, as the guards dragged her through the hallways that made up the concrete warren, she mapped the engravings with her eyes the same way she mapped the layout.

Her escape attempts were never the earnest attempts to break free that her captors believed. She had let them think she was turned around in the rat nest of subterranean tunnels. It never occurred to them that her understanding of ritual emplacements was sufficient to grasp their function from visual inspection alone. Each escape attempt, a seeming scramble to find a path out, was actually intended to get her eyes on crucial elements of the magic array that her captors had not led her past themselves.

Just as she plotted out the layout of the complex in her head, she plotted out the workings of the magical array. She was approaching the point where she would understand enough of it to extrapolate the rest, after which point it became a matter of how to turn it to her own ends. In the meantime, she would endure whatever indignities they chose to inflict.

Erika put her phone away.

"Mum sent her apologies," she said, leaning into her husband, Ian. "Via text."

The party was in full swing as people swarmed in, out and around their house. There were two barbecues roaring in the gazebo, which also contained the beer fridge. Eskies scattered about contained even more booze—no one touched Erika Asano's kitchen fridge.

She was dressed as the Riddler, complete with green bowler hat. The long, green coat covered in question marks helped with the winter cold, although the roaring barbecues kept the gazebo toasty and there was a fire pot on the patio.

"It's probably for the best," Ian said, lifting off her green bowler hat to kiss the top of her head. He was dressed as a pirate. "Your dad would be enough to set her off," Ian said, "but he brought his brother with him too. I think he was trying to cause trouble."

"Yeah," she wearily agreed.

"Look at it this way," Ian said. "Emi is staying at Ruby's house, your mum isn't here to get in a fight with your dad. You have two dozen people here who love you and all your potential friction points are gone. You can just have a drink, and then another drink and have a nice time."

"How do you always know what to say?"

"Well, you're smarter than me, so I just wait for you to get tired and then be as supportive as possible."

"You're a sly one, Ian Evans," she said.

"I had to be, to get the best woman in the world to agree to marry me."

"Charmer."

"Sadly, she died and I had to settle, so you lucked into all this," he said, gesturing up and down his body. She flicked him on the nose.

"Ow!"

They made their way around the guests, Erika receiving birthday congratulations as she checked out the various costumes. Most were store-bought or thrown together with minimal effort. She felt a longing for her big parties in Melbourne. On balance, though, she liked where she was. The costumes might have been better in Melbourne, but she preferred the people inside them here. Old friends and family were better than media executives looking for networking opportunities.

"Greg's done well," Ian pointed out.

“Oh, that’s an impressive Iron Man outfit,” she said. “That’s Greg in there?”

“Yep.”

“That must have taken him weeks.”

“He’s very lonely.”

“Just because he can spend so much time on an impressive costume, that doesn’t mean he’s lonely.”

“Must be a coincidence, then.”

“You’re so bad,” Erika scolded.

“Who’s that in the Sith outfit?”

“Not sure,” Erika said. “The lightsaber’s a bit naff, but the rest of the outfit is incredible. That cloak seems really spooky.”

“There is something about it, isn’t there?” Ian said. “Shall we pop over and say g’day? See who’s under there?”

They made their way in that direction, but the person somehow slipped away unnoticed.

“Did you see him go?” Erika asked as they arrived at the spot he’d been standing in.

“No,” Ian said, looking about in confusion. “I could swear I was looking right at him too.”

Jason spent most of the party in the shadows, using a combination of his cloak and subtle aura projection to make people overlook him. He watched his sister and her husband, glued to one another the entire night. He watched his father, Ken, who brought Hiro but left early. He had gone next door to watch his grandchildren while their parents joined the party.

Kaito wore a pale suit and pastel shirt. Just as Jason had rejected his mother’s attempts to impart Japanese culture, Kaito had rejected their father’s attempts to impart pop culture. Jason observed that his brother’s grasp of classic pop-cultural knowledge still appeared to begin and end with *Miami Vice*. Kaito’s wife, Amy, was dressed as the Fourth Doctor from *Doctor Who*. This permitted her a long coat and longer scarf to hold off the winter chill.

Amy had wavy brown hair and fair skin. She was pretty, but only by Earth standards; compared to the supernaturally beautiful women of the other world, she was rather plain. Nonetheless, Jason was stopped dead as she walked into view. Feelings he had convinced himself were long dead surged up within him.

Jason and Amy, the girl next door, had been best friends going back as far as Jason could remember. They were inseparable growing up and careened together into the confused hormones of adolescence. She had a crush on Kaito from an early age, which only complicated Jason's already complex feelings towards his brother.

As she had matured and moved past Kaito's disinterest, she had eventually come to reciprocate Jason's feelings. It was only years after it came crashing down that Jason came to accept that he had been the one pushing their relationship in that direction. He realised that she went along as much to avoid losing him altogether as anything else. If they had been older and wiser, they both might have handled things better. He certainly wouldn't have leveraged their friendship the way he had, a shame he carried to the present day.

It was the end of their first semester of university when things came to a head. They had both moved to Melbourne to study, him at the University of Melbourne and her at La Trobe. She returned home for the semester break, while Jason stayed in Melbourne to revel in his newfound freedom.

Jason was unsure exactly what happened between her and Kaito during that semester break and had no interest in learning more. The fallout had been bad enough. Jason had dropped out but stayed in Melbourne, while Amy transferred to a university in Sydney.

Aside from one disastrous trip home in the immediate aftermath, Jason had not returned to his hometown until now. He watched his brother and sister-in-law from the shadows, unseen.

Erika and Ian looked for the man in the strange cloak, asking their guests if they knew who it was, but no one could tell them. He wasn't seen again as the party wound down. In the aftermath, Erika stood in the lounge room,

taking stock of the mess. She tiredly rubbed the back of her neck, and when she looked up, the man in the cloak was standing at the far end of the room.

"You kept vanishing on us," Erika said.

He hit the spring action on his plastic lightsaber.

"The dark side of the force is a pathway to abilities that some would consider… unnatural."

Erika found the voice familiar but couldn't place it.

"The party's over and it's time to go home," she said. "Who are you?"

Jason pushed back the hood of his magical cloak.

"Hello, Eri."

Erika stood stunned as Jason waited, not saying any more as she stared at him, wide-eyed. She took one hesitating step forward, then another, before hurriedly shuffling across the room.

"Jason?" she asked, her voice soft as if afraid that speaking too loudly would scare him off.

"G'day," he said with a warm smile.

Her hands went up, unsure whether to hug him or grab him or just poke him to see if he was real.

"How?" she whispered.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "There'll be plenty of time for explanations."

Her eyes searched his face, as if it held the answers to questions that had plagued her for a year and a half. It was not quite the same face she remembered. She took in the beard, the two small scars. The eyes were the same, dark and penetrating. So was the vaguely smug, perpetual half-smirk.

"Where the hell were you, you frigging arsehole?" she asked, throwing herself forward and clutching him in a fierce hug. His body felt different.

"Have you been working out?"

He chuckled, returning the hug.

"Work keeps me fit," he said.

They stood in the lounge, Erika clinging to him like she was afraid he'd disappear again. Ian's slightly inebriated, sing-song voice came drifting in from the hall.

"Erika… who's ready to walk the plank?"

He walked into the room with a plastic cutlass on one hand and a bottle of rum in the other, wearing only some pirate-themed boxer shorts and a tricorn hat. He spotted his wife hugging the man in the dark cloak.

“What the… Jason?”

“What the hell kind of answer is ‘it’s complicated’?” Erika asked.

“An accurate one,” Jason said. “I’m going to tell you everything, I will. It just has to come in stages.”

“Why?”

“Because some things you need to see for yourself before you can accept them.”

Jason sat across from Ian and Erika at their dining table. Ian had made a quick trip to obtain pants, while Erika held Jason’s hand across the table, as if afraid he’d make a break for it.

“You expect me to just accept that?” Erika asked. “I knew there was something shady about what happened. I was looking into it for months. There was some kind of crazy coverup…”

“I know,” Jason said.

“You know? But you let me keep thinking you were dead?”

“I didn’t know then,” Jason said. “I had no say in what happened. I only got back a week ago and I’ve been playing catchup.”

“You’ve been here a week? Back from where?”

Jason sighed.

“Alright. I’ll give you the broad strokes, but you probably won’t believe me. When you just lay it out, it comes across as quite ridiculous.”

“Compared to a conspiracy where I had to back off instead of getting murdered?”

Fury twisted Jason’s face twisted into that of a savage stranger.

“Who threatened you?” he asked, his voice full of dark promise.

“I was looking into what happened with this cop, back in Melbourne,” Erika said. “He pretty much torpedoed his career trying to help me. He finally told me to back off because people who dug too hard were turning up dead. I know that sounds like some crazy conspiracy.”

“No,” Jason said. “I’m pretty sure I know who that was. Broadly speaking. I’m sorry you’ve been caught up in all this.”

“In all what? Seriously, Jason. You fake your death and vanish? What’s going on?”

“I didn’t fake my death, Eri. Look, this is going to sound insane, even by murderous conspirator standards. It started when I got caught up with this… let’s call him a fringe religious extremist. He never intended to get me involved; it just happened by accident. Next thing I know, I’m a very long way from home, with no way back.”

“You couldn’t pick up a phone?”

“No,” Jason said. “No phone, no internet, no radio.”

“Where were you? The Sahara Desert?”

“No, the Kalahari.”

“What?”

“It’s further south.”

“I know where the Kalahari Desert is, Jason. You’re telling me you’ve been in Africa this whole time?”

“Yes.”

“And you didn’t think to tell anyone when you left?”

“I didn’t leave, Erika. I was taken.”

“You were kidnapped?”

“Not on purpose, but essentially, yeah.”

“You were accidentally kidnapped. And taken to Africa.”

“I did say it would come across as ridiculous.”

“You know they have phones in Africa.”

“Not where I was.”

“You couldn’t go somewhere there was one?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s complicated.”

Erika let out a groan.

“What happened to your apartment?” she asked. “You’d better not say gas leak.”

“It wasn’t a gas leak. I’ll tell you all about it, but not tonight.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think you want me to tell you the reason again.”

She let out another frustrated groan.

“You look different,” she told him. “You sound different.”

“Part of my training,” Jason said. “I do a thing with my breathing that makes my voice different.”

“Training?”

“It’s a martial arts thing. Kind of.”

“There was a Shao Lin temple in the Kalahari?”

“I like your new voice,” Ian said. “It’s deeper, with a little hint of reverb. It’s sexy.”

“Thanks,” Jason said brightly.

“How can I be sure it’s even you?” Erika asked.

“Because you want to punch me in the face,” Jason said. “You know that feeling.”

“You’re right,” she said. “I do want to punch you in the face. How about you keep telling us your ridiculous story instead?”

“Alright, so this guy took me by accident. I… managed to get away, but it turns out he had a whole family of nutjobs and they caught me immediately. That was when I met these other people they caught, and those people were private security contractors. They’d been hired to look into this crazy family living out in the desert and got themselves caught.”

“Private security contractors?” Ian asked. “You mean mercenaries?”

“Whatever you want to call them,” Jason said. “Mostly, they work for the local authorities. They helped me get out of the situation I was in and recruited me.”

“They recruited you to be a mercenary?” Erika asked.

“Yes.”

“You?”

“Yes.”

“Did they mistake you for someone else?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“This is not helping my self-esteem, Eri.”

“Your self-esteem doesn’t need it. You’re telling me you’re a mercenary?”

“Not right now,” Jason said. “It was the only way we could think of that might get me a way home. These people, they trained me up over a few months. They became my friends.”

“They taught you to shoot people?”

“I’m more of a knife guy.”

“Oh, you’re a knife guy,” Erika said lightly. “ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR GODDAMN MIND?”

“I warned you, Eri: ridiculous.”

“You weren’t wrong,” Erika said, swiping the bottle of rum from her husband and taking a swig. “Alright, go on.”

“So, I worked this job for a while until I stumbled into a way back home. That was a week ago. I’ve been staying with Uncle Hiro while I get a handle on everything.”

“Uncle Hiro knows you’re back?”

“Yeah. It’s just him and you two. No one else yet. Not from the family anyway.”

“This is a lot to take in, Jason,” Erika said.

“I know. It’s only going to get worse once we start going through the details.”

“Maybe we just leave that for tonight,” Ian interjected. “How about we just be happy that Jason has come back to us?”

“That would be nice,” Jason said. “I’m going to need your support when it comes to Mum and Dad, Eri. And Kaito.”

“Oh, carp,” Erika said. “That’s going to be a huge mess.”

“Yep,” Jason agreed.

She squeezed his hand.

“Are you still saying carp instead of crap?”

“Sometimes,” she said. “Carp is worse than crap.”

“You’re a chef,” Jason said. “Show some professionalism.”

“No. Carp is the worst.”

“And people say I’m weird,” Jason said.

“You came back from the dead claiming to be a knife mercenary,” Erika exclaimed. “Knife mercenaries and coming back from the dead aren’t things that happen.”

“Yeah,” Jason said awkwardly. “This is going to be an interesting week for you.”

“Do you have somewhere to stay?” Erika asked. “Your old room is a guest room now. Emi had Kaito’s old room, because it’s the biggest.”

“I have a houseboat at the marina.”

“You’re living on a houseboat?” she asked. “Like the Highlander? TV show *Highlander*, obviously.”

“That was never a good TV show,” Jason said.

“Let’s be honest; it was never a great movie,” Erika said.

“I liked that movie,” Ian said.

“Me too,” Jason agreed.

“It was a good idea with a middling execution at best. Search your feelings, boys; you know it to be true. That movie coasted on the soundtrack.”

“Oh, hell yes,” Jason said. “I haven’t heard a Queen song in a year and a half.”

A BIG DOSE OF NORMAL

Jason returned to Erika's house in the crisp air of the winter Saturday morning. After giving his sister a night to process his sudden return, he was expecting a thorough grilling. He wanted to bring her into the fold as quickly as he could but knew that dumping everything at once was a recipe for disaster. He didn't want her making any mistakes because of something Jason communicated poorly.

Erika had arranged for their parents to come over to let them know about Jason's return, with Kaito and Amy scheduled to arrive after. Jason, Ian and Erika were waiting in the lounge room, in Erika's plush chairs. They weren't cloud furniture, but they were the next best thing. Erika's phone bleeped and she checked the text.

"Oh, bloody hell."

"Mum?" Jason asked.

"She's too busy, apparently," Erika said. "She told me that she'd be here. I told her it was important."

"Are you really surprised?"

"It would be nice if she actually did surprise me for once and didn't blow me off," Erika said.

"You should have had Kaito set it up," Jason said. "She'd turn up for that."

"You're right. I didn't think of that."

"We'll stick with the plan. Dad should be here soon, with Uncle Hiro. Then we can bring Kaito and Amy over."

"Are you sure you're all right to see them?" Erika asked. "It's been a lot longer than just since you died. Went away. Oh, carp. I still haven't got my

head around this."

"When I was so far away that I didn't have the choice," Jason said, "it put a lot of things into perspective. Mum wasn't wrong that the best thing to do was just accept it, but she really needed to wait a year before giving it. Maybe two. You know she's the one who actually told me about it?"

"You're kidding," Erika said.

"Nope," Jason said. "Mum always liked Amy, but she was with the wrong brother. It kind of felt like she was calling to say that I was never good enough and now she had proof."

"I'm starting to see why you rushed back and hit town like a thunderstorm," Erika said.

"It took me years to move past what happened," Jason said. "I don't have to tell you that. You were propping me up the whole time."

"Are you sure that you have moved past it?"

"Nope," Jason admitted. "But at this point, staying away hurts more than coming back."

"So, what do we do about Mum?"

"She's a busy woman, obviously," Jason said. "She'll figure it out eventually."

"You're just going to not tell her?"

"Why don't we tell Kaito that she already knows and let nature take its course?" Jason suggested.

"Isn't that a little cruel?" Erika asked. "Wait a second. Kaito said he kept seeing you the other day."

"That was fun," Jason chuckled. "I shaved for that."

"He thought he was going crazy."

"That was the basic plan," Jason said.

"Did you turn his helicopter into the Thanos copter?"

Jason laughed. "Did you have to explain it to him?"

"His wife did."

Jason smirked.

"Jason, if you just came home for some petty revenge, you may as well have not come."

"Of course I didn't. Petty revenge is just a perk."

"You did do a pretty good job with the helicopter," she acknowledged.

"It's the off season," Jason said. "It's not like he's using it right now and it's not even proper paint. It's water soluble and will practically just hose

off."

"So, what's the big mystery?" Ken asked as he came inside and hugged his daughter. "Hiro was so adamant about me coming along that I thought he was roping me into smoothing things over with your grandmother for him. I told him he was better off asking your Uncle Shiro."

"No, this is more than that," Erika said, leading him into the lounge.

"So, what's is going on?"

"Hello, Dad."

Ken went dead still on hearing Jason's voice behind him. Slowly, he turned around, as if fearful of what he would see. His breathing became ragged when he saw Jason standing in the doorway. After a moment of shocked stillness, Ken exploded forward to catch his son in a huge hug. Jason caught the familiar smell of Old Spice and soil as he returned the hug.

"Is it really you, boy?" Ken asked, not releasing Jason.

"It's me," Jason said.

Ken continued to hold on to Jason like he would never let go.

Things with Jason's father went very differently than with Erika. She had launched into an interrogation almost immediately, while Ken only wanted to know two things: was Jason alright and was he back to stay. He couldn't stop grinning as his teary eyes drank in the son that had been returned to him.

"I'm not looking to disappear any time soon," Jason assured him. "Not like last time. Things are kind of up in the air right now, professionally, but I'm looking to base myself out of Casselton Beach for at least the near future."

"Professionally?" Erika asked. "You know, I've been going over what you told me yesterday and the more I think about it, the more it comes off as a pile of hot nonsense."

"How much did you tell her?" Hiro asked.

"About what I told you, at first."

“None of the really implausible stuff, then,” Hiro said.

“That’s not the implausible stuff?” Erika asked, her voice rising an octave.

She turned to Jason and saw that he was looking suddenly nervous.

“They’re here,” he said.

Shortly thereafter, there was a knock on the door, followed by the sound of it opening.

“G’day,” Kaito’s voice called out. “We’re arrived for the mysterious family meeting.”

“Lounge room,” Erika called back, glancing at Jason only to realise that he’d vanished like a ghost.

“Do you know who that car outside belongs to?” Amy asked as they came in. “It looks like the Batmobile.”

“Hey, Dad,” Kaito greeted. “Are you alright?”

“Better than alright,” Ken said. “Who has the girls?”

“Mrs Glenn.”

“Mrs Glenn.” Ken chuckled. “She used to look after you when you were little.”

“She’s great with the girls,” Amy said. “The only concern is that she’ll get too attached and flee the country with them.”

“You should be safe there,” Erika said. “I doubt Mrs Glenn knows a good passport guy.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Amy said. “She seems like a woman with a history.”

“So, what’s the big mystery?” Kaito asked.

“That would be the owner of the car outside,” Erika said. “He seems to have disappeared on us. Again.”

“Can you blame me?” Jason asked from the doorway. “I’m nervous and love dramatic entrances.”

Amy and Kaito turned around, wide-eyed.

“G’day, Kaito, Ames. How’ve you been?”

Kaito pointed at Jason.

“You… but… did… how…?”

“I guess we know who painted the helicopter,” Amy said. “Not dead, then?”

“I gave death a try,” Jason said. “Wasn’t for me.”

Despite her light voice and flippant words, Amy's face was stricken, her eyes panning over Jason, cataloguing the changes from the boy she remembered.

"Why don't we all sit down?" Ken suggested.

After Jason talked the rest of his family through essentially the same thing he had told Hiro and Erika, he left them alone in the lounge to digest while he went into the backyard. It was the same backyard he had growing up, although there was a strange sense of alienation. Part of that was his heightened senses; he was literally looking at his childhood haunt with new eyes.

There were also the details that showed the passage of time. The old, dilapidated fence had been stripped out and replaced, although he guessed his father had done that. The gazebo had been torn down and rebuilt larger from scratch, to better suit Erika's style of culinary entertaining.

The lemon tree was bigger and showed signs of care. Erika clearly wanted those lemons and had taken the time to foster fruit growth. The flower garden their mother had always insisted she'd find time for and never did was now a herb garden. The patio furniture had been replaced; their mother had purchased for appearance, whereas Erika and Ian chose comfort. The wood and cloth folding chairs were a little daggy, but nice to sit in.

He could sense his family inside the house. Their emotions practically shouted through their auras. There was a lot of confusion and no small amount of suspicion, mainly from Erika and Amy. They were the smartest and knew him the best; they had immediately realised how much he was withholding, not that he made any great attempt to sell the authenticity of his story.

The first one to make his way outside to join Jason was Kaito. They each claimed a folding lounger and neither spoke for a long time.

"That was a prick move with my helicopter," Kaito said, finally breaking the silence.

"You don't like yellow?" Jason asked.

“Not that. Pulling a prank that my wife had to explain to me. Reminding me of all the things you and her have in common.”

“You’re reading too much into it.”

“No, I’m not,” Kaito said. “I know the way you think, and you think I took her from you.”

“I used to, Kai. It took me a long time to realise that I pushed as much as you pulled, but that doesn’t make what you did okay.”

“No,” Kaito acknowledged. “It doesn’t. Jason, is this thing going to hang over us for our entire lives?”

“Yeah, brother, it is,” Jason said. “Remember that one of the things you and Amy have in common is that you worked together to gouge the heart out of my chest and back over it with a school bus.”

“We could have done things better,” Kaito said. “It was always going to be bad, though. I am sorry, Jason.”

“Nobody cares if the guy who stabbed them in the back is sorry, Kaito. They care that they got stabbed in the back.”

“Do you even know how stifled she felt by you?”

“Yes,” Jason uncomfortably conceded. “It took me longer than it should have, but yes.”

“There was no good way it was going to go.”

“So you decided to go with the worst way? Thanks for that.”

Kaito sighed and got to his feet.

“I was hoping that you coming back from the dead meant we could… I don’t know. Move past it.”

“We can,” Jason said, also standing. “But I’ve been waiting six years to say those things, Kai, and I think maybe you’ve been waiting to hear them. I’m probably going to say them again, too. In fact, I suspect I’ll be kind of an arse about it.”

“As long as you stick around to say them, I’ll listen.” Kaito offered his hand. Jason shook it.

“Then I’ll go complain to my wife,” Kaito added.

“Oh, you prick.”

“I’m probably going to be a bit of an arse as well,” Kaito said.

Kaito went back inside, sharing a look with Ken, who passed him coming out. Jason hadn’t paid a lot of attention to reading emotions through auras and was unable to read the complex interplay between the two men conveyed through that brief glance.

Ken pulled his son into another long hug.

"I'm sorry I didn't stand up to your mother more," he said.

"It's alright, Dad."

"No," Ken said, pulling back to put his hands on Jason's shoulders and look his son in the eyes. "It was my job to hold the family together and I let you be pushed out."

"Dad, none of it was easy and we all made mistakes."

"And it was my job to rise above them, which I didn't."

Ken brushed his fingers over his son's scars, bisecting one eyebrow and leaving a hairless line in his beard.

"Are you alright?" Ken asked softly.

"Honestly?" Jason said. "No."

Jason sat back down while Ken claimed the chair vacated by Kaito.

"I'm not the person I want to be right now," Jason said. "I've done things. Had things done to me. I'm not making great choices right now and I'm hoping that being home will help me to get back some of what I lost along the way."

"This mercenary work," Ken said, broaching the topic like an animal handler trying to catch a wild creature. "You saw fighting?"

"Yeah."

"Did you…?"

"Yeah," Jason said.

"We're here, son. I'm here. Whatever you need."

Jason looked over at his dad.

"You know what I really need?" he asked. "I need a big dose of normal. I need the things I'm cranky about to be that my brother married my ex. I need my problems to be finding out-of-season chutneys and my mum being disapproving and stand-offish. Hell, I need Koji to come by and hypocritically accuse me of being a banana. Is he still in town?"

"Your cousin? Sure. Shiro bought the caravan park a couple of years ago and left Koji to run the place. Into the ground, mostly."

"Uncle Shiro bought the caravan park? I thought he was all about those high-end developments."

"He is," Ken said.

"Oh," Jason said. "He's going to replace the caravan park with a bunch of fancy holiday homes? Try and turn Casselton Beach into the next Castle Reach?"

“Pretty much. Your mother’s snobbish hands are all over the project.”

Jason sighed. “I’m going to have to tell Mum that I’m back.”

“Erika said she was meant to be here,” Ken said. “Of course she’s too busy for her son who came back from the dead.”

“In fairness, she doesn’t know that’s what this was about.”

“Erika said she told her how important it was,” Ken said. “But, of course, nothing’s more important than whatever your mother is doing at any given moment.”

“I’m sorry you and Mum got divorced, Dad. I know that I was the catalyst.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Jason. Your death just brought things that had been building up for a long time into the open.”

Ken got up from the chair.

“I don’t want to just be complaining about your mother the whole time, so I’ll let someone else have their turn.”

“There’ll be time enough,” Jason said. “I’m looking to stick around for a while.”

“Plenty of time to pile on that normal you’re looking for,” Ken said. “And I will, believe me. I love you, son.”

“Love you, Dad.”

Erika came out and claimed Ken’s vacated seat next to Jason as Ken went back inside.

“How was it with Dad?”

“It was good,” Jason said.

“Did he complain about Mum?”

Jason just chuckled.

“You can expect a lot of that,” Erika said.

“Is he okay?”

“None of us were great after you died. He blamed himself for you not coming home after Amy and Kaito. Not as much as he blamed Mum, but still.”

“I wish things hadn’t gone the way they did.”

“And you found a wish-granting genie out in the desert, did you? Or are you just whining about things you can’t change?”

“It wasn’t a genie,” Jason said. “Too far south. Also, real genies don’t grant wishes. They’re pretty much just elemental spirits with an overdeveloped sense of self-importance, from what I hear.”

“Oh, look; it’s a stream of utter nonsense spoken with total conviction. You really are back. I still don’t understand why you weren’t able to at least get us word that you were alive.”

“You will,” Jason said. “I’ll tell you everything, and soon.”

“Why not now?”

“Because what I have to tell you isn’t something you can just accept. Especially from the guy spouting utter nonsense with total conviction. Extraordinary claims and extraordinary evidence, you know?”

“You have some extraordinary claims to make?”

“You have no idea. The other thing is that I just want things to be normal. Or as close as I can get. At least for a little while. Before things start becoming strange.”

“You know, Jason,” Erika said, “I’m not sure you’re being vague and ominous enough. Any chance you could crank that up?”

“Ask and ye shall receive, big sister.”

“I didn’t actually mean—”

“Change is coming, be we prepared or not,” Jason intoned, leaking a little of his aura to add gravitas. “You’ve heard the stories of the starlight man.”

“You mean that Starlight Rider guy? That’s all that’s been on the news for days.”

“People are going to look back and realise this was the beginning.”

“The beginning of what? And stop using that voice. You’re just daggy, not creepy.”

“You’ll have to wait until I show you what’s coming,” Jason said in his normal voice. “You won’t believe me if I just tell you. But change is coming, Eri.”

“What change? What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about everything. Everything is going to change. I need to get the family ready for that.”

“Jason, you sound like a crazy person.”

“I’ll sound worse before I’m done, believe me. For today, just let it go. We’re just going to go around in circles if you keep hammering away.”

Erika groaned.

“You’re a pain in my arse, you know that? Not even twenty-four hours since you sprang back to life and I’m ready to kill you all over again.”

“It’s been done before.”

“I’ve known you your whole life, Jason. Don’t try to distract me with your nonsense.”

“Just give me some time, Eri. Please.”

“Fine,” she said unhappily. “We need to talk about Emi right now, though. She took Uncle Jason’s death very hard and me running around playing conspiracy theorist didn’t help. She’s finally back in a good place and I don’t want her to get off track. You know the academy has her in their advanced program.”

“Of course they do,” Jason said, smiling. During his most self-pitying moments, his razor-sharp little niece had been a big part of keeping his head, if not above water, then at least not too far below the surface.

“How do you want to tell her?” he asked.

“Come back tonight, for dinner. We’ll herd the mob out and it can be you, me and Ian when she gets home from her friend’s house.”

Jason got up from his chair.

“I’ll go, then,” he said. “Text me a time and I’ll be here.”

“You aren’t done yet,” Erika said. “There’s one more person who hasn’t gotten you alone.”

Jason turned his gaze towards the house where he sensed Amy approaching the back door.

“I wasn’t sure she’d want to speak with me,” he said. “I’m not sure I want to speak with her.”

“No one is going to pretend this situation is easy, Jason. Or normal. But she’s not going anywhere, so unless you’re going to disappear again, you have to face her sooner or later.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I have things to do here.”

“Then you and Amy will have to figure out how to be in a room together.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Send her out.”

MOPPET

Jason stood on the patio, looking out at the yard. He sensed her approach but didn't turn around.

"I wasn't sure it was really you," Amy said, talking to his back. "The others don't realise how different you are yet. There's the physical stuff. The chin, obviously, but the beard hides that a little. The scars. You're a little taller. But that's not all. You move differently. Sit differently. You don't watch your surroundings the same way. It used to be with curiosity but now it's something else. Wariness? At first, I thought you might be some kind of impostor, trying to scam the family for money."

"But now you know it's me."

"Yes."

Jason turned to face her.

"What clinched it?" he asked.

"You're hurt and angry. You can talk about letting it go and moving on, but it's not so easy, is it?"

"No."

"I am sorry I hurt you, Jason."

"I'm sorry you hurt me too. It's one of those things, isn't it? You don't want to, but you're so damn good at it."

"I know you had Erika in Melbourne, but did you have anyone for support while you were away? You don't do so well all on your own, Jason."

"I have friends. Good friends. I had to leave them behind, though. I came back as unexpectedly as I left."

“You never did explain that properly,” Amy said. “Or at all. You’re lying about Africa.”

“Everything I said is accurate.”

“That’s not the same as telling the truth.”

“No, it’s not,” he agreed.

She sighed.

“You know, you weren’t the only one to lose the most important relationship in your life.”

“I wasn’t the one who destroyed it,” he said.

“You did your part,” she countered. “You’re too smart and introspective to not have figured that out by now.”

“Leaving me I understand,” he said. “But the way you did it? You knew me better than anyone. You had the knowledge and the tools to hurt me more than anyone else could. And you used them.”

“I told myself it had to be a clean cut,” she said. “That if I didn’t put a thorough end to it, then there would always be something there.”

“It wasn’t clean,” Jason said. “And there will always be something there.”

“I know,” she said. “We both hurt one another when that was the opposite of what we wanted. After you died, Kaito and I had a lot of talks about what we did. To you.”

“I wasn’t just hurt, Amy. Take it from someone who’s been destroyed more than once; if you wanted thorough, you got exactly what you were after.”

“What happened to you, Jason?”

“You did, remember?”

“I didn’t pay for that crazy car in the drive. Where do you make that kind of money?”

“I’ve been working.”

“As a private security contractor, you said. Did you find some gold out in the desert or something?”

“Actually, yes.”

“You never used to lie to me.”

“I still haven’t.”

“Then why are you still holding back? You can talk about reconciliation all you like, but I see the anger behind those eyes. You’re seething with it.”

Jason turned away again.

“My anger can hurt people, Amy.”

“Really? You’re the Incredible Hulk now?”

Jason had excellent aura control. There was only one person who could make him lose it enough that it flared out. Amy staggered back. He quickly restrained it; he should feel sorrier than he was. He turned to see her looking at him fearfully.

“What was that?” she asked.

“I told you my anger can hurt people. Not a metaphor, Amy.”

He strode into the house.

Keith knocked on the open door as he appeared in the doorway of Anna’s office.

“What did I tell you?” he asked.

“They went for it?” Anna asked, getting up from behind her desk.

“The committee has tentatively approved opening preliminary negotiations with Asano.”

“Tentative, preliminary negotiations?” Anna asked. “You don’t want to qualify that some more?”

“Seriously, Anna,” Keith said wearily. “Learn to take a win.”

“What about Miranda?”

“She was a loud voice, but also a solitary one. There’s a reason that no one else spoke up at that meeting.”

“Yeah, because hedging your bets is always a sign of decisive leadership.”

“Good job on the biker spin,” Keith said, firmly changing the subject. “Getting the State Police Commissioner to start talking up a drugs crackdown was a solid move. ‘Drug-fuelled biker frenzy’ is a nice sound bite.”

“Riling up reactionary sentiment about drug use may not be great for society,” Anna said, “but it sure helps us right now. The Cabal stepped up on this one and largely cleaned up their own mess. Craig Vermillion really has them convinced that Asano represents an opportunity and they know that their relationship with Asano goes out the window if we set him on a war footing.”

“I think the opportunity he represents is what got us over the top,” Keith said. “When you look at what he did to our French guest, it’s clear that putting him down would cost us. Inversely, it means that he’s potentially a treasure-trove.”

“How are things going with the Lyon branch?”

“Slowly. They haven’t gone much past admitting they have someone, somewhere in custody. They refuse to say who or why, despite the fact that we know. Did you get anything from the Frenchman?”

“He’s not talking. No surprises there.”

“Can you go harder?”

“I don’t need the International Committee strictures to know not to torture people, Keith. Interrogation works; it just takes time. Right now, he’s still waiting for his branch to get him back. Once he realises that we’re not giving him back any time soon, the doubt will start to seep in. When we get him to engage, we’re on the path. We’re not giving him back any time soon, right?”

“Definitely not. We’re milking this debacle for everything we can get. The Lyon branch is actually offering some generous concessions; they really want us to stop asking about their prisoner.”

“Please tell me that the committee isn’t going to give him up without pushing the Lyon branch on their outworlder.”

“They won’t. They’ve realised how important the outworlders are.”

“I’m not sure that they have. That any of us have for that matter. I had my team put together a dossier on everything we have on outworlders. I’ll forward it to you, but the gist is that the Network may be about to go through the largest change since the manifestations started escalating more than a century ago.”

“It’s already happening,” Keith said. “We’ve kept the lid on this incident, but sooner or later, the magic is going public. Once we revealed ourselves to the governments, it was only a matter of time.”

“What happens when it really breaks?” Anna asked. “I know there are plans in place.”

“Yes, but you know what they say about plans,” Keith said. “I’m not allowed to share them below the committee level anyway. That’s true for every branch.”

“You think Miranda is adhering to that?”

“That’s her mistake to make,” Keith said. “You need to focus on cracking the Frenchman, Sebastian, and on making some kind of agreement with Asano. Obviously, he won’t be joining the fold, after what happened.”

“Maybe we can mash our problems together,” Anna said. “I’m willing to bet that Asano left quite an impression, so maybe we put them in a room.”

“Does Sebastian know Asano got away from his men?”

“Nope.”

“So, if Asano walked in on him, apropos of nothing…”

“It might give him a jolt we can use,” Anna concluded. “We just have to convince Asano that he can walk in here without us closing a net on him. So, who is going to do the negotiating?”

“You and me, plus a government liaison.”

Anna groaned.

“I know,” Keith said.

“The Prime Minister’s office has been pressuring us to send the Frenchman home. I hate this government so much. There isn’t a foreign interest they don’t fall over themselves to capitulate to. If they saw a rerun of *’Allo ’Allo,* they’d try to smuggle secret plans to the French hidden in a sausage.”

“A rerun of what?” Keith asked.

“Never mind.”

“Also, Gladys,” Keith said. “She pushed her way into it and the committee isn’t willing to push back. They know the Brisbane branch has been trying to poach her again.”

“When are we meeting with Asano, then?”

“I’ve already contacted Vermillion,” Keith said. “He’s going to set up a time for us, then we’ll go up the coast. He lives in some little beach town, which might be nice.”

“We’re giving him home ground advantage?”

“Unless you want to meet him in your kitchen again.”

Ian and Erika watched out the window as Jason pulled his absurd black sports car into the driveway.

“That’s his car?” Ian asked as the gull wing door on the driver’s side opened vertically and Jason stepped out.

“He’s too young for a mid-life crisis,” Erika said.

“How much do you think it cost?”

“No idea.”

“And he’s a private security contractor?” Ian asked. “I guess shooting brown people for Americans is lucrative. It seems weird. Jason was always so progressive.”

“He was also poor,” Erika said. “I love the boy, but he was always better at holding ideals than living up to them.”

They met Jason at the door and let him in.

“How did you afford that car?” Erika asked without preamble.

“Shooting brown people for Americans,” he said, stepping into the foyer. “Don’t you remember how poor I used to be?”

Erika and Ian shared a surprised glace as they went inside. They made their way into the kitchen, where Ian started brewing some tea.

“You’re on time,” Erika said to Jason.

“You don’t have to sound surprised.”

“I kind of do.”

“Emi isn’t home yet,” Ian told him.

“I know,” Jason said.

“Oh, you do, do you?” Erika asked. “How is that, exactly?”

“Mysteriously,” Jason said. “I’m very mysterious now.”

“Is that so?”

“You think I’m not?”

“I think you should tell us what you were up to all this time,” Erika said. “You have no idea what I went through when I thought you died. People were clearly lying and there was some kind of crazy conspiracy theory cover-up. I thought I was going nuts.”

“She was getting a little erratic,” Ian agreed.

“You don’t have to worry about that anymore,” Jason said. “Now that I’m back, I won’t let anyone treat you that way.”

“I don’t want your protection, Jason,” Erika said. “I want to know what’s going on so I can protect my family for myself.”

“You will,” Jason said. “Consider this a warning, though; once I tell you, there’s no going back.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that when I tell you everything, everything changes. It will upend your most fundamental understandings of the world you live in.”

Erika narrowed her eyes at Jason. “Did you join a cult?”

“Of course not.”

“Are you sure?”

“I didn’t join a cult, Erika.”

“You’re talking a bit like someone who joined a cult,” Ian said. “It would make sense that you were gone for so long. Cults like to isolate people from their support networks while the indoctrination takes place.”

“I did not join a cult,” Jason insisted.

“So, you’re still an atheist, then?” Erika asked.

“Not… as such,” Jason admitted.

“You joined a cult,” Erika said.

“I didn’t join a cult!”

“It really sounds like you joined a cult,” Ian said.

“I did not join a cult. I’m not an atheist because I met a…”

Jason cut himself off, letting out a frustrated sigh.

“Look, set aside a day,” he said. “Make sure Emi is taken care of and you have no other commitments. I’ll tell you everything. It’ll take some time to go through it and even more to process it. I’m not kidding, Erika. This will change your life.”

“Are you going to explain why you were talking about that starlight person on the news?” Erika asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “I’ll explain it all. Answer every question.”

“Will your cultist friends be there?”

Jason buried his head in his hands.

“I should have thrown away that stupid token,” he complained.

Erika and Ian watched through the window as Emi was dropped off by her friend’s mother. She eyed the black car in the driveway, walking all the way around it before making her way up to the door.

“Whose car is that?” she asked her parents.

“We have something to talk to you about,” Ian told her, and the family made their way into the lounge. They sat on the couch, Emi in the middle

with a parent on either side.

"You two are acting weird," Emi said. "This is how you told me about Uncle Jason. Did someone die?"

"No," Ian said with a chuckle. "Nothing like that."

"Actually, it's kind of the opposite," Erika said.

"Someone came back to life?" Emi asked.

"Still sharp as a tack," Jason said, appearing in the lounge room doorway. Emi went dead still, staring at him for several seconds. Then she burst forward like she was fired from a rocket, Jason crouching to catch her in a huge hug.

"Hey, Moppet," he said, tousling her hair.

It was a long time before she let him go. Finally, she stepped back to critically look him over, while holding both of his hands in hers.

"You look different," she said.

"I am different."

"Did you get some work done?" she asked, letting go of a hand to experimentally poke his chin.

"I did not have any work done," came his indignant answer.

"Must be an optical illusion with the beard," she said. "Where did the scars come from?"

"I did some things that certain people didn't like," Jason said. "They did some things that I didn't like."

"They hurt you?"

"Yes."

"Did you hurt them back?"

"They got caught and punished by the local authorities," Jason said.

"Is that your car outside?"

"Would you like a ride? If your parents say it's alright."

Emi turned to look at her parents, who glanced at each other before nodding.

"Not too long," Erika said. "Back in time for dinner."

ALWAYS TELL THE TRUTH IF YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH IT

JASON LED THE UNCHARACTERISTICALLY DOCILE CHILD OUTSIDE AND they got into his car. She goggled at the gull wing doors and sleek interior. She was even more startled when the car took off without Jason touching the steering wheel. For a long while, they drove in silence, Emi watching Jason contemplatively. She kept one of his hands in a tight grip.

"Why did you go away without telling us?" she asked finally.

"I didn't get to choose that," he said.

"Like you were kidnapped?"

"Not exactly, but kind of."

"By the people who did that to your face?"

"No," he said. "That was someone else."

"Where were you?"

"Africa."

"Someone kidnapped you and took you to Africa?"

"Something like that."

"And you couldn't contact us in all that time?"

"No."

"I'm twelve, not an idiot. You expect me to believe that?"

"You will," he said. "Once you hear the whole story."

She lapsed into silence again and it was a little while before she spoke. When she did, her voice was almost a whisper.

"Why did you let me think you were dead?"

He looked at her face as she wiped moisture from her eyes with the back of her hand.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” he said. “If I had the choice, I would never let that happen.”

“Mum went through a conspiracy theory phase,” Emi said. “It looks like she wasn’t so crazy after all.”

“I heard about that.”

“Uncle Jason, what aren’t you telling me?”

“Lots of things,” Jason said. “I have a lot to show you.”

“You’re talking around something,” she accused.

“You know you’re stranger than me, right? How are you twelve? You’re like the reincarnation of a sneaky old lady.”

“Uncle Jason…”

“Yes, I’m talking around something. You really want to know?”

“Of course I do.”

“Alright,” he said. “What if I told you that magic was real?”

“That’s nonsense,” she said.

“Agreed,” Jason said. “What if I told you that it was true anyway?”

“You’d need some compelling proof,” Emi said. “The weight of evidence for an extraordinary claim must be proportioned to its strangeness.”

“You’re quoting Laplace? You couldn’t go with Sagan and at least pretend you’re not that much smarter than me?”

“Stop dodging, Uncle Jason,” she said. “I’m going need an explanation better than magic.”

“Or some evidence proportional to its strangeness, right?”

“If you could prove magic is real, then you’d make millions of dollars and be all over the news.”

“I did make millions of dollars and get all over the news,” Jason said.

“The news has been nothing but that thing in Sydney for days.”

“Yep,” Jason agreed.

She narrowed her eyes at him, looking eerily like her mother.

“You’re saying that you’re the Starlight Angel?” Emi asked.

“I prefer Starlight Rider,” Jason said. “Angel comes with connotations I’m not entirely comfortable with.”

Shade pulled to a stop and the doors opened. They had driven to Castle Bluff, Shade stopping at the impressive coastal lookout. Jason got out and Emi followed. Although the Mid North Coast enjoyed mild winters, there was no one else around as the day turned into evening. Emi took his hand

and they sat on one of the public benches set up on the lookout. The sun was dropping low behind them, leaving the sky over the Pacific a rich purple.

"Do you believe in magic, Emi?"

"Of course I don't. You got weird, Uncle Jason."

Jason took a deep breath to steel himself.

"I have secrets," he said. "Secrets that I haven't told your parents about, yet. I will, but I think you can handle them a little better than they can. Take a look at my car."

They turned around on the bench to look at the car.

"Pack it up, Shade."

The car exploded into a swirling mass of darkness that swept over and vanished into Jason's shadow. Emi leapt to her feet, staring wildly between Jason and the spot the car had vanished from. She walked over, feeling the air with her hands as she stepped cautiously through the space it had just occupied.

When she turned back to Jason, he was draped in his combat robes, his starlight cloak shining and a huge, dark motorcycle next to him. He pushed the hood back off his head to reveal his face.

"You're him," Emi said.

"I'm him," Jason said.

"How?"

"Magic."

"Magic isn't real."

"That's a reasonable position to hold in the absence of evidence to the contrary," Jason said.

Emi warily moved closer to him, looking him over. His cloak shone with starlight and there was a sword at his hip. She trailed her fingers over the snakeskin leather of his robes, shaking her head.

"The Starlight Angel was able to heal people," she said.

"Yes."

"Can you heal people?"

"Yes."

"What about Grand Nanna?"

When he had last seen his maternal grandmother, she had been in the early stages of Alzheimer's. Jason's mother had her placed in a hellaciously expensive private care community in Castle Reach.

“Is she still at Garden Shore?”

Emi nodded.

Jason called up a portal arch, startling Emi once again. He reached out and took her hand.

Garden Shores was an expensive assisted living community with extensive staff and state-of-the-art medical facilities. A small number of large cottages nestled amongst a sprawling garden of native plants, situated along a picturesque shoreline of craggy rocks. Behind them were various buildings for administration and other services.

In a secluded part of the garden, in a copse of eucalyptus, a line of shadow drew its way across the ground. An arch of glossy obsidian rose up from the shadow, the darkness rising to fill the arch. A short while later, Jason and Emi emerged from the dark arch, her hand grasping his in a rictus grip. She looked around, wide-eyed, before doubling over with nausea.

“It’ll pass,” Jason said. “Most people throw up, the first go around.”

“I’m all right,” Emi, standing up straight but looking peaky. The same fortitude that made her adore theme park rides helped her to endure her first taste of dimensional translocation. She turned her gaze back to her surroundings, then immediately began moving off, touching the grass and the trees.

“It’s not a holodeck, Emi,” Jason said, amusement in his voice. “We’re really here.”

“That’s thirty kilometres,” she said.

“Yep.”

“Did you drug me?”

“You think I drugged you?”

“Getting dosed with something that makes me suggestible and knocks me out long enough to bring me here is more plausible than magic powers. A hallucinogenic makes more sense than your car disappearing, and the nausea could be a side effect of the drugs.”

“I went through what you’re going through now,” Jason said. “The sceptical mind, as it turns out, does not handle the truly outrageous all that well.”

“Are you complaining that I’m not more gullible?”

“Not at all. You’re going to experience a lot of strangeness and sorting out the real from the unreal is only going to get harder.”

“So why should I believe it wasn’t drugs?”

“Think about your own thought processes. They’re lucid, clear and analytical. Which is weird, because you’re twelve. Shouldn’t you be obsessed with a boy band or video games or something?”

“Just because you were basic at twelve doesn’t mean the rest of us have to be, Uncle Jason.”

“I’m getting owned by someone who can’t reach the high shelf,” he mock-complained. “Loving this day.”

“Get to the point, Uncle Jason.”

“Right, yes. Your thoughts. Lucid, analytical. Admittedly, it’s a subjective viewpoint, but if you were dosed up on the kind of drugs that made the impossible possible, then your head shouldn’t be as clear as it is.”

“You isolated me,” Emi said. “Took away any comparative viewpoints to measure against.”

“That’s a good point,” Jason conceded. “I originally intended to show your parents all this first, but I think that you and I can show them together. You can help me.”

“You really haven’t told Mum and Dad?”

“The only ones from the family who know are you and your Great Uncle Hiro. Come on; let’s go see Nanna. I haven’t been here in a long time, so I’ll need you to tell me which one of these is hers.”

Emi led the way, leading Jason by the hand.

“Mum doesn’t let me see Grand Nanna very often,” Emi said as she looked around to get her bearings in the evening twilight. She didn’t show any nervousness except for the tight grip she kept on his hand. Jason could feel her trepidation at the thought of her great grandmother’s condition through her aura.

“She’s gotten pretty bad,” Emi said. “She’s usually thinks that I’m Mum or Grandma when they were little.”

Jason nodded. He had only seen the early stages but had kept up an email correspondence when he set off for university. Her emails had become increasingly incoherent over time before stopping altogether. He felt pangs of shame that he had let his bitterness and self-pity stop him from coming back home to see her when she could have used it the most. He

wondered if that was why he had brought Emi here, despite the trouble it would inevitably stir up.

"Actually," Jason said, stopping. "Before we go see Nanna, I should make a phone call."

Jason's phone was in the clothes he had switched out for his combat robes to impress his niece with and he had to fish it out of his inventory. As soon as he did, it bleeped with messages from his sister.

"Missed a call from your mum," Jason said, even as Emi's phone started to ring. "I'm guessing that'll be her."

Emi nodded as she took her phone out, then handed it to Jason.

"Oh, come on," Jason said.

"You're the responsible adult," Emi said.

"Says the girl who's twelve going on forty," Jason said, taking the phone. "Erika, hey."

"It's time to come back, Jason. Also, did you give me a fake number? When I tried to call you, it said your phone was out of area."

"I think we were going through a tunnel. We've got one thing to do before we come back."

"What tunnel?"

"Oh, here's that tunnel again."

"There aren't any tunnels around here."

Jason hung up and handed Emi back the phone.

"You're a bad man," Emi told him.

"I prefer naughty," Jason said. "It's sexier."

"Uncle Jason, I'm twelve."

"Sorry about that. I mean, you've had the talk, right?"

"Yes. Stop being gross."

"Sorry."

He took his own phone and called a number that Craig had provided him.

"Asano?" Anna said.

"G'day," Jason said. "Do you prefer Annabeth or Anna? I'm going to go with Anna. Anna, I'm here with my niece and I thought you'd like a heads-up."

"About your niece?"

"No, about curing my grandmother's Alzheimer's. I thought maybe your lot would like to cover it up so it doesn't make as big a hullabaloo as

the last thing."

Silence came from the other end of the line.

"Anna?"

"Do you have any concept of how many problems I have with what you just said?"

"It sounds like you might want to swear, but I've got you on speaker and my niece is twelve, so you probably shouldn't."

"What?"

"It's Garden Shores Assisted Living Community, just outside Castle Reach. Thanks, Anna."

Jason hung up over the bluster coming from the other end.

"Who was that?" Emi asked.

"You know the Men in Black?" Jason asked. "That was them. Well, the People in Black."

They avoided the reception building as Emi led them to the cottage occupied by Jason's maternal grandmother. Jason had his cloak dimmed down to black and occasionally wrapped it around Emi when a staff member passed them by.

"How did they not see us?" Emi whispered as they watched a pair of orderlies wheel a laundry basket towards the utility building.

"My cloak makes us harder to see in the shadows," Jason said. "With magic."

They reached the door. Jason took out a small crystal key, one of the single-use opening devices he made for dealing with normal and iron-rank locks.

"Let's see if this works," he said, touching it to the card-reader lock on the door. The key evaporated into the air and red light switched to green. Jason lightly pushed the door open. He glanced at Emi, who was staring at where the key vanished.

"It's a lot to take in, isn't it?" he said softly. "Just be thankful that no one is trying to eat you."

"What?"

"I'll tell you about it later," Jason said, leading her inside.

Emi slowed down and Jason accommodated her, still reassuringly holding her hand. The room was dark and Jason lit it up with stars on his cloak rather than switching on the light. Jason's grandmother was sitting in the dark, glassy-eyed. She didn't react to their presence at all and Emi shrank behind Jason. He looked down at his niece.

"Once I do this, we're going to leave immediately, okay? We don't want to be around to answer questions."

Emi nodded.

"Are you ready for this?" he asked.

She nodded again.

"Are you sure?"

"Come on, Uncle Jason."

"Alright," he said. "Here we go."

He raised an arm in the direction of his grandmother.

"*Feed me your sins.*"

Emi's eyes turned into round headlights as a feeble red life force emerged from the old woman in the armchair, with unpleasant colours teeming through it. The tainting colours leaked out in a stream that moved across the room and into Jason's hand, pouring out of her and into him until the red glow of her life force was clean, even a little firmer than before.

- You have cleansed all instances of disease [Alzheimer's Disease] from [Glenda Pottsworth].
- You have cleansed all instances of disease [Arthritis] from [Glenda Pottsworth].
- You have cleansed all instances of disease [Liver Cancer] from [Glenda Pottsworth].

- Your stamina and mana have been replenished.
- Stamina and mana cannot exceed normal maximum values. Excess stamina and mana are lost.

- Cleansing afflictions has triggered [Sin Eater]. You have gained an instance of [Resistant] and [Integrity] for each instance of affliction cleansed.

Jason's grandmother looked at him with addled eyes that saw only a figure shrouded in darkness but sparkling with stars, as if the night sky was standing before her. Jason took out a healing potion, moved forward and tilted her unresisting head back to tip the potion into her mouth. After making sure that she swallowed it, he grabbed Emi's hand and quickly led her outside.

Emi was still dazzled by the magical light show, moving numbly as she let her uncle lead her around. She didn't resist as Jason put her in the passenger seat of Shade's car form. He got behind the wheel but let Shade drive them away. They had been there long enough for Jason's portal ability to come off cooldown, but Jason wanted to give Emi the car ride back to process. As it was, he was already regretting letting her see so much so quickly.

"What was that stuff you gave her?" Emi asked, after a long time.

"Healing potion," Jason said. "I took away the Alzheimer's, but I have no idea how much damage it did to her brain. I'm not sure how much she'll get back from healing it. I can't be sure what the results will be."

Emi lapsed back into silence, Jason leaving her be.

"What do I tell Mum and Dad where we went?"

"That we went to Castle Bluff, and then to see Grand Nanna," Jason said. "Always tell the truth if you can get away with it."

DISCRETION IS A GOOD IDEA

Erika had put together a simple dinner of salad, tartiflette and buttermilk pie. Tartiflette was a potato, bacon, onion, and cheese casserole that made a great winter warmer. They sat somewhat awkwardly at the table, talking around the topic of Jason's mysterious return to life.

Jason and Erika had grown up with their mother's strict rules about not bringing conflict to the dinner table. While Jason never saw a rule he wouldn't obnoxiously flout just because, it helped him out in this particular instance. He was happy to ask Emi about her life, having been transplanted from Melbourne to Casselton Beach. It was the opposite of his own trajectory.

"I like the weather here," she said. "It rains more in summer than winter, which is weird. That rain we got last week was really heavy, though."

Jason absently wondered if his arrival had somehow impacted the weather patterns. Clive would have been able to figure it out.

"Are you alright, Uncle Jason?" Emi asked, reading his expression.

"Yeah," Jason said. "I was just thinking about a friend. I don't know when I'll be able to see him again."

"Can you not call him because he's in the place you were?"

"Exactly," Jason said.

"So, did you do much cooking while you were away?" Ian asked Jason, diplomatically seeking common ground between the siblings after the tension between Jason and Erika.

"A bit," Jason said. "I got to try a lot of new things, but the ingredients were largely local. That friend I mentioned grew up on an eel farm and

taught me a few ways to cook them that aren't awful. Again, I can't get my hands on the same ingredients here, but I took notes with some potential substitutes and variations. I'm hoping to find the time to try some things out, now that I'm home. Do you know an eel guy, Eri?"

"I know someone who can sort you out," Erika said. "You know who will be happy you're back? Wally."

"Wally! He moved over to the new show with you?"

"He didn't just move to the show, but into town too. He bought one of those fancy beach cottages."

"He was lucky to pick one up," Jason said. "They almost never go on the market."

"The Green family sold and Mum gave him an early heads-up."

"That's nice of her," Jason said. "You know, I saw Lawrence Green the other day. He thought I was Kaito."

"Wasn't he quite slimy?" Erika asked. "I went to school with his cousin."

"Still is," Jason said. "If anything, he's even more oily. You could lubricate an engine with his personality."

"Wally's husband bought the coffee shop off old Mrs Russel," Ian said. "You can finally get a good cup of coffee in this town."

"I'll take your word for it," Jason said. "I'm lucky I'm not a coffee drinker, since they didn't have any where I've been staying."

"Just like phones," Erika said.

"Exactly," Jason said. "The tea was crazy good, though. There was this river, running through a valley with all this tea growing up the slopes. I went through there once, not long after I arrived."

"Arrived where, exactly?"

"A place called Greenstone," Jason said. "You'll be able to see it for yourself, soon. I kept a vlog."

"A vlog?" Erika asked. "They don't have radios, but they have the equipment for vlogging?"

"It'll make sense once I explain everything. Did you figure out a day the two of you can both get free? I did say that you should have someone look out for Emi, but I think she should be involved from the start."

"Tomorrow," Erika said. "If it has to be a whole day, then we can't do it on a weekday and I'm not waiting until next weekend."

"Tomorrow it is," Jason said.

Erika narrowed her eyes at him, looking for evasiveness.

"So long as nothing comes up," he added innocently.

The houseboat produced by the cloud flask was more impressive than what it had been at iron rank, which was already quite luxurious. It was still a far cry from the sprawling wings and towering spires of Emir's cloud palace, but it was still a small floating island, with multiple levels of open deck and tinted wraparound glass. There was even a glass-walled room beneath the waterline.

The rooftop surfaces were covered in solar panels. Jason could sense them drawing in ambient magic like an overactive mana lamp. It left the surrounding ambient magic even more anaemic than normal as the houseboat guzzled it up.

It seemed largely designed to suck the ambient magic down vertically, drawing it down from the air in a great column. Anyone with magical senses would notice it from halfway across town. It offered far more draw than the motorhome variant, presumably because it normalised magic across the larger space of the houseboat.

The decks and interior of the houseboat were littered with lush, green leafy plants. Jason had largely transplanted them from the jungle astral space, although he had avoided the magical ones. When he had awarded Jason the flask, Emir had also given him a notebook that detailed all his experiments into different kinds of plants with his own cloud flask. It detailed his results with different kinds of flora, magical and mundane. It had exhaustive lists of how different plants withstood being stored away in the cloud flask, weathered the sea air, or adapted to various climates.

"If you aren't going with magical plants," Emir had told him when handing over the notebook, "I'd just give the section on getting the plants installed a read. You can shovel a bunch of earth, water, light, and shield quintessence into the cloud flask and any non-magical plants you want will thrive. Once you start looking into magical plants, that's the time to give it a proper read. There are a lot of quirks you need to be aware of."

Saturday night, Jason arrived back at the houseboat mentally weary but let out a contented sigh as he drank in the sight of it. It was big enough that

Jason's winter arrival proved to be a good thing; the neighbouring berth was available for Jason to rent when the houseboat spilled over into the neighbouring slip.

He stepped onto the lower deck and then made his way inside. The interior was all light woods and white leather, plus tasteful teal embellishments. The cloud constructs could have their interiors and exteriors set to adaptive or grandiose independently and he had the houseboat set to full adaptive.

The various surfaces were indistinguishable from actual woods and leathers, courtesy of the materials he had shovelled into the flask as reference. Along with quintessence, different kinds of magical and mundane woods, stone, metal, and fabric had been consumed by the cloud flask. It could dissolve and consume whole blocks of stone, sucking it into the flask.

More than once, Jason had used the flask to remove obstructions as his team explored the astral space. It was a win-win, since generally the obstacle was something sturdy enough that other methodologies would be slower or ineffective. Clive had posited that Emir's cloud flask had consumed ludicrous quantities of materials and was always encouraging Jason to throw things in.

While he missed the plush comfort of cloud furniture, Jason maintained the houseboat internals in a camouflaged state, with the exception of his own bed. He would continue that at least until his family were up to speed on magic. While his sister might feel like he was stonewalling, he was even more anxious than her to get everything into the open.

The goal was to resolve everything, if not neatly, then with as little mess as he could manage. Throwing explanations in between meetings with vampires and crime bosses the way he had with Hiro, or getting bystanders caught up like with Taika, was precisely what he sought to avoid.

Ideally, that issue would be settled by the time the weekend was over. He was unsure how much his powerful but inexpert healing would help his nanna, but it had the potential to cause, as Nanna herself would say, a kerfuffle.

Jason could sense Hiro and Taika watching more of his recording crystals in the media room. Leaving them be, he made his way to the upper deck where he opened a portal arch and entered his spirit vault, the enhanced version of his old inventory ability.

The personal space was apparently different from an ordinary dimensional boundary, like that sealing off an astral space. Unlike that sort of boundary, Jason could maintain his familiars on one side, while he was on the other. This allowed Shade to keep watching his family and the houseboat while Jason was safe inside the vault. His familiars were a reassuring presence each time he retreated into the spirit vault for meditation.

Since his soul underwent changes after overcoming the star seed, Jason's meditation had taken him to an internal world—a garden of the soul where his abilities were represented by beds of flowers. At bronze rank, that garden had expanded, giving them room to grow. Trellises created tunnels of flowers in bold colours of red, white and black, allowing him to walk through the living pathways of his own power.

The boundary of the garden was still the wall surrounding it, a stone facade covering a darker and stranger substance underneath. The facade was increasingly crumbling away, exposing more of the eerie material beneath. It was like darkness itself made substantive. A black hole, frozen and harnessed to build an unassailable boundary, then hidden behind an acceptable face. Compared to the cracked and battered stone, the dark walls beneath promised invulnerability to those within and annihilation to those who attempted to breach it.

In the time since he acquired the spirit vault, he found that it had gone through a change. The vault took the form of a gazebo of marbled black and white obsidian. It floated in the sky, which reflected the world outside. The first time he had used the vault, it had been dark and raining. During the day, the sky was bright with sunlight, but Jason's favourite times were clear sky nights. With no town to cause light pollution, the sky was a sea of stars. There might be a wisp of cloud, lit up by the light of the moon, and he would sit beneath it, meditating in absolute, uninterruptible peace.

Over several meditation sessions, the gazebo had started descending. At first, there seemed to be nothing but endless sky below, but slowly, the garden appeared. He sensed it before he saw it, then he went out to look over the edge and down.

The garden itself was different from his experiences in the past. Instead of dark earth, it rested on dark clouds, heavy with the promise of storms. Slowly, the gazebo had descended until it settled in the middle of the garden, in a space that fit it perfectly. Henceforth, every time Jason stepped

into the spirit vault, it was already in what was now a sky garden. The line between his internal and external worlds was becoming hard to tell apart.

It was a scary yet exhilarating feeling, like falling, but there was still a sense of disconnect. It made him think of the power the World-Phoenix had offered, uniting body and soul into a merged gestalt. The connection between that feeling and the offered power made him wonder if the World-Phoenix had a hand in evolving his inventory power into the spirit vault. Clive had told him that a great astral being shouldn't be able to impact his gift evolutions without his knowledge, but even Clive couldn't be right all the time.

Jason arrived through one of the four arches holding up the gazebo roof. There was an arch for each of his familiars and one for Jason himself. The contents of his inventory still floated in the air, orbiting the space just above the gazebo. He could see them clearly as he left the gazebo to walk around the garden.

Just strolling through the garden was a meditative experience now. He could even direct the power he was consolidating in specific directions by where he chose to go in the garden, although the powers he had been using were easier to promote. He had consolidated the gains of his recent challenges and now all his abilities were at least past the third of what Clive called the minor thresholds. His most-used abilities, his vision and cloak, had passed the halfway mark of the fifth threshold.

Until he found a new challenge, his abilities would not advance further. He hoped to find that challenge working with the Network, but if the Network decided to become that challenge instead, then so be it.

Jason spent the night in meditation rather than sleep. The more powerful he became, the less he needed to rely on sleep, although it was never wholly inescapable. Slumber was an intrinsic part of the mortal existence, even for those imbued with mystical power.

Sleep was part of the magical cycles of an essence user, even when their superhuman recovery attribute kept them awake and alert. Going too long without it would increasingly impair their ability to regulate the magic

stored in their bodies. With a cloud bed to come home to, though, Jason did not begrudge the need for sleep.

Emerging through the archway from his spirit vault the next morning, his phone immediately started beeping. He went through the voice messages: an audio mosaic of his sister narrating events surrounding their nanna through a series of increasingly angry and erratic messages.

Nanna had somehow switched doctors, without her family—who held her power of attorney—being notified. Her new doctors had whisked her away to the Casselton Regional Hospital, where they were decidedly less than forthcoming.

In spite of this, and to Jason's surprise, Erika had apparently managed to extract Nanna's medical state from who he strongly suspected to be the Network's people. Jason's takeaway was that Nanna was lucid, lacking in almost any memory of the last few years and very spotty about the few before that.

Between Jason and Emi's visit to Nanna, Jason's mention of the Starlight Angel that cured people and his ongoing mysteriousness, Erika was putting together things that added up to impossible answers. Her inability to reach Jason had led to each message exuding more frustration and rage than the last.

He sighed. He knew that curing his nanna would cause trouble. All he could do was step in and sort it out as best he could. His immediate thought was that Erika would push Emi for information, but he immediately dismissed the notion. Erika would never put too much pressure on her daughter. Even so, he did want to intervene before she started asking her daughter about their visit with Grand Nanna. His intention had never been to cause friction between mother and daughter.

"Shade," he said. "Remind me to give you my phone when I go into the spirit vault. You can tell me if I get any important messages."

He made his way into the bar lounge, where Hiro was working on a laptop with headphones on while Taika was on another laptop, talking with his mum over a video chat. Like her son, she was basically a chocolate wall with a friendly expression. Jason walked up behind Taika and gave his mum a wave.

"Hello, Mrs Davison."

"Oh, hello, Jason. When are you going to bring my boy back to Sydney so I can meet you in person?"

“Oh, I’m sure we’ll have business there soon enough. Hiro needs to go back into Sydney soon and I’ll probably go along.”

“He’s been showing me around your houseboat, if you can even call it that. It’s more like a palace.”

“Oh, the palace comes in a few years. If I can get the parts. You know, you could come to us. The weather’s very nice here, even in winter.”

“Bro,” Taika complained.

Jason chuckled.

“I have to go see my nanna, Mrs Davison. You have yourself a lovely day.”

“I will, sweetie.”

Jason tapped Hiro on the shoulder, gesturing for him to follow. Hiro took off his headphones and they went out on the deck.

“You heard about your grandmother?” Hiro asked.

“Yeah.”

“You know, trying to explain to your sister that you’re unavailable because you’re meditating inside a magic archway is not easy.”

“Sorry about that,” Jason said. “I need to bring her in sooner rather than later. I’d like to do it today, after things are sorted out at the hospital.”

“I would have gone to the hospital, but I figured I’d wait for you. Are you responsible for what happened?”

“You make it sound like a bad thing,” Jason said. “I’m going now, if you want to join me.”

“I will, yeah.”

Jason opened a portal arch.

“Not by car, then?” Hiro asked, looking at the portal warily.

“This is quicker,” Jason said.

“Not that much quicker.”

“Come on, Uncle Hiro.”

Moments later, Jason was looking at a wide-eyed man in one of the men’s toilets at the Greater Casselton Regional Hospital in Castle Reach.

“What?” Jason asked him as the portal sank into the floor and Hiro rushed into one of the stalls. “You’ve never seen two grown men emerge from a magic portal before?”

The man scrambled to escape the bathroom as Hiro emerged, taking some paper hand towels to wet and wipe his face over the sink.

“I hope he washed his hands,” Jason said. “It’s a hospital.”

Hiro gave him a sideways look. “That’s what you’re worried about?”

“You’re right,” Jason said. “They have those disinfectant dispensers all over the place. I’m sure it’s fine.”

“Aren’t you worried about that guy telling people?”

“About the two men who appeared in a men’s room through a magic portal? Not especially. Would you believe it?”

“What if those men in black guys hear about it? You said they’re here, right?”

“The Network? Well, my portal is one of my trump cards, but Craig knows, which means his group knows, which means it isn’t really a secret anymore. Plus, I’m pretty sure that’s a very valuable ability. It’ll show what I have to offer when I sit down to negotiate with the Network. What they’ll bring to the table are things like health care for Nanna that’s better than money can buy.”

“Still,” Hiro said. “I have to imagine that discretion is a good idea.”

“I can assure you, Mr Asano,” Shade said from Jason’s shadow, “it is an idea that has been put to him on several occasions. He seems to hold little affection for it.”

“Says the guy who turns into a giant black mid-life crisis,” Jason said.

“Through your ability,” Shade pointed out.

THE COLD EYES OF A STRANGER

Erika, Ian and Kaito were gathered in a waiting room with Jason's mother, Cheryl, and her brother, Robert. Emi had been left with Amy and her children. Erika was coming to regret that choice, though, given her increasing suspicions surrounding Jason and the visit Emi had paid to her Grand Nanna the previous evening.

Jason arrived in the waiting room at a stride, Hiro trailing behind. The shocked expressions of his mother and maternal uncle made them look like they'd just been slapped.

"G'day, all," Jason said. "That's a nice pantsuit, Mum. Uncle Robbo, it's been a while. Doctors still giving you the run around? I'll go see if I can't give them a kick in the bum."

Erika, Ian and Kaito had all turned to Cheryl who was still looking at Jason like she'd seen a ghost. Jason started marching off again, then stopped and snapped his fingers like he'd just remembered something.

"Oh, yeah," he said, turning and absently pointing a finger at his mother. "Not dead. Obviously. Forgot to say. We can talk in a couple of days; I'm a bit busy at the moment. You know how it is."

He then resumed marching away from his startled family, with Hiro staying behind but Erika quickly trailing after him.

"This is how you let Mum know?"

"Apparently," Jason said. "She's hard to pin down."

"This is because of how she treated you after, you know."

"I'm not unaware of my own motivations, Erika."

"That's another mess I'll no doubt be left to clean up. Do you ever leave your phone on?"

“I was meditating in an alternate dimension, Eri. The Telstra network doesn’t cover that.”

“I am not going to let you distract me with your lunacy.”

“You say that,” Jason said, “but we’ll see.”

He spotted the ward reception and went over.

“I need to see the doctors for Glenda Pottsworth,” he demanded of the nurse there.

“You’ll need to wait,” he said. “As I told the rather assertive young lady beside you, the doctors will make themselves available when they can.”

“Tell the doctors that Jason Asano is about to start poking around and see if that doesn’t free them up,” Jason said. He didn’t wait for a response before walking away.

Erika followed again and pulled him up short.

“You did have something to do with this,” she said.

“Yes,” Jason admitted.

“What the hell is going on, Jason?”

“Look, Emi asked me if I could help Nanna. I wasn’t sure; Alzheimer’s is a tricky one, but I thought maybe I could. I gave it a go and it looks like it worked.”

“Like what worked? What did you do?”

“The doctor’s here,” he said, looking at a door marked STAFF ONLY. Moments later, they saw a doctor through the glass in the door, who buzzed himself out to join Jason and Erika in the corridor.

“Mr Asano?” the doctor asked. The man had no magic, but Jason had sensed the man’s nervous fear approaching. It seemed the Network had told him at least something about Jason.

“Eri, go back and tell the others that we’ll have news soon.”

“If you think I’m leaving you alone for…”

The look Jason turned on her wasn’t backed up by his aura, but the unflinching authority in his gaze made him seem for a moment like a total stranger. She took an involuntary step back.

“Tell the others that they’ll be able to see Nanna soon,” Jason reiterated. “Because they will, won’t they, doctor?”

Jason didn’t turn away from his sister to ask him, but the man hopped nervously like a raw recruit on a parade ground.

“Of course, Mr Asano.”

Only then did Jason turn to face the man.

“There’s somewhere you can brief me on my grandmother’s condition?”

“Follow me, please.”

Jason was led through the doors. He suddenly stopped dead when his senses picked up something. It was retracted and hard to sense, but not hard enough.

He had unmistakably sensed a silver-rank aura.

Jason turned a look on the doctor that could melt steel and fear crossed the man’s face.

“I hope you haven’t done something very, very stupid,” Jason snarled.

The increasingly skittish doctor led Jason to a small office that contained the silver-rank aura Jason sensed, and left him outside the door as he scuffled off. Jason was ready to unleash Colin if these people were foolish enough to try something as he opened the door.

On the other side of the door was a woman with the magically perfected looks he had come to expect from silver-rankers. She had shampoo commercial dark hair and flawless alabaster skin, but Jason was well past the point of being distracted by such beauty. He had kept more than his share of company with beautiful people.

“Jason Asano,” she greeted.

“Random silver-ranker who better not try anything with this many of my family in the building,” he greeted back coldly.

“That’s not my intention at all,” she said. “Take a seat.”

The diminutive office she had appropriated only had space for two to sit with a small desk in between. Trying to dodge Colin in the limited area would be an exercise in futility, which gave him a level of comfort as he took a seat.

“My name is Gladys Erstweller,” she said. “Silver-ranker. That’s what you call a category three, right? Based on the spirit coin of that rank?”

“Yes,” Jason answered coolly.

“You really aren’t worried about the power disparity, are you?” she asked. “Most cat twos get real nervous this close to a three.”

“You wouldn’t be the first category three that I’ve killed.”

“I’m a healer, you know. I can counteract a lot of the powers you use.”

Jason took on the grin of a cat who had just spotted a mouse with a pronounced limp.

“So did the first silver-ranker I killed,” he said. “He died screaming his lost faith to the sky. The archbishop wasn’t much of a martyr in the end.”

“You’re not talking about any of our local religions, are you?”

“No. Now you’ve dug some nuggets out of me to take back to your bosses, it’s time to tell me about my grandmother.”

Gladys nodded.

“Have you ever tried healing Alzheimer’s before?”

“No,” Jason said. “Chronic problems usually get dealt with before they get to that stage in the other world. There’s a god of healing who seems like a good bloke.”

“You say that like you met him.”

“Briefly. Friend of a friend.”

“I can’t tell if you’re making things up or not. Your aura is like nothing I’ve ever seen. Anna will want you to commit to helping our people learn to do that with their auras.”

“We need to settle things regarding my grandmother before I’m going to talk about any kind of arrangement with your organisation.”

Gladys nodded.

“After examining her,” she said, “as best I can tell, you sucked out all the sickness and then fed her a potion.”

“Yes,” Jason said. “Was that not the right approach?”

“It’s not the worst approach you could have taken,” Gladys said. “The basic idea is sound. Excise the disease and then repair the damage. Alzheimer’s is tricky, though. Especially with advanced cases like your grandmother.”

“I was worried about that,” Jason admitted, his expression softening. “Healing magic restores the body using the soul as a blueprint, but I was concerned about what years of dementia had done to affect her soul.”

“That’s precisely the issue,” Gladys said. “You seem to know a bit about magical healing.”

“Just some foundational theory. Do you have some kind of treatment?”

“We do,” Gladys said. “As it is, she’s more or less fully lucid. The memory gaps aren’t going to come back, though. What we can do is a regime of regular therapy and some more nuanced magical treatment. Over the next few months, we can work on consolidating body and soul into a healthy balance and prevent complications from arising in the future.”

“So, my grandmother needs to be in the Network’s care.”

“I’m not just saying this for leverage, Mr Asano. I have better ethics than that. Since you seem to have some grasp on the theory, I can take you

through it in more detail, if you like."

"Yes," Jason said. "That's exactly what I'd like."

After Jason appeared, only to leave again immediately, there was a commotion as his siblings tried to explain his revival to his mother. This was made harder by not really understanding it themselves.

"Well, if you'd actually shown up to the family meeting, which I made very clear was important," Erika told her, "then you could have asked him these questions yourself, Mother."

The doctor re-emerged, giving the family some vague explanations that Ian immediately picked out as sketchy. As a doctor himself, he knew when another medical professional was talking nonsense. Plus, every doctor involved with his wife's grandmother was unfamiliar to him. He had only been working in the area for a year, but as a regional physician, he had made a point of making connections in the local hospital.

Erika had insisted that they wait for Jason before Ian started throwing his weight around, and shortly after Jason arrived, the doctors told them they could see Nanna Glenda.

"No more than two or three at a time," the doctor insisted. "She's lucid but has a lot of confusion and memory loss. You need to be gentle."

"Mum and Uncle Robbo," Kaito said. "You're her children, so you go first. Erika and I will go after."

Right after Cheryl and Robert were led away, Jason was suddenly back without any of the family having noticed him arrive.

"Jason, what is going on?" Erika asked.

"I'm leaving," he said.

"Are you kidding me?" she asked.

"Jason, what's going on?" Ian asked. "I have no idea who these doctors are, I'm certain they're lying, and the whole debacle is shady as a long autumn dusk. Why are they suddenly cooperating?"

"Have Uncle Robbo take Nanna to stay with him," Jason said. "I'll pick up Emi and take her back to my place. Once you're done here, bring Hiro, yourselves, and Dad to my place. It's at the marina; Hiro can show you. I'll explain everything. Really everything."

“I’m not sure I want Emi to be part of that,” Erika said.

“She already is,” Jason said. “She knows more than you do.”

“Jason, we’re her parents,” Erika said fiercely. “That should have been our decision to make.”

“I know,” Jason acknowledged contritely. “I acted on impulse, sorry.”

Kaito looked on, excluded, but didn’t speak up.

“I’m going,” Jason said to Erika. “I’ll see you soon. Can you call Amy and tell her I’m coming?”

“How did you know Amy has her?” Erika asked.

“Didn’t I tell you? I’ve got magic powers.”

Jason walked from his car parked out front to Kaito and Amy’s front door. It was a house he had visited almost every day of his childhood, and approaching under current circumstances left him with a sense of alienness from the mix of old and new feelings. He sensed a similar swirl from Amy’s aura, inside the house. She had apparently seen him arrive, so he waited by the door instead of knocking and she opened it.

“What did you do to me last night?” she asked. “I wasn’t just imagining it, right?”

“No.”

“So, what was it?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. Well, not without some convincing, but that will have to wait.”

“That’s what you’re giving me? You really weirded me out, Jason.”

“Well, you threw my heart into a woodchipper, carved my family in half and sent me spiralling into years of depression during which I basically scuttled my whole life.”

Her gaze drifted over to Jason’s car.

“Your life seems to be going alright.”

“That didn’t come cheap, Amy.”

“So, you’re rich now?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean, Jason?”

Jason untucked his shirt and lifted it up to reveal a torso covered in small scars, plus one thick, savage one extending diagonally across his abdomen.

"Jason, what the hell happened to you?" she asked as he dropped his shirt back down.

"You know the saying about not knowing who you are until you've walked through the fire?"

"Yeah."

"I found out who I am."

"And who is that?"

"Someone who doesn't get to live a quiet life."

He stepped back, looking around at her home.

"I wanted this to be you and me, Amy. Why wasn't I good enough?"

His morose expression transformed into a sparkly eyed smile as Emi came pounding down the stairs before Amy had a chance to respond.

"Uncle Jason!"

He caught his niece in a hug.

"Ready to go see my houseboat?" he asked.

"Is it all mouldy and gross?" Emi asked.

"No, it is not," he said indignantly.

"Boo," Emi jeered.

"At least wait until you see it," Jason complained. "Say goodbye to your Aunt Amy."

"Bye, Aunt Amy," she called at they set off for his car. "Uncle Jason, tuck in your shirt. You look unemployed."

"I prefer to think of myself as independently wealthy."

They started walking across the front yard to Jason's car and Amy called out after them.

"Jason."

"Yeah?" he asked, pausing and turning around.

"I know I did everything wrong," she said. "How badly I hurt you. You didn't deserve that just because I didn't know how to end things. I really am sorry."

"I know," he said.

Her memory of his impish grin went back longer than most things she could remember. When he flashed it for her briefly, it wasn't the same. He looked at her with the cold eyes of a stranger.

“It just doesn’t matter anymore,” he told her.

“Come on, Uncle Jason,” Emi said, tugging on his hand.

“I do not look unemployed,” he merrily complained to his niece, letting himself be dragged towards the car. “I look like a dashing man about town…”

LOOKING DOWN THE POINT OF A SWORD

"So, how are you doing after yesterday?" Jason asked his niece as Shade drove them towards the marina.

"It's weird," Emi said. "I kind of like having this big secret."

"Well, it's time to let your mum and dad in on the secret," Jason said. "Do you think you can help stop your mum from throwing me in the ocean?"

"No promises," Emi said with a laugh.

"I need to introduce you to some of my friends," Jason said. "They're a bit strange, but I think you'll get along."

"Strange how?"

"Strange like magic. First is my friend Shade. He's made of shadows."

"Made of shadows?"

"Yes. He can also turn into a car."

Emi started looking around the car interior.

"Yep," Jason said. "We're inside him right now. You can say hello, if you like."

"You want me to talk to your car?"

"Yeah."

"Like in that terrible TV show Pop keeps trying to make me watch?"

"It's not terrible," Jason said. "You know your pop had me watch it when I was a kid and I loved it."

"It's a DVD box set, Uncle Jason. It might as well be chiselled on stone tablets."

"If you will be more comfortable, Miss Emi," Shade said, "I am happy to initiate the conversation."

Emi jolted in her seat.

"You don't need to be worried about Shade," Jason said. "He's very nice. He's been a good friend, even if he does occasionally keep things from me."

"If I had told you about the World-Phoenix token," Shade said, "you would have gone and gotten yourself killed even earlier."

"What do you mean killed?" Emi asked.

"See?" Jason said. "Now look what you've done."

"I thought the idea was to tell them everything," Shade said.

"Yeah, but the order we do it in is kind of important, Shade."

"Uncle Jason, what does your car mean by getting killed?" Emi insisted.

Jason could sense from her aura that the slight strain of worry in her voice was only a shadow of her true fear. After getting her Uncle Jason back, the thought of losing him again shook her to the core.

"It's fine," Jason said, patting his chest with both hands. "Look at me. Here I am, nice and alive."

"That's not an answer," she said. "You're trying to distract me."

"And you're too clever for my own good," Jason said. "Let me tell you about my other friends. Taika is really nice; he's fairly normal."

"Taika like the director?"

"This one doesn't make movies, although he is from New Zealand. Then there's Gordon."

"Is he from New Zealand too?"

"I'm not sure where Gordon's from," Jason said.

"The realm of the All-Devouring Eye," Shade said. "Colin also originates from there, although from the border territory with Legion's realm."

"The realm of the All-Devouring Eye?" Emi asked.

"I'm pretty sure it's in the South Pacific," Jason said.

"Uncle Jason, why do you tell such obvious lies?"

"So it's harder to notice the subtle ones," Jason said. "Tell the truth as much as you can, and if you have to lie, make it obvious. That makes it easier to slip the important lies past people."

"Miss Emi, I'm not entirely certain that your Uncle Jason is a good role model," Shade said.

Anna accepted the video call and Gladys's face appeared on her laptop.

"Well?" Anna asked without preamble.

"I didn't find him at all like you described," Gladys said.

"Oh?"

"You said amiable, right?"

"Discounting the implied threat of being in my home, he was oddly charming," Anna said. "Emphasis on the odd."

"I didn't find that at all," Gladys said. "With a category three in front of him and his family in the next room, he was hard and sharp. It was like looking down the point of a sword. I swear he was ready to fight right there. Have you seen his aura, Anna?"

"No. He's a category above me."

"I've never felt anything like it," Gladys said. "It feels like a weapon and I swear it was almost as strong as mine. Add in that insane control and I don't think I'd win, aura to aura."

"We knew he was dangerous."

"This is more than dangerous, Anna. I don't think he's stable. Right now, he's looking down the barrel of a world full of forces he doesn't understand and he doesn't know how to protect his family. He's flailing in ignorance and he knows it, so he's going overboard because it's all he has. He's fully aware that it's a flimsy shield, so he's doing everything he can to prop it up. I don't think he'd be an entirely reliable ally."

"You're advocating not trying to pull him in after all?"

"Oh, we definitely want him on our side," Gladys said. "His aura control techniques alone leave us in the dust. Also, not for nothing: that is not a man I want to make an enemy of. What he needs more than anything else is someone he can trust, and if we can provide that, I think the dividends will be amazing."

"Agreed," Anna said. "That will be a big ask after what the Lyon branch did, though."

"No kidding," Gladys said. "Right now, he's a gun that's ready to go off. It's kind of sexy."

"Gladys…"

"I know, I know. I'm not a cradle robber, Anna. Give it a decade, though, and that boy might be in some trouble. Have you considered trying to honey trap him? You won't have trouble finding people willing to throw themselves in front of that bus."

“I’ve had people running background,” Anna said. “It seems that he had a family rift stemming from his childhood-friend-turned-girlfriend, who is now his sister-in-law.”

“Ouch.”

“Yes,” Anna agreed. “Our analysts suggest that he likely has a deep sensitivity to betrayal in general and romantic betrayal specifically. Even if we play it fairly straight and just make sure an agent is available and open to forming a relationship, he’s likely to be sensitive to that kind of manipulation. If something went wrong, it would go very wrong.”

“How wrong?”

“Marching through our headquarters with a chainsaw wrong.”

“Probably best be careful, then,” Gladys said. “Especially while he’s on a hair trigger.”

“Our analysts think that an open alliance with well-defined terms is what he’ll respond best to.”

“Well, he has a lot to bring to the table,” Gladys said. “I was able to probe his magical knowledge a little.”

“He was only gone a year and a half. How much can he have picked up?”

“You’d be surprised. I was. He claims to only have a basic grounding in different kinds of magic, but I think that’s more than enticing enough.”

“That makes sense,” Anna mused. “Our definition of the basics is different to someone from a magical alternate reality.”

“Fortunately, we bring things to the table as well,” Gladys said. “He seems to genuinely appreciate our treatment of his grandmother. Fortunately, he was smart enough to feed her a healing potion as soon as he removed the disease. Getting that healing in immediately gave us a good head start on the treatment. Now she just needs some regular, specialised therapy.”

“I suggest you start charging him for it, preferably in magic materials.”

“That won’t alienate him?”

“It keeps the arrangement honest and keeps it out in the open,” Anna said. “That’s exactly what he wants.”

They arrived at the marina and Emi goggled at Jason's opulent boathouse.

"How much money do you have?" she asked.

"I've got a huge pile of gold, so a lot."

"You have a huge pile of gold?"

"Yeah. Actually, let me show you a trick."

He took a bar of gold out of his inventory. To Emi, it looked like he plucked it out of thin air.

"I know that could be just sleight of hand," he said.

"That's too light," Emi said as she watched him wave the bar in his hand.

"The gold bar?"

"Yeah. It should be heavy."

Jason held out the ten-kilogram metal bar. Emi took it in her hands, but it immediately slipped through. Jason reached out with a shadow arm and caught it, then put it back into his inventory.

"See?" he said.

"Your arm got longer," Emi said. "And it turned black."

"Yep," Jason said. "Magic powers, remember."

"How did you get them?"

"I'll explain all that when your parents get here."

"Can I get them?"

"Not until you're older," Jason said. "At least a few years."

"Really? How many years?"

"It depends on when your body is able to accept them. For most people, that's around sixteen or seventeen, but that's just the centre of the curve. My friend Rufus had to wait until he was nineteen."

"Do lots of people have them in Africa?"

"Lots of people have them in the place I've been all this time."

"That's not the same thing as saying yes," Emi said, causing Jason to chuckle.

"You're trouble, you know that?" he asked.

"Is trouble good?"

"Trouble is very good," he said, ruffling her hair. He chuckled as she pushed his hand away.

"You'll understand everything soon," he told her. "As to whether you believe it, that's another thing. For now, let's go take a tour of the houseboat, yeah?"

“Is it a magic houseboat?”

“Can you keep a secret?” Jason asked. “Look who I’m talking to; of course you can. Don’t tell anyone, but this houseboat may be the single most magical item on Earth.”

“Are there a lot of magical items on Earth?”

“A lot more than I thought, as it turns out.”

“You realise that if magic exists,” she said, “it changes everything we know about the universe.”

“It doesn’t so much change it as expand it,” Jason said. “It’s just that the things we don’t understand turns out to be a larger pool than we realised. There are ways to explore beyond the boundaries of our universe. And it’s not like the scientific method is invalidated all of a sudden. In fact, I have a friend who is basically a research scientist, but his area is magic. Well, aspects of magic. As with science, there are many fields of study.”

Jason took her around the houseboat, which Emi found suitably impressive. One of Shade’s bodies accompanied them, giving Emi a look at his normal figure. In the kitchen, they met Taika, who they caught raiding the houseboat’s supply of coconut rum balls.

“There are a weird number of homemade snacks on this houseboat,” Taika said.

“You should see our house,” Emi told him. “Those snacks tend to be healthier than what I’m seeing here, though.”

“I need extra carbs and protein,” Jason said defensively. “I have a condition.”

“What condition?” Emi asked.

“Super powers,” Jason said.

“He does,” Taika said. “A bunch of bikers attacked our car, and he went all magic and stuff. I didn’t get to see much at the time because I was concentrating on driving, but it was all over the news.”

“That really was you on the news?” Emi said.

“Oh, yeah,” Taika said. “He got shot a whole bunch of times.”

Jason felt a streak of panic shoot through Emi’s aura and gave Taika a withering glare.

“Taika,” he said through gritted teeth. “Maybe we don’t tell my twelve-year-old niece about the horrifying situation we were in?”

“That was a horrible situation for me, but you’re impervious to bullets, bro.”

“Taika, maybe it’s time for that errand?”

“Oh, yeah. No worries, bro. You got the cash?”

Jason took an envelope stuffed with hundreds from his inventory and handed it over.

“Oh, damn. How much do you want me to get?”

“There’s a list in the envelope,” Jason said.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “Your family members have left the hospital and will be here in around twenty minutes.”

“Thank you, Shade.”

“How do you know that?” Emi asked.

“I have multiple bodies,” Shade said. “Your uncle has had me watching out for your mother, your grandfather and yourself since his arrival in this township.”

“You’ve been watching me?” Emi asked.

“Yes,” Shade said. “I have been hidden in the shadows around you, even your own.”

“Have you been watching me pee?”

“Mr Asano asked me to remain at a remove during your more delicate moments,” Shade said. “I feel that this compromises my ability to secure your person to the fullest extent of my capacity, but I have complied.”

“Shade,” Jason said. “I’m not going to let you watch her pee.”

“Miss Asano, I’m older than your species. I can assure you that I take no interest in your biological necessities. If you could convince your uncle…”

“No,” Jason said definitively.

“Wait, if you’re with me all the time,” Emi asked, “can you turn into a car and drive me places?”

“A car takes multiple bodies, while only one stays with you,” Shade said. “I could turn into a motorcycle.”

Emi’s head turned to Jason on a swivel, adorable eyes glistening with hope.

“Absolutely not,” he said.

Ian was driving back to Casselton Beach from the hospital on the outskirts of Castle Reach. Hiro was in the passenger seat while Erika and her father were in the back.

"I'm not sure we should have rushed off like this, Erika," Ken said.

"Dad," Erika said. "I want answers. Uncle Robbo is taking Nanna back to his place, so there's no point hanging around the hospital. Ian, you're driving too slow."

"I don't know if you've ever noticed those signs with the numbers on them next to the road, dear," Ian said, "but they have to do with how fast cars are allowed to go."

Erika groaned her complaint while Ken and Hiro chuckled.

"You're a braver man than most, Ian," Ken said.

"This family needs more women," Erika muttered.

"If you're looking to have another kid," Ian said, "I still have my sexy pirate outfit. It kind of went to waste the other night."

"Quite enough of that kind of talk, thank you," Ken said. "Her father is right here, Ian."

"Sorry, Ken."

"Of course, if you *are* looking at giving me another grandchild, I could be convinced to cover my ears."

"Dad, ick."

"I'm not saying right here in the car, Sweetie," Ken told Erika. "Although you could drop Hiro and me off while you two go—"

"Dad!"

"You know, you were conceived in a '76 HJ Holden—"

"DAD!"

Ian and Hiro were laughing in the front, as Erika glared at her father.

They arrived at the Casselton Beach marina, Hiro directing Ian where to park.

"Should I just look for that crazy car of Jason's?" Ian asked.

"It might not be here," Hiro said. "You'll be able to see the houseboat easily, though."

"Holy crap," Ken said as the houseboat came into view. "Is that it?"

"That's the one," Hiro said, pointing. "The jetty access is just there."

"That's Jason's houseboat?" Ken asked.

"How is that anyone's houseboat?" Ian said. "That's bigger than our actual house. By a lot. Should we buy a bigger house?"

They piled out of the car as another car arrived and parked just one spot along. It was Taika, driving Hiro's new car.

"Oh, hey, boss," Taika greeted, and Hiro made introductions.

"What are you up to?" Hiro asked.

"Jason asked me to stock up the bar. He said he didn't have any regular booze, just the magic stuff."

"Magic stuff?" Ian asked.

"Right, you're here to learn about all that," Taika said. "I think alcohol was a good idea."

The others offered to help Taika, each taking a crate of drinks from the car while Taika carried one under each arm.

"How much did you actually buy?" Hiro asked. They were leaving at least as many crates behind. As well as filling the boot, the crates were loaded up in the back and passenger seats.

"This is just the plonk," Taika said. "It'll probably be two runs for mixers and stuff."

WHAT YOUR UNCLE HAS BEEN TELLING YOU

Erika approached the houseboat flanked by her family and the towering figure of Taika, all carrying crates of alcohol. Jason and Emi came out to meet them, standing on the lower deck that was level with the jetty. Jason waved them aboard.

"Thanks for helping with the drinks," he said. "We may as well do this whole thing in the bar lounge. We'll probably need those drinks by the time we're done."

"There's a bar lounge?" Ian asked.

"Look at this place," Ken said. "I'm guessing they started with a bar lounge and built a houseboat around it."

"Jason, are you finally going to stop dodging me?" Erika asked.

"Yes," he said. They spotted immediately that he was more subdued than his usual self, gently holding his niece's hand. "How's Mum?"

"Freaked out," Erika said. "Her son just came back to life and her mother's Alzheimer's is miraculously cured. All she got in explanation were second-hand accounts of the vague nonsense you told us. Why did you do it like that?"

"If she doesn't want to show up for family meetings, then that's what she gets," Jason said, his father nodding in approval.

"Jason," Erika said. "This isn't like sorting out Great Aunt Marjory subscribing us all to *Christian Quarterly*. You came back from the dead."

"Yes," Jason said. "Twice, thus far."

"What do you mean, twice?"

"First things first," Jason said. "Before we can start, I need to change your understanding of what is and isn't possible."

“Are you completely certain you didn’t join a cult?” Ian asked.

“You have to see for yourself, Dad,” Emi said, standing next to Jason.

“Come on,” Jason said.

He traded Erika’s crate of alcohol for her daughter and led them across the lower deck and through the tinted glass doors that slid open at their approach. Inside was a sprawling lounge, with soft chairs of white leather and glass walls running around three sides. They put the crates down by the bar and looked around at the opulence.

“There’s a bloody mezzanine,” Ian said, causing the rest to turn their gazes to the upper level. “God damn, Jason.”

“Hiro, Taika and Emi have already seen what I’m about to show you,” Jason said. “Today, we’re going further than what I’ve revealed so far. It’s going to take a while, so expect to be here for the day.”

“What about all the stuff you told us before?” Erika asked. “Being a mercenary in Africa.”

“Everything I told you is true,” Jason said, “but also incomplete. There’s something very important that I left out, and much more to tell. I’m going to begin by showing you something. Then something else and something after that. One impossible thing after another until your perspective of impossibility itself undergoes a fundamental change.”

“Bro, you sound like one of those guys with a TV show that explains magic tricks. You’re pretty big into melodrama, hey.”

“Taika, I’m trying to set a mood here,” Jason complained. His family chuckled.

“Sorry, bro.”

“Stop dancing around it, Jason,” Erika said. “What is it you’re going to show us?”

“Alright,” Jason said.

He opened a portal arch, which rose up from the floor. The black obsidian arch, filled with darkness, was incongruous with the lavishly appointed lounge.

“I’ll be waiting on the other side,” Jason said and stepped through.

The others went through the same startled examination of the arch that Taika and Hiro had done upon their first exposure to it. They walked around, examining the arch Jason had vanished into from both sides, peering into the darkness. Erika checked the floor for a mechanism it had used to rise up while Ian ran his fingers over the arch.

“This is solid stone,” Ian said. “Is he a magician now?”

“Not a magician, Dad,” Emi said. “A wizard.”

“A wizard,” Erika said disapprovingly. “I don’t know what your uncle has been telling you, Emi, but he is not a wizard.”

“Come find me, then,” she said and dashed through the portal herself.

“Emi!” Ian called out, then immediately followed her through the arch.

“What is happening?” Ken asked as his family vanished one by one.

“It’s a lot, I know,” Hiro told his brother. “I also know from experience that once you step through that door, everything changes. I don’t think there is a way to prepare for what comes next.”

Ken nodded at his brother, squared his shoulders and marched resolutely into the portal. That left Erika with Hiro and Taika.

“Don’t look at me,” Taika said. “I’m going to get the rest of those drinks.”

Hiro gave Erika a sympathetic smile, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“You’re looking for answers in a world that’s making less sense with every passing day,” he said. “I’ve been there. Very, very recently. We both still have a lot to learn.”

He held out his hand for her to take and led her towards the arch.

The point at Castle Bluff had a paved and railed lookout area that ran along the cliff face. Further back was a park where much of Jason’s family was throwing up on the grass. The winter wind blew in off the ocean, making the park trees hiss like snakes as the wind savaged its way through the leaves.

Jason stood at the railing looking out. Emi was beside him, holding his hand as the wind whipped her hair around her head. There was no one else out on the bluff on the blustery day.

Despite being the last of the family to arrive, Erika recovered the quickest, looking around disbelievingly at their surroundings. The portal was still there, taunting her with its impossibility. As she stared at it, Taika emerged, putting a hand to his stomach until it settled. He glanced around, nodding with approval, then made his way to Jason.

“Did you want me to go get the mixers and stuff, bro?” Taika half-yelled over the wind.

“Thanks,” Jason said. Despite not speaking loudly, his voice oddly cut right through the wind. “When you get back, stick around, yeah?”

“I thought maybe it was a family thing?” Taika said.

“I got you caught up in all this,” Jason said. “I’ll see you through it all the way, brother.”

“Thanks, bro. Alright, I’m going to do that drinks run while you’re showing them stuff here, yeah?”

“You’ll have time,” Jason said. “They’re a stubborn bunch. I mean, look at them. They just got teleported and they’re staring at the sky like it owes them money.”

Taika glanced over at Jason’s family, who were starting to recover and, as he said, looking at their surroundings in suspicious disbelief.

Erika, having recovered, also made her way to Jason, and held out a hand towards her daughter. Emi ignored the hand, moving past it to embrace her mother in a huge hug.

“Emi,” Erika said, staring at Jason over her daughter’s head.

He had turned from the railing and leaned back against it, watching her with sparkling eyes. There was an ease to the way he leaned against the rail, a confidence like nothing she’d seen from him before.

Confidence wasn’t an area in which Jason had ever been lacking, but this man before her was different from the cocky boy who thought he was smarter than everyone. This was deeper, less forced and more assured, as if he feared nothing the world could throw at him. She felt it strange that she suddenly had that certainty about him, to the degree of it being suspicious.

“What you’re feeling is my aura,” Jason said. “Not that nonsense they take photos of in new age shops, but the real thing.”

“Jason, that’s ridiculous.”

“I did warn you. Look at where we are, Eri. How did we get here?”

“I can’t explain that,” she said, “but it definitely wasn’t through the power of reflexology and crystal healing.”

“Try the archway again,” Jason said. “You’ll get used to the queasiness and disorientation, I’m told. Not entirely, but it gets easier.”

“You’re told?” Erika asked.

“I don’t suffer from it,” Jason said. “A quirk of constitution. Seriously, give it another few goes.”

“I will!” Emi said, rushing off to the portal. She started dashing rapidly in and out until she staggered away with a goofy grin, dizzy from the disorientation. Jason and Erika looked on, standing side by side.

“You know I’m the coolest uncle ever, right?” Jason asked Erika as he slipped an arm around his sister’s shoulders. “Eri, magic is real. I know that’s crazy, but crazy is where I’ve been living for a while now.”

“It’s beyond crazy,” she said.

“Oh, this is only the beginning,” he said.

Emi fell over in the grass, dizzy, while her father went to make sure she didn’t roll over into someone’s vomit. The rest of the family had recovered and approached, still looking around in disbelief.

“Vermillion,” Anna greeted over the phone. “I was sorry to hear you were demoted.”

“It’s not without its benefits,” Vermillion said. “Getting out of Sydney for a while might not be a bad thing. You should see the house they’ve put me up in.”

“I’d like that,” Anna said. “Would you be willing to play host for when we talk with him?”

“He insists on hosting you himself, on his houseboat.”

“He’s not willing to accept neutral ground? That doesn’t speak well to his willingness to come to an accommodation.”

“His position,” Vermillion said, “is that he has one houseboat and you have the rest of the planet, being an international network of secret magicians. Who have already tried to kidnap him once, you might recall. I think you should just concede the point, Anna.”

“I’ll talk to my boss and get back to you. Did he agree to a day?”

“Tuesday. From what I can see, he’s eager to get this done.”

“The day after tomorrow,” Anna said. “We can work with that.”

Jason needed the family to get it in their heads that magic was genuinely a thing. They were a sceptical bunch. Erika especially reached for mundane

explanations much as her daughter had. Back at the marina, in preparation for some dramatic show-and-tell, he had Shade scout the area around the houseboat for potential eavesdroppers. Even on a late Sunday morning, the marina was winter quiet.

In the parking lot, Jason began by demonstrating his inventory. He took things in and out, including Hiro's car. He showed them Shade turning into a car and returned the houseboat to the cloud flask and brought it out again, now with magical cloud interior.

Back on the houseboat, he moved around the interior, transforming rooms as they watched. He ran a power drill through his hand, which had trouble fighting through his damage reduction, then chugged a bottle of detergent. His powers turned the poison into healing that restored the injury on his hand.

They returned to the bar lounge, now made up of overtly magical cloud stuff in gorgeous sunset colours. After everything they had seen, Jason gave them time to let it all sink in.

Taika was freshly back from his second run of mixers and was putting away all the fruit, sugar syrup, soda water and other drink ingredients. Ken was looking shell-shocked, Hiro sitting with him and talking quietly. Ian sat with his daughter while Erika and Jason made cocktails at the bar, side by side as she continued to grill him.

"I swear, Jason," Erika told him. "You better not have met some ridiculous illusionist and conceived all this as a mad, elaborate prank. I will go to the hardware store and buy one of those big PVC barrels, knock you out, throw you into the barrel, fill it with concrete, borrow Wally's boat, take the barrel out into the ocean, and drop you to the bottom of the Pacific. You've disappeared once; it won't seem that strange."

"That's suspiciously well-thought-through," Jason said. "Ian, has your wife been killing people and dumping them in the ocean?"

"Absolutely not," Ian said. "They changed all the judges on *Kitchen Conquest* because the network refused to bump their pay and definitely not for any other reason. I didn't tell him anything, honey."

"Is this really the time for jokes, husband? Jason, pass the sliced limes."

"Sweetie," Ian said, "Jason came back from the dead and is apparently an indestructible wizard now. Once your brother turns into Gandalf the White, I think we're in uncharted territory, decorum-wise."

“It wouldn’t kill me anyway,” Jason said. “Hand me the rum. No, the white rum. Never mind.”

His arm extended to grab the bottle from the end of the bar.

“Apparently, he’s also Mr Fantastic,” Ian said.

“How could being dropped into the ocean inside a solid block of concrete not kill you?” Erika asked.

“Well, the pressure might get me, if you dumped me in the Marianas Trench. Is Wally’s boat big enough to get out there? Anyway, my mate Gordon would get me out before I sank too deep. He’d make pretty short work of concrete. And I don’t breathe anymore, so that’s not an issue.”

“You don’t breathe?” Erika asked.

“Who’s Gordon?” Ian asked at the same time.

“Okay,” Jason said. “I think we’ve reached the portion of the proceedings where we need to sit down and have it explained from the start, if only to organise what is a lot of crazy. Let’s all go to the media room, since I’m going to start things off with a video presentation.”

“Seriously?” Erika asked. “Like one of those employee induction videos, but for magic?”

“It’s more of a magical hologram than an actual video,” Jason said.

The group settled into the couches and recliners of the media room and Jason took out a carousel of recording crystals, plucking a crystal from the very first row. A projector emerged from the floor, and he slotted it in before taking a seat between his sister and niece on one of the couches.

An image appeared in front of them, an opulent living space in cool ocean greens and blues. Jason was in front of it, but Jason as they remembered: clean-shaven, prominent chin.

“Hello,” image Jason said, waving out from the projection. “I’m not sure if, or when you’ll be seeing this, but I didn’t die, or whatever you think happened to me. You probably know that, since the only way you’re likely to see this is if I give it to you.”

He let out a dissatisfied groan. His voice was also the way they remembered, less deep and resonant. The group all looked at Jason’s current self for comparison.

“Maybe I should have scripted this,” image Jason continued. “Oh, well. Where should I start? It’s been about two months since I arrived here. Where is here? That’s complicated. I’ve made some friends. I just got a new job, although I haven’t started yet. They’re meant to be sending my ID over

today. The application process involved sort of a week-long retreat, which I got back from a couple of days ago."

Image Jason took a deep, centring breath.

"I still needed to breathe, at that stage," real Jason pointed out.

"I suppose I should start with that complicated question of where I am," image Jason said. "Right now, as you can see, I'm in an expensive hotel suite. It isn't actually mine; that's across the hall. This one belongs to some of those friends I mentioned. They went three-bedroom, which came with this nice, open living area."

The image panned off Jason, turning towards a pair of open French doors leading onto a balcony. The recording moved forward, giving them a view of a cerulean sea.

"Nice, right?" Jason's voice came from the recording. "One of my new friends is kind of a big deal, so he got the best room in the house. We're on an artificial island, which is pretty crazy, given the size. At some point, I'll do a tour video. The subways here are amazing."

"Jason," a woman's melodic voice came from the recording. "Who are you talking to?"

Erika and Emi both felt Jason flinch when they heard her speak.

THE MOMENTS THAT DECIDE WHO YOU ARE

It was a strange closing of the circle as Jason watched his recordings with his family, seeing himself behave without knowing if the moment he now experienced would ever happen.

There were over a hundred and fifty hours of recordings. Most of the early recordings were of Jason exploring Greenstone as he gave an in-depth narration of his experiences to date. His family did one of the few things even less plausible than magic—they took a genuine interest in a family member's holiday videos.

They watched until the early evening, at which point Jason put a stop to it. There were protests, but Erika and Jason shared a look, his eyes flicking in Emi's direction. Erika picked up his signal that not all the records were tween-appropriate and helped quell the other's insistence on continuing.

"There is plenty more where that came from and it's all here waiting for you," Jason said. "In the meantime, there is more you need to know. Specifically, about the state of the world here and now. You've all just become part of a wider reality, and you need to understand the new world you're living in."

Jason proceeded to explain the three hegemonic powers, how he had healed Nanna and the treatment she would need to give her the most effective recovery.

"Why are you telling us all this?" Ian asked. "You said yourself that at least some of these groups have a vested interest in secrecy."

"Because the secret is going to come out," Jason said. "Probably sooner than later. After the circumstances of my disappearance, Erika ran into that secret herself, before being crudely warned off. When the world finds out, it

will be an incredibly unstable time. I want the family ready when that time comes."

"What about Kaito and Mum?" Erika asked.

"I'll bring them in," Jason said. "I'll tell them everything, the same as with you. But the people in this room will be responsible for keeping the family safe. Over the next few weeks and months, each of you will obtain magic for yourselves. We'll select those powers together, from what I can get access to, and I'll train you to use them. Emi too, but only once she's old enough."

"You aren't going to give Mum and Kaito powers?" Erika asked.

"I don't know about Kaito and Amy," Jason said. "They have two young children, which leaves them essentially zero time to train. If I have enough resources to be going on with, then maybe. Mum, definitely not. I don't have the time or patience for her trying to take charge of everything."

"Can you show us an essence?" Emi asked. "We saw them in the recordings, but I want to see one in person."

Jason took a plant essence from his inventory and handed it to her. The cube was a dark, earthy brown riddled with green like roots in soil.

"This is a plant essence," he explained as the group gathered around the object Emi was holding in her hands. Jason pulled out some others and passed them around, along with some awakening stones.

Finally, Jason sent everyone off, except for Hiro and Taika.

"I've thrown a lot of crazy stuff at you today," he told them. "It's going to take a while to sink in. Take the night; you'll think of a lot of things you want to know. I suggest you write them down and you can bring them to me whenever you like. Except Tuesday, when I'll be negotiating with a secret organisation working with the government to keep magic a secret from the world. I never got to do that at the office supply store, but I was only an assistant manager. That's probably store manager level stuff."

Erika and Ian informed Emi that no, she was not allowed to stay on the houseboat with Uncle Jason as she had school in the morning. They took Ken with them to drop off on the way home. One of the advantages of a small town was nothing was really out of the way.

Jason, Hiro and Taika kicked back in the lounge.

"So, you really healed all those kids in the hospital?"

"Yeah. I didn't know the local players, so I needed to flush them out. If I can heal a bunch of kids while I'm at it, then all the better."

“Are you going to do it again?” Taika asked. “There’s a lot more sick kids out there.”

“I won’t do it like that,” Jason said. “The media and political storm I kicked up was so big, it impacted hospital operations. I’m told the Network has ways to do the same thing without kicking up a stink.”

“And if that doesn’t pan out?” Hiro asked.

“Then we’ll see,” Jason said. “Taika, now that you know more and you’ve heard what’s coming, you should give some thought to your own family.”

“What happens if all this magic stuff comes out into the open?” Taika asked. “Are they in danger?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Jason said. “It could be anything from a blip on the radar to the end of civilisation. It might be just one more thing the rich people keep to themselves and a month later we’re back to obsessing over celebrity scandals. Or it could be a new world war as everyone grasps for new power. I hate to think about what happens when religion gets involved. If we’re really lucky, it could be a dawn of peace and prosperity as magic helps us overcome disease, poverty and climate change.”

“Where would you put the odds of that?” Hiro asked.

“It seems pretty unrealistic,” Jason said. “And that’s coming from an interdimensional warlock ninja who came back from the dead. Twice.”

“Did you really come back from the dead?” Hiro asked.

“Oh yeah.” Jason tugged at the collar of his shirt. It revealed a scar at the base of his throat. “I got impaled through the throat. Amongst other places.”

“How did you come back?”

“That’s a secret I don’t have all the answers to,” Jason said.

“Can you come back from the dead again?” Hiro asked. “Are you immortal?”

Jason responded only with a saturnine smile.

“Alright,” Hiro said. “Something I’ve been thinking about, then. You know I’ve been talking about a legitimate development project once the EOA handover is completed.”

“Sure,” Jason said.

“What if it was a residential community? Like the gated communities in America, except built to keep out dangerous magic rather than ethnic minorities. Is there some way we could bake in magical protection, right

from the planning stage? Secretly build a place where our friends and family can be safe if things do go bad?"

"That's an interesting idea," Jason said, thoughtfully rubbing his chin. "A very interesting idea. I'd need to advance my understanding of array and formation magic, but I just so happen to have an excellent library of appropriate theoretical texts. I'll have to do some reading before I can tell you how viable that is."

"It's not like I need an answer today," Hiro said. "I need to finalise things in Sydney before I even look at what comes next. I'd like to head into Sydney later in the week, if that works for you. I know enough now that I don't want to meet them without you watching my back."

"Of course," Jason said. "Set something up and let me know a time. Anything Wednesday or later works for me."

Casselton Beach always had pleasant winters, but the morning after Jason's big talk with his family was shaping up to be an especially fine day. The sky was crystal clear and the weather was projecting a high of 26 degrees. When Shade took his car form, it was open-top. Jason patted the door appreciatively.

"Have I ever told you how awesome you are, Shade? Because you're awesome."

Jason took the wheel himself as he threw on some music. He intended to enjoy the drive out of town as he headed for his father's new place. It was just a few minutes out of Casselton Beach, but that was still far enough to leave the small town behind and hit pleasantly pastoral countryside.

Ken had picked out a good-sized patch of land that occupied an entire hilltop. It had panoramic views on all sides, with a vast open sky overhead, although parking was not ideal. There was a short gravel drive off the access road on the far side of the property from the cottage where Ken was living. Jason parked next to his father's flat tray Land Cruiser.

Jason picked his way through an expansive landscaping project that was currently little more than a hilltop covered in dirt, large holes, and a scattering of native trees. Jason walked around dug-out dirt beds as he navigated towards the little wooden cottage where his father was living.

Even the grass was largely torn out, with only some of the native trees left intact. The holes and projects dotted the property, all the works careful to avoid their root systems.

Jason knew enough to realise how ambitious the project was. His father was literally reshaping the hilltop in preparation of establishing the foundational infrastructure. It would take years to reach fruition.

The old wooden cottage was the exact opposite of Jason's lavish magical home. He could just imagine the interior, all worn down wood and faded furniture. The only new things would be the big TV and the extra shelves for all the DVDs. Give his father a bunch of solar panels and the complete series set of Magnum P.I. and Ken Asano would happily wait out the zombie apocalypse.

Jason found his father in a folding camp chair outside the cottage, overlooking the property with a pensive expression. He had an old car stereo sitting on a brick and set to a golden oldies station. It was wired to a loose car battery. Ken had watched Jason pick his way across the property, then rose to hug his son as he arrived.

"You know, Dad, both of those things are meant to be in an actual car."

"If I wanted a car up here," Ken said, "there'd be a car up here."

Jason chuckled as he moved to stand side by side with his father and look out over the property.

"This is ambitious," Jason said.

"After what happened with you and then your mother," Ken said, "I didn't know how to go forward. I wasn't feeling that excitement for any of the projects I was being offered. I needed something different, something I could lose myself in. I didn't have any passion left. I've been lucky enough that money wasn't a problem, so I packed in the business and went looking for that something. This is what I found."

"You're still getting ready to put the bones into place."

"Yep," Ken said. "I'm not sure I know how to do this after what happened yesterday, though. The things you showed us. The world just changed around me, Jason, and once again, I have no idea how to go forward from here. How do you go back to living a normal life after learning those things?"

"You don't," Jason said. "You can trust me on that one. Life is different now and there's no going back. Change doesn't have to be bad, though. I'm back, and I come bearing gifts."

He took out an essence and placed it in his father's hands.

"You have no concept of what it's like to wield magic," Jason said. "It isn't that much of a sensation, at first. You can feel it inside you, but it's just a seed. As you grow stronger, you can feel the power. You make it your own and then, when you use it…"

Jason shook his head, a smile on his face.

"It's like feeling the universe wash through you. I don't know if there's a drug that feels that good, which is probably for the best."

"Jason, I'm fifty-six years old. I don't know that I'm up for whatever it is you have planned."

"That's the best part," Jason said. "You'll be healthy. Strong. Strong enough to maybe help me put aside old grudges. It'll be awkward and uncomfortable. You'll fight with Mum, I'll fight with Kaito. And Mum, probably. But we'll be there for one another. There are strange days ahead, and there will be things that I need to do."

His voice dropped to a whisper.

"There are things I've already done. I'm not sure who I am anymore, Dad."

Ken placed an arm around Jason's shoulders as his son's quiet voice broke.

"Don't worry, son. You can tell the others as much or as little as you'd like. But whatever you tell me, I'll listen, and you will never have to be ashamed."

After unburdening his sins to his father, Jason was fearful of how Ken would look at him. For a long time, Ken watched his son in silence, Jason's nerves fraying like old wires.

"I'm not going to tell you that the things you've done were right or wrong," Ken said finally. "You can't change the past, only the future."

"I'm going to have these choices all over again in the future," Jason said. "I'm not naïve enough anymore to think I can avoid that."

"Jason. Son. In life, there are things that you want to do, and things that you need to do. That's true whether you're a dimension-hopping wizard or a landscape architect who only gets more handsome with age. Next time

you're in a position to kill—every time you're in a position to kill—then you have a choice to make."

"It's not always a choice, Dad."

"Like I said: some things you need to do. That's not unique to you; it's something plenty of people face. Soldiers, cops and yes, magicians from another universe. But don't fool yourself into confusing what you want with what you need. If you get the choice and you realise that you want to kill someone, don't think about whether to kill them or not. Think about whether you want to be the person that killed them or if you want to be the person who showed mercy. You're more important than them and what they deserve. Those will be the moments that decide who you are, son, and every choice is a chance to turn a little more in one direction or the other."

"The two wolves."

"Exactly," Ken said. "You've got the good wolf and the bad wolf fighting inside you. You get more chances to feed them than most, and it sounds like maybe you've been feeding the wrong one."

After letting everything out to his father, Jason finally felt a crack in the angry vigilance that he hadn't been able to shake. He needed to act smarter and more diplomatically if he was going to keep his family safe and prepare them for the future. Playing chicken with ancient orders of magic would only hurt them in the long run.

He was back on the road when his phone rang, and Shade closed the hard top on the car to cut down on wind noise. It was Erika.

"Jason, I've got a production meeting running long and Ian can't leave the practice. Can you pick up Emi from the academy for us? She stays late for the advanced program, so she can't take the bus back."

"I'd love to."

"Thanks," Erika said. "Normally, I'd ask Mum, because even she's never too busy for granddaughter time, but she's with Nanna out at Uncle Robbo's farm."

"No worries, Eri. You'll come and pick her up from my place?"

"Damn right I will," Erika said. "I've been writing down questions all day. Oh, Wally says g'day, by the way. He asked if you'd to do an episode; we're filming all next week."

"Give him a firm maybe," Jason said. "I don't know what my next few weeks are going to look like."

“Alright, I’ll call ahead to the school and put you on the list of people allowed to pick Emi up. You’ll need to check in with the office, the first time.”

“No worries. See you this afternoon, sis.”

Jason took the turn for Castle Reach as Shade retracted the roof once more.

“Back to school,” Jason mused.

Arriving at the academy, Shade, for once, was not wildly out of place. The cars present to pick the kids up all cost more than a teacher’s annual salary, ranging from dark German sedans to bright Italian sports cars.

“Who needs a Lamborghini here?” Jason asked. “I bet none of these pricks need to outrun bikers hopped-up on vampire blood.”

Most of the students had been picked up an hour earlier. Only those in extra-curriculars or the advanced program like Emi were still around. That left a handful of cars in the largely empty parking lot, with a cluster of parents gathered outside, chatting as they waited. There were also what appeared to be a number of household staff sent to pick up young scions, who had formed their own little group.

Jason parked and made his way to administration to register himself.

“I thought Mrs Asano’s other brother died,” the elderly receptionist said.

“Well, we all thought you died in 2006, Mrs Wilkins, yet here we both are.”

“Oh, now I recognise you. The one with the mouth. You know, we remember your brother and sister very fondly.”

“Story of my life, Mrs Wilkins.”

Jason headed back outside to wait for Emi. Through their auras, he felt the gathered parents turn their attention on him. One of the people wandered over.

“Excuse me,” the man said. “You look a lot like someone I used to know.”

“G’day, Silas,” Jason said.

“Jason, that’s really you? You look good, man. Especially given that I went to your memorial service. What happened to the whole being dead thing?”

“You’ve heard the saying ‘too sexy to die?’ Not just a saying, as it turns out.”

“Well, you did me a solid,” Silas said. “You remember Asya Karadeniz? She’s looking good too and I almost got a leg over with the whole shared grief thing.”

“You and Asya? Does she have self-esteem issues these days?”

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” Silas said wistfully.

“Aren’t you here to pick a up a kid? You should try and sound less date-rapey.”

“It’s my little cousin,” Silas said. “He’s on the soccer team. With your cousin, I think.”

“Right,” Jason said, remembering that Toby would be sixteen now.

Jason had two cousins, on his father’s side: the children of his Uncle Shiro. Like his sister and himself, the cousins were separated by about a decade. The older, Koji, was Jason’s age and they had spent a lot of time together as children, although not by choice. The younger, Tobio, had been ten the last time Jason saw him.

Jason was contemplating how to handle meeting his cousin when Emi arrived in the parking area.

“Uncle Jason!”

“That one’s mine,” Jason said. “Good seeing you, Silas.”

“See you around, I guess. Congrats on not being dead.”

Emi was positively bouncing as he climbed into the car.

“Shade, you’re a convertible now? That is so cool!”

“Good afternoon, Miss Emi.”

“I came up with so many questions.”

“So did your mother, apparently.”

“So, that Farrah lady is really cute. Are you and her a thing?”

“That’s what you want to ask? An alternate magical universe and that’s your first question.”

“That wasn’t a no,” Emi said.

“No, we weren’t a thing. She was a friend and a teacher. She meant a lot to me, but not like that.”

“Was?” Emi said, her excitement doused in cold water.

Jason smiled sadly. His niece really was too sharp.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “You’ll see that when you watch more of the recordings.”

“About the recordings,” Emi asked. “Does it magically translate? I assume they don’t speak English in an alternate universe and it would

explain why everyone's speech is out of synch, like a seventies kung fu movie."

"That's exactly right," Jason said. "The ones that translate weren't much more expensive than regular ones, and you were the intended audience, so I picked them up. The hardest part was calibrating the crystals to English, which took ages."

"How did you talk to people there in person? Did you have a magic translator item?"

"I'm pretty good with languages," Jason said.

"Is that so?" Emi asked in Japanese. "Mother told me that you were bratty about learning when you were at my age."

Jason was getting better at paying attention to when he was switching languages and taking more active control over it. He responded to her also in Japanese.

"Your mother and your Uncle Kaito used to talk behind my back, except right in front of me, using Japanese."

"You do speak it! You sound a little like the translation recording crystals, though. Do you have a translation power?"

"I do."

"What languages can it do?"

"All of them, as far as I'm aware."

"You're going to find anime dubs even more annoying now, I guess. Okay, next question: Your friend Gary is really furry. Does he give good hugs?"

"Oh, they're amazing," Jason said. "It's like being wrapped in a blanket made of friendship. But not as weird and creepy as I make it sound."

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 and the afternoon temperature had climbed into the high twenties. The unseasonable heat was begging the beach town's residents to slip 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 and returned Emi's wave as she whooped and hollered at them from the back of her jet ski.

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. The white sandy shore was 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 where Jason purchased them an ice cream each.

Emi was approached by some of her friends who were also at the beach. She 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 towards 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?"

"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 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?”

“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.”

Jason sat alone 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. 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.

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. Their last few phone calls had devolved 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 armchairs. 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 new 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. Her instincts screamed danger, until the sensation passed. She looked 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 get in here?”

“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?”

“Years of observational evidence. Kaito and Amy, I get. We were young and dumb and made choices that hurt each other. 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 at least tried to hide it 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 forcefully strode to the door and opened it.

“I came back home for reconciliation,” he said softly, pausing in the doorway. “I know I’m not doing a great job of it, 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.”

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.”

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; he looked at the listed caller.

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

“I wanted to talk about the other outworlder,” Anna said.

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 an organisation 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,” Anna 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, Anna had her phone on speaker as she scrolled through a file on the screen.

“Is this what I think it is?”

“Thousands of known essence combinations, plus some basic notes on the general tendencies of those combinations. Very basic; I’m keeping the details for the next time I need something. This is just a taster.”

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?”

“Yes,” Anna said. “This will do nicely.”

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.”

Jason let out an easy laugh.

“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!”

Anna was making final preparations to leave when a woman in her mid-twenties knocked on the open door. She wore 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 given her a swarthy skin tone and dark hair, which were set off attractively by the maroon of her outfit.

“Miss Karadeniz,” Anna 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,” Anna said with a smile.

“I was always fancy,” Asya said.

Anna chuckled. “It seems odd that they sent someone from magitech research.”

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

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

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

“Seriously?”

“Oh, yes. I even had a 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,” Anna said. “Contrast him with his pre-magic self.”

“That’s why they approved the assignment, although it’s 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.”

“You think they matter?” Anna 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,” Anna 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.”

Anna returned her phone to her pocket.

“Done,” Anna said.

Keith arrived outside the office.

“Miss Karadeniz, always a pleasure.”

Anna’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?” Anna asked.

“There’s us three,” Keith said, “plus the government liaison. We’ll be meeting Craig Vermillion once we reach the town.”

“Who’s the liaison?”

“Gordon Truffett,” Keith said.

Anna 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?” Anna 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.”

“Anyone else?”

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

“What for?” Anna 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.”

Anna 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?”

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, Anna and Asya enjoying the coastal drive.

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

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

Anna 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.”

Anna gave Asya another look.

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

As they reached the outskirts of Casselton Beach, Anna 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?” Anna 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.”

Anna 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,” Anna said.

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. 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. 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.”

“How is that even possible?” Asya asked.

“His houseboat is drawing it in. 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.”

“How is his houseboat absorbing the magic?” Asya asked.

“Magically, I’d assume,” Craig 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 ahead of time what does it 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?" Anna asked as she stepped out of Asya's roadster.

"Now we're talking," Asya said. "I wonder where he picked it up."

"I strongly 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 still swimming 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 conditions 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 was 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 long enough to have scar over.

The air mattress turned into 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.

He turned his back to them to lead them inside. This put the tattoo on his back on full display. It showed a night sky filled with stars that actually seemed to twinkle. Looking closer, it seemed like there were dark shapes, almost imperceptibly moving through the night. In the middle of tattoo was a strange dark cloak, lit up by the stars. Inside the cloak was an open, daylight sky. Aside from Gordon Truffett, who had no magic, they could all sense that it was no ordinary tattoo.

"Best come in, then," Jason said. He moved 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 was 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 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 figure manifested in the air, although this one was quite different from Shade. The new presence was a disembodied cloak, much like the one on Jason's back tattoo, but instead of containing daylight, it held an image of the God's Eye nebula. Four glowing orbs floated around it, looking similarly like blue and orange eyes.

"This guy thinks you should be Other Gordon," Jason said, pulling a pitcher from one of the two large refrigerators. "What do you say, Gordon?"

The familiar responded by turning on Truffett, making a slow, menacing approach. Nigel stepped between them.

"Alright, Gordon," Jason said and the familiar vanished. "Sorry, Other Gordon. Looks like actual Gordon's taking a hardline position."

Standing behind Nigel, 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 from his own. 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?"

Interlude

Jason's Lemonade

Item: [Jason's Lemonade] (normal rank, common)
A delicious citrus drink (consumable, beverage).

- Effect: Refreshing.

Crafting requirements:

Materials:

- 6 lemons.
- 1 and ¼ cups of sugar.
- 5 cups of water.

Amounts of sugar and lemon juice can be adjusted, if you like it extra sweet or with bit of a twang to it.

Tools:

- Mixing bowl.
- Cooking pot.
- Mesh strainer.
- Lemon/vegetable peeler.
- Lemon juicer (optional).
- Serving pitcher.

Steps:

1. Wash lemons. If they feel waxy, scrub them under hot water.
2. Peel the zest from **6 lemons** with a veggie peeler. You want the yellow zest, but don't be too worried about getting some of the white. Set the peeled lemons aside.
3. Cover the lemon zest with **1 and a quarter cup of sugar** in a mixing bowl and combine by tossing. Cover with some cling wrap and leave for at least 2 hours, but longer is better. Leaving them overnight works very nicely.
4. Bring **5 cups of water** to the boil, in a pot on high heat. Turn off heat and pour in lemon-sugar mix.
5. Bring water to a boil in a pot over high heat; turn off heat and add the lemon-sugar mixture, including the peel. Stir, then leave as the sugars dissolve, which should be about 5 minutes.
6. Strain the liquid back into the mixing bowl through a mesh strainer to excise the peel.
7. **Do not add the lemon juice immediately**. Let the liquid sit until room temperature; about half an hour should do.
8. Cut the lemons in half and squeeze into the bowl through the mesh strainer. Pour lemonade into a serving pitcher, cover in cling wrap, and refrigerate until nice and chilly.
9. Pouring the lemonade over ice without chilling it first will melt the ice and water it down, so get it nice and cold. I'd recommend a couple of hours. Then pour over some ice and prepare to get seriously quenched.

OTHERWISE BEST AVOIDED

Jason and his guests were sitting around the bar lounge of his houseboat.

"I think we should start," Keith began, "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. 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 may seem to be from the wounds you suffered, but the reality is that you put them there yourself."

"Psychological scars made manifest," Gladys said.

"Something like that. 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 shapeshifter 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?" Anna 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 solar 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 that’s more of a metaphor.”

Jason turned and let them look without it being half-obscured by a towel. 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 cosmic power and knowledge and came home.”

“What do you mean by ‘died’?” Anna 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?” Anna 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, etcetera. 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 may be a little cross with me because I keep dodging him, though.”

“These are some outrageous claims you’re making,” Anna 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.”

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

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

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

“How?”

“No idea.”

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

“Yes, 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 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?” Anna asked.

“Some of it,” Jason said. “A lot of the blanks he didn’t know, I filled in myself. 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,” Anna 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?”

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

“Monsters,” Jason said.

“We use the term dimensional entity, or DE,” Anna 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 to handle that?”

“There has only been one category-four incursion to date,” Anna 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. 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,” Anna 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 guessed.

"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 unrelated to magical affairs."

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

"You're not on TV, Truffett," Anna said. "Don't bother with the transparent lies."

"Obviously, what we want from you," Keith said 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 sad 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.

Anna 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 set 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 with a clink. The crystal spirit coins had a different sound from 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," Anna 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," Anna said.

"Now, about 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."

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 a McDonald's 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. It's not anything hugely revelatory. Probably a refinement of what you've already been trying. It's a just matter of training."

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 can do is show you training techniques to help you to bring up a new wave of people who are stronger than the last, using their powers to the fullest. The other world has been refining their training techniques for thousands of years and I was taught using some of the best methodology for creating powerful essence users there is. I can’t train people as well as the people who trained me, but I can still pass along the lessons I’ve 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.

“I won’t say that,” Jason said. “It should be a big improvement, though, based on what I’ve seen. 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 jump forward in leaps and bounds.”

“Can’t you just teach the people already using cores?” Anna 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," Anna said.

"You're right," Jason said. "But the hard way is kind of my thing. You haven't seen the list of entities who bet against me and lost, Anna. If I have to make a new list here, 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. I'm going to get them and you get to help if you want. You don't get to ransom them to me."

"We don't have this person," 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 stationery, 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," Anna 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 you're here negotiating instead of holding me 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 you failing to grasp the full gravity of my concern on this matter, so allow me to rectify that. I am going to go to get that outworlder, whoever they are. That's just a fact. Maybe I'll 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 that means and that it truly is the kind of help you'll need if you try and stop me."

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 felt oppressed. The normal-ranked government official panicked and ran out the doors, sprinting around the outside deck towards the dock. The incongruency of such a menace pouring off the barefoot man in a Hawaiian shirt and board shorts gave it a bizarre eeriness.

The pressure receded, leaving the iron-rank Asya and Anna taking deep breaths, as if they'd just breached the surface of the water. Keith didn't look much better, while Gladys watched Jason warily.

Nigel stared at him with wide eyes. "Can you teach me to do that?"

“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 clarified.

“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?”

“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 one of Shade’s bodies 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?” Anna 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," Anna told Jason.

"What gold?" Asya asked.

SECTION

Sitting at a table in the bar lounge of his houseboat, Jason spent considerable time hammering out details with Keith and Anna. 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," Anna 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, Anna, Gladys and Nigel all received notifications on their phones, the same alarm-like sound for each. They glanced at each other as they checked the messages.

"Is that about 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," Anna 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 Anna.

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

"Alright," Anna 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?”

“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.

“Did you make those panels yourself?”

“Kind of. More of a renovation to the base model.”

“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,” Anna 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 magically barren?”

“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," Anna 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."

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 towards 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," Anna 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," Anna 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," Anna 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 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.”

“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 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.

The Network’s paramilitary nine-person sections were assembled, along with their actual military counterparts. The organisational structure seemed quite similar; the Network appeared 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.”

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; 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."

"So much bloody jargon."

"The Ditto is 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?"

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

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

"Yeah, because I've seen any war movie from 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."

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 and appeared to Jason's senses as if it might collapse at any moment.

It couldn't be traversed in its natural state. A team of Network ritualists worked to stabilise and open the aperture. It was a similar process to opening 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.

- 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 watched 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, who, in Nigel's team, was the laconic Green. The signaller had two primary tasks. One was to maintain communications gear—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 got 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 kind of your 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 made 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’s 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 emerged from 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 the 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.

Jason paid significant attention to the section's teamwork 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. This approach 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, in contrast, 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 up enemies 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.

Jason would never go for this technique himself, since it would be hampering his own advancement, but he couldn't help admitting 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 advance his abilities more quickly.

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

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, they used their powers to support the team in combat when they weren't 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, but set 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 and, 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 aiming. He fired 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 did 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 he was in an eighties action movie.

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

That gun was 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 overpowered. Higgy used his charged shield to send one troll stumbling back while Nigel conjured a grenade launcher to blast the third. A grenade to the face rang the troll's bell, but it was far from a kill shot. They could visibly see it start to heal.

The stalling tactics were 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, 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. A terrifying storm of bullets chewed 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 cut 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. Jason helped 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 combusted 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 alright," 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.”

“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, which 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 the voice channel to Koen. “Waters, 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 may 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.”

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 almost a kilometre in that direction.” He pointed. “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?”

“One hundred percent.”

“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 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 tainted with green murk emerged from a member of the harvest team. 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 a 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?"

"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. 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."

"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. 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."

"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?"

"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.”

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 for 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 after letting 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.”

Against Nigel's protests, Koen sent Jason after the third hydra. His concession was conditional on Jason taking the scout with the strongest sensory powers they had in order to warn him away from critical danger. For that reason, Jason went to the rapidly evacuating camp to pick her up. She was a scout from one of the harvest teams, her stealth only exceeded by her perceptual abilities.

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. Jason was experienced at riding this form during 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; 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 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."

"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 walked into the jungle.

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, 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 now recorded 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. She felt it react to her senses, which flinched from the aura 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 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 influenced 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 him. 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.

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. Jason took 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 on to 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.

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 expected 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.

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 like a scared insect.

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

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, Anna, 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 our 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?" Anna 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," Anna 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 it shows that Asano's looting ability is 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 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 and Gretel if they 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 and 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," Anna 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 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," Anna 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,” Anna 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,” Anna 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,” Anna 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,” Anna 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!”

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. Instead, he 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 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 dialled.

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

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 sat on the floor behind a plastic drum kit. All three turned guiltily to 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 me," 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 Grand Nanna."

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. "Glad you're not dead, though."

"Love you too, cousin."

They went 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. 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 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?”

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, earning 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 am 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.

“Annabeth 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.”

In the medical department of the Network’s Sydney branch, Kylie Chen sat 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 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’d 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 prompted.

“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. That’s why the committee has decided to act, but we need to be careful.”

“Yes,” Kylie agreed, nodding. “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?”

“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 as the folder slipped between trembling fingers to spill papers onto the ground.

MY TURN

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

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

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

"Mr Asano just received some important news."

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

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

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

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

"How so?"

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

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

"I think, perhaps, that you should be the one to watch them," Shade said. "I hope it will build a bridge between you. Mr Asano has shown you

the fantastical and wondrous, while avoiding the suffering he has experienced. I have seen that you want to be good family to him, but what he's been holding back lies between you. I would like to help you bridge that gap, for his sake."

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

"Begin with these," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He rubbed his temples.

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

"Who is she?" Asya asked.

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

"Lost her?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is this chicken?" Taika asked.

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

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

"Just up from Tuncurry," Jason said.

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

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

"Are you alright?" Hiro asked.

"I'm fine."

"Bollocks you are," Hiro said.

Jason let out a groan.

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

"What are you going to do about it?"

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

"Is there ever enough power?" Hiro asked.

"I don't know," Jason said. "There are people who are basically demigods, but I don't know if I'll ever be that strong. Very few ever get

there, or so I'm told. For all I know, they have just as many problems, but on a scale that would crush me underfoot in an instant."

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

Jason nodded.

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

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

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

In Greenstone, when Jason felt frustrated like this, he would go on a monster hunt. Moving from town to village in the delta, clearing out every adventure board notice and moving on. At least there he could channel his pent-up aggression into something that helped people.

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

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

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

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

“That doesn’t sound like her.”

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

Jason frowned and left his cabin.

“Where are they?”

“The media room.”

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

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

“Not the time?” his mother exclaimed. “If you think…”

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

“We’ll come back another day,” Amy said firmly.

“Amy, are you kidding?” Kaito asked.

She turned to her husband.

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

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

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

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

“Still very little. I’m sorry.”

“Should I have had you send more bodies?”

“I would need to send most of them to have a significant impact,” Shade said. “Sending them all to France would hamper my ability to react to

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

"Which has limited value," Jason said.

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

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

"There is no strong enough that no one will defy you, Mr Asano. The Builder possesses power beyond your ability to conceptualise, yet you defied him and you won. Twice."

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

"All the great astral beings are allowed to make exceptions with their power," Shade said. "It is the only currency they can trade with one another, for what else is denied them? It may seem, from a limited perspective, that this world and the events you are caught up in are important, but there are more universes than you have names for numbers. There are countless strange events and exceptional circumstances. At every moment, each of the great astral beings is taking countless actions. The Reaper making an exception like this has never happened in all the time humans have existed on your planet. If you looked across the cosmos in its entirety, however, you would find the Reaper is releasing souls at every single moment of every single day."

"Why?"

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

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

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

“What’s different about the Builder?”

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

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

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

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

“Yes,” Shade said.

“And that’s a normal thing?”

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

“But it’s happened before.”

“Yes.”

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

“I hope you’re contacting me with good news, Mrs Tilden,” Jason said.

“We haven’t got her out yet, Mr Asano, but the International Committee has agreed to form a contingent to press the Lyon branch in person, after

their encroachment into our territory. That means some of our people, plus some IC heavy hitters. And you, if you want in."

"When?"

"How quickly can you get to Bankstown Airport?"

"Very."

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

"I'll be there."

"Oh, and Mr Asano?"

"Yes?"

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

VISUALLY DISTINCTIVE HENCHMAN

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

"Uncle Jason," Emi scolded.

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

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

"Yep."

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

"Why?" Erika asked suspiciously.

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

"Back to the other universe?" Emi asked.

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

"What's in France?" Erika asked.

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

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

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

“I wouldn’t mind sleeping in one of those cloud beds,” Ian admitted, after which Emi threw up her arms and cheered.

“Cloud bed! Cloud bed! Cloud bed!”

Erika groaned her reluctant capitulation.

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

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

Erika wrapped her brother in a hug.

“Are you doing something dangerous?” she asked.

“Probably,” he admitted.

“Just come back to us faster this time, okay?”

“I’ll do my best.”

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

“Harsh,” Jason said with a chuckle. “As it turns out, though, that’s exactly the plan.”

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

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

“Is letting him out really the best way?”

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

Kylie nodded, although she still looked uncertain.

“Just remember the threat that Asano poses,” Miranda said. Kylie’s dull gaze grew sharp. “Good girl. Your envelope has a key card and door codes,

none of which are tied to you. Memorise the codes and the security protocols and then destroy the envelope before you begin. Once you release the Frenchman and give him the packet, get out and destroy the key card as well."

"What will you be doing?" Kylie asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So I was reborn on the same spot I was born."

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

"I guess my return wasn't a sufficiently impactful event to glom onto," Jason said. "And here I thought I was special."

The Bankstown airport was better suited to discreet private charters than Sydney International, which suited the Network's needs. Anna had sent Jason directions to avoid the passenger terminal and approach a small, quiet entrance to the airfield. She was startled to see his approaching car explode

into darkness, only for him to stride out as the swirling darkness was sucked into his shadow.

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

"My driver understands the most vital aspect of being an essence user," Jason said. "Of all the things I learned in the other world, it stands above all the others."

"And what's that?"

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

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

"Very frequently."

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes," Anna said. "He's quite intimidated by you, so please don't make things hard on him. There's also Ketevan Arziani, who you've yet to meet. She's my right hand, which means she gets to run off to France while I stay here and do the actual work. It feels like it should be the other way around. We're also sending a unit of four from Tactical Division. We can't spare any category threes, but these are category twos with experience in personal security."

They entered through the open hangar doors, where ground crew were loading luggage onto a private jet. Jason recognised Asya and Keith

chatting with another pair, while the obvious security locked eyes on Jason and Anna as soon as they came into view.

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

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

He turned to her, his face apologetic.

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

"It's alright."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason was introduced to the remaining people and then they boarded the plane. Along with the Network's contingent were the plane staff, made up of the pilots and a pair of flight attendants.

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

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

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

“That’s still pretty good,” Jason said.

“This plane is a product of my department,” Asya said as they took their seats. She claimed one directly facing Jason. “Research Division has been divorced from specific branches and brought under the umbrella of the International Committee. That way, breakthroughs are shared by the entire Network. It’s part of a gradual progression by the Network away from the factionalism of the past and towards truly becoming one organisation. This very trip demonstrates that there’s still a long way to go.”

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

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

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

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

“That’s pretty sweet,” Jason said.

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

“And you harvested the materials from proto-astral spaces?”

“That’s right,” Asya said.

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

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

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

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

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

Miranda’s satellite phone rang right on schedule.

“Well?” Adrien Barbou asked.

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

“Just make sure you rendezvous with Sebastian first,” Adrien warned. “If he isn’t there, no portal.”

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

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

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

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

be."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But you were fine," Asya said.

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

"And they were shark crabs?" Ketevan asked.

"It's not a great monster," Jason said. "Tough carapace, and rough if it gets a hold of you with that mouth, but it's slow and clumsy. There's a sand

variant that's even bigger and buries itself in sand. I fought one of those later, once I knew what I was doing."

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

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

"A blood root vine," Shade said.

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

"That big?" Ketevan asked.

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

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

"True," Jason said. "I should explain from the start; it's not like we're going anywhere."

Suddenly, an explosion ripped through the plane.

OF COURSE IT WAS HIM

JASON CAME TO HIS SENSES, WHICH WERE AN INCOHERENT STORM OF sensations as he tumbled wildly through the air. His head was ringing, wind roaring over his body and through his ears. All he could see was a spinning blur of sky.

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

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

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

The other major injury was a deep slash to the side of his neck. If not for the combination of his exotic physique, bronze-rank power attribute, and Colin's healing, it would certainly have killed him. The confluence of those factors made what would otherwise have been lethal an inconvenience at most. The magic imbued into the plane had already

allowed it to inflict damage like an iron-rank weapon, and without his bronze-rank damage reduction, it may have taken his head clean off.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The wind roaring past his ears should have made Shade's words unrecognizable, but Jason heard him clearly. His bronze-rank spirit attribute enhanced his perception enough that he could pick up the sounds before the high-altitude winds and their rapid descent carried them away. Not only that, it could filter out the extraneous noise, allowing Jason to ignore that and focus on what he wanted to hear.

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

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

"You have a suggestion?" Jason asked.

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

"On it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course."

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

"Go for it, Shade," he said.

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

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

danger, but until her body processed the residual magic, potions would be unable to heal her further.

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

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

- [Bruce Corwin] has been added your party.

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

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

"My guess would be a second aircraft, someone on a boat, or both," Bruce said. "They may have even been tracking our transponder and triggered the explosion remotely."

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

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

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

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

"Can you?"

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

“Sand pirates?”

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

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

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

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

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

“True, but I’d take those odds. I’ll check it out before I do anything drastic.”

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

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

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

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

The drones were steel wrapped in protective bubbles, on which Gordon went to work. His disruptive-force beams cracked the magical shields while

his resonating-force beams made short work of the reinforced drones underneath. The four beams swept through the drone swarm in pairs, efficiently wiping out what Jason hoped was an outrageous wealth of magical devices.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason recognised that the three men were arguing in French. It was the result of his practise at actively listening to people to recognise the

languages his power translated for him. It had been a reason to watch some of the foreign films he always told himself he should be watching instead of trashy action films. He had compromised by watching trashy, foreign-language action films.

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

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

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

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

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

"We needed to fire the rockets."

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

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

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

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

THE PRICE OF TRANSGRESSION

JASON HAD JUST DROPPED LIGHTLY TO THE LOWER DECK AS THE YACHT rolled under his feet on the open ocean. The three men were startled as the object of the search they just ordered alighted right in front of them. He pushed the hood of his cloak back off his head to reveal his face. They looked each other over.

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

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

More people arrived to form up behind the first three. They were all bronze rank, with less complicated magic and without the power boost flowing through them. Their magic felt like that of the EOA thugs he had been talked out of fighting at Vermillion's café. They were a variant of converted—the magically modified people the Builder cult had used. The Builder's examples had been more improvised, using a modified core with extremely negative side effects. The Builder's forcibly implanted cores essentially hijacked the body and trapped the soul, leaving mindless drones.

The ones he had seen on Earth had critical differences. For one thing, his aura senses revealed that the soul was empowered, like an essence

user's, rather than sealed away to serve as little more than a magical battery. The Earth converted were also more holistically imbued with magic, rather than it all stemming from a central core. He could sense the distinct magic in their flesh, their bones, and even their skin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A second tattoo lit up on the man's arm, which was wreathed in fire as it passed through Jason's empty cloak. Jason had already shadow-jumped

through it, moving the moment he sensed the surge in magic. In another shadow, a freshly conjured cloak hid him as he examined the man more closely with his magical senses.

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

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

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

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

A line of darkness snaked from the shadow cast by the deck above, an arm holding an ornate black and red dagger. It made two shallow cuts on Number One's leg and tried to withdraw, but was grabbed by the silver-rank reflexes of Number Two. Despite the shadow arm's intangible nature, a small tattoo on the back of the man's hand was glowing and the hand had no trouble gripping Jason's shadow arm. The arm and the dagger both vanished as Jason relinquished the conjured items.

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

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

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

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

"*Bleed for me*."

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

“Should we help?” one of the henchmen asked.

“Don’t get in our way,” Number Two warned them.

Shade was occupied playing parachute, so Jason flung explosive throwing darts at the tinted windows, blasting them out to let in more direct sun. Jason needed some hard shadows to shadow jump through instead of the soft, diffuse artificial lights in the room. So long as he had that option, the room’s furniture would only be an impediment to his enemies. Combined with the room’s extravagant size, he decided this would make a good place to face off with the trio of converted.

They chased him in and he cast a second spell on Number One, before jumping from one shadow to another and casting a third spell. The trio was clearly used to working as a team, spreading out for maximum coverage and limiting Jason’s room to manoeuvre. When they adapted to his tactics and started to box him in, Jason switched it up again.

His primary goal was achieved; the affliction suite was in place on Number One, so it became a matter of waiting. He retreated through a door and moved deeper into the yacht.

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

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

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

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

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

“I can’t help him now,” Jason said. “He’s dead, whatever I do.”

“If I die, you’re coming with me,” Number One snarled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“*As your life was mine to reap, so your death is mine to harvest*.”

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

Number Two snarled, but Three grabbed his arm.

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

“You want to surrender?” Two asked incredulously. “After what he just did to Henri?”

“He’ll do the same to us.”

“No, he’ll die.”

Two yanked his arm free and rushed at Jason, who didn’t run. He held up his hand, his palm slick with blood as leeches sprayed like water from a garden hose. Then Jason fell into his own shadow like it was a manhole, rising from Number Two’s shadow and making two shallow cuts with his dagger. Two was madly yanking leeches from his face as he yelled more in panic than pain.

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

“Drop,” Jason commanded.

The leeches fell instantly to the deck as Two threw himself over the side.

“Come back,” Jason commanded.

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

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

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

“*Suffer the cost of your transgressions*.”

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

“We surrender!” Three called out. “Can’t you let him live?”

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

He turned around to face Three.

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

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

"*Feed me your sins.*"

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

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

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

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

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

Jason turned his gaze on Number Three.

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

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

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

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

Bruce had been anxious about what they would be dropping into after the powerful rockets had come their way. He'd been able to shoot them

down before they struck the semi-conscious iron-rankers, but it left him with trepidation about what awaited them below.

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

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

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

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

"Your people?" Bruce snarled. "You think we care about your people after you killed ours? My team. My friends. I should execute the lot of you."

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

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

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

"Reynaldo Agostinelli."

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

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

"Expecting a call?" Jason asked Reynaldo.

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

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

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

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

Jason took the phone from Bruce and answered it.

THE TIME FOR BOLD, DECISIVE MEN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Adrien won’t be happy about losing her contacts still in the Australian branch if the outworlder survives.”

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

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

“I’ll take that action.”

“We should let Adrien know about Ellis.”

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

Remy held up his phone, peering at it.

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

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

“Uh…”

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

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

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

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

"Am I speaking to Mr Asano?"

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

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

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

"Is that so?"

"It is," Jason said. "Now that I'm alive, your prisoner is of little use to you, if any. Whatever you might force from her, the Network will get from me quite freely. I'm going to make you an offer, which I hope you take."

"And what's that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So, you offer forgiveness?" Adrien asked.

"Call it what you like. I've been trying to teach myself to let go of the past so it doesn't poison my future. You and I can go at it, but I don't care about taking you down. I care about getting her away from you. If letting

you go gets me that and coming after you just endangers her, I'm happy to take her and never see you again."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Unless he was lying," Jason told him, "Barbou is going rogue from his own branch. Contact your people. This is going five kinds of sideways."

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

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

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

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

"We can assign blame later."

"Says the man whose idea of saying hello is to accuse my people of failure."

Adrien rolled his eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The time for secrecy is over,” Adrien said. “It’s the time for bold, decisive men to take action.”

“Do we really need her?”

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

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

“Did you have a strike team ready to take me out if I double-crossed you? I respect that.”

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

“Heron, tell your people to hurry.”

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

“Are you sure you couldn’t portal down?” he asked.

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

“Then couldn’t we have both gone down and portalled to our next destination from there?”

Remy thought it over for a moment.

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

Sebastian took a fistful of smashed electronics from his pocket.

“She landed on it.”

Farrah hadn’t quite completed her mental map of the facility’s magic array, but once they started prepping to move her to another facility, she knew she had to act. The first part was the hardest, taking out a pair of bronze-rank

guards. Fortunately, one panicked when she made her move and unleashed his strongest attack. Farrah shoved the one she had been choking out with her handcuffed arms into its path. Her arms were burned a little, but she ignored it. Fire wouldn't have hurt her if her powers were active.

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

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

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

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

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

Personnel rushed through corridors filled with concrete dust from the repeated explosions. The staccato flickering of the lights was inducing panic; each moment of darkness was a reminder of how far underground they were. Whole chunks of floor, wall and ceiling had become rubble underfoot. In the chaos, her stolen uniform and cap allowed her to blend in, just another panicked staffer.

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

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

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

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

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

Barbou was standing with a dozen heavily muscled men and women in dark clothes.

"Well," Barbou said. "Aren't you industrious?"

TECHNICAL ISSUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Network was at a body count of eight. Though Jason was the impetus for the trip, he did not assign himself the blame. That he placed on

the people that took Farrah and planted the bomb: Adrien Barbou, anyone that worked for him, and anyone he worked for.

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

That, however, was an implausible power fantasy. He'd indulged in them before, to the cost of himself and others. He thought he could outplay Elspeth Arella and Lucian Lamprey, both seasoned politicians. The reality was that he got himself tortured and Sophie almost condemned to a life of exploitation and depravity. He'd only escaped through luck and protected Sophie by hiding behind Emir. He'd caused the problems and failed to be the solutions.

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you sure?" Bruce asked.

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

“We appreciate the alacrity,” Asya said. She had regained her senses on the yacht while awaiting the helicopter. All the surviving Network members had been healed up, at least physically. Emotionally, they remained shaken from the ordeal; not everyone almost died as frequently as Jason.

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

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

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

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

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

Recognising the shimmer of a compressed air attack, she juked left. If it had caught her squarely, she would have been sent tumbling back. As it was, the attack still arrested her forward momentum. It was enough time for

the rest of the thugs to charge in for the attack while Barbou launched himself into the air and hovered out of her reach.

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

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

This was a special purpose squad, made up entirely of elite converted. They suffered fewer side effects from dosing themselves with boosters and their magic tattoos that added a handful of magical abilities to their tactical options. It was nothing compared to Farrah's array of essence abilities, but those were currently denied her, so even something as simple as the conjured rope that caught one of her arms was a useful tool.

Once Barbou was out of reach, the fight was already over. They had too many people and too much strength, although she made them pay a blood price to finally take her down.

When she was finally unconscious, Barbou descended to the ground.

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

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

As Barbou said, half of the thugs were sitting or lying on the ground, being tended by the rest. One of the ones that hadn't boosted himself had been killed outright.

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

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

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

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

"Yes, very well."

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

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

"…we have her in custody," Anna continued, briefing Jason via video conference, "but Sebastian was out of the building before anyone was the wiser. Miranda was quite thorough in her preparations and was gone herself long before we realised what was happening. We have no idea where she is, now. If she's smart, she'll stay beneath whatever rock she's crawled under and never come out. If I get my hands on her I'm going to strangle her with her own hair."

"So, what now?" Ketevan asked, standing next to Jason in the small office at the airstrip. Asya and Chathura were also present.

"Asano," Anna said. "I assume that your intention is to continue to France?"

"It is," Jason said.

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

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

"That may only be the beginning, from what I'm learning," Anna said. "You'll be briefed further on landing. For now, get on your plane and go. If

the rest of you would leave, I'd like a private word with Asano."

Chathura and Asya went outside, leaving Jason alone with Anna on the screen.

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

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

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

"Thank you, Anna. I set things in motion the moment you told us that Sebastian was loose but appreciate you looking out for them."

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

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

Emi absently meandered with a thoughtful expression, placing the officers between herself and the scooter. They turned to watch her, wondering what she was up to. Once their backs were to the scooter, she stopped, took off her helmet, and tucked it under her arm, scratching her head curiously.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, officers," she said.

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

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

"This scoo… where did it go?"

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

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

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

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

"What helmet?"

"Young lady, what's your name?"

Emi pulled out her phone and started recording video.

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

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

"You little…"

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

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

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

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

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

"Talking to you like this might take some getting used to," Erika said.

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

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

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

"You can teleport a dessert to Sri Lanka?"

“I have the power. Like He-Man, but with desserts instead of startling homo-eroticism.”

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

“You promise not to freak out?”

“No. Tell me anyway.”

“Okay, so this didn’t really come up in conversation, but last week, I got mildly kidnapped.”

“What?” Erika exclaimed.

“It’s fine.”

“You were kidnapped?”

“Mildly kidnapped. I unkidnapped myself as soon as the sedative wore off and the guy responsible has been locked up ever since.”

“You need to explain all of this right now.”

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

“Why would he come after us?”

“I don’t think he would,” Jason said. “He probably thinks I died when my plane blew up.”

“WHAT?”

THE LONG GAME

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

contain sensitive operations and was not within the array's protective magic.

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

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

"It takes the right circumstances," Jason said.

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

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

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

Espinoza gave Jason an assessing look.

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

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

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

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

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

"That's the idea," Jason said.

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

“That sounds fair,” Jason said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Justifications can come later,” Hector interrupted. “Relevant details, Mr Abreo.”

Abreo sighed, clearly reluctant.

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

Abreo paused, looking around the room with trepidation.

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

That statement triggered a susurrus of murmured disbelief.

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

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

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

Hector stood up to calm the group down.

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

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

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

Jason leaned closer to Asya.

“Catastrophic events?” he asked.

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

“You’re talking about a monster apocalypse.”

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

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

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

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

“Adrien Barbou,” Hector said, “was part of the highly secretive and highly selective group of Lyon branch staff who knew of and worked in the so-called dimensional fortress. We now believe that he has been cultivating loyalists from within the Network’s ranks and that he stepped up this activity after being made Operations Director. It is highly likely that anyone and everyone in the dimensional fortress is one of his, not one of ours.”

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

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

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

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

“Spirit coin farm,” Jason murmured to himself in surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Barbou has been recruiting from within the Network,” Hector said. “He’s been working towards the entire staff occupying the dimensional fortress being personally loyal to him. He most likely has full control of the space. Our current thinking is that he’s playing a long game. Either he believes that the EOA will come into conflict with the Network and liberate him or that the dimensional space escalation problem is far worse than is

generally accepted and the dimensional fortress will become a key refuge that he can leverage. He has the resources there to remain inside without external supply. In fact, the dimensional space was a major source of resources for the Lyon branch. He simply doesn't need to come out."

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

"These are the locations of the apertures to the dimensional space," he explained. "As we speak, there are people attempting to breach the seals on those apertures. We are on standby until one of those apertures is opened."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We realised that the Australian signal was likely another outworlder. As we hadn't heard anything, this meant that either the local branch there was hiding him, like we were with ours, or their outworlder was still at large. Adrien advocated for having the Australian outworlder captured or,

failing that, eliminated. The Steering Committee reluctantly agreed, under the stipulation that we send a stealth specialist, rather than the more aggressive team Barbou wanted. The goal was to remain unnoticed, or at least unidentifiable, even in failure."

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

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

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

Abreo stood trembling, too scared to answer.

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

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

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

A MOMENT FOR DRASTIC MEASURES

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

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

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

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

"How long did it take to go from dial phones to cellular phones?" the ritualist asked. "Unless you have a whole new field of magic sitting around somewhere, we're done here."

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

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

"Then by all means, proceed."

Jason looked down at the purpose-built wooden boards with the ritual circle drawn onto them. They were tightly slotted together so as to not break the ritual circle. Jason broke the ritual himself by drawing his foot

through a chalk line in the magical diagram, and the visible magic it contained faded and dispersed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you think?" Jason asked him.

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

"It is," Jason said. "By a lot. That said, Clive and Emir's team took months cracking that seal. Testing, analysing, retesting. Even if I wasn't reliant on mana lamps for that, which I very much am, it will be time-

consuming. It may not be months, but I'm not Clive. Unless I get lottery-win lucky, it'll be weeks."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Taking weeks to get through is better than not getting through at all," Hector said. "They're bottled up and not going anywhere."

"Not good enough," Jason said.

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

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

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

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

Ability: [Nirvanic Transfiguration]

- This ability will be evolved from the ability [Astral Affinity].
- Your body and soul will be combined into a gestalt entity both physical and spiritual in nature. This state will grant inherent resistance to effects that utilise the soul-body disconnect.
- The nature of your new body will render you immune to resurrection effects, including those of high-rank healing magic. If your body is discorporated, your soul will return to a purely spiritual state, unable to reinhabit a physical form or re-enter a physical reality. This prevents the natural formation of an outworlder body on entering a physical reality. These restrictions will change on reaching diamond rank.
- When suffering lethal damage, instead of dying, your new body will undergo a nirvanic rebirth, returning to a state of full integrity. This effect cannot be triggered again until you have increased in rank from the last time it was used. This ability will change on reaching diamond rank.
- The strength of your aura will significantly increase.
- Your resistance to hostile dimension effects and disruptive force damage will be increased. This is an enhancement of the [Astral Affinity] ability.
- The effect of your dimension effects and your transcendent damage will be increased. This is a legacy effect of the [Astral Affinity] ability.
- Physical reality around you will be more stable. You will be able to sense nearby astral space apertures and proto-astral spaces coterminous to your location.
- You will be able to traverse astral space apertures, including those that are closed or have been sealed.
- You will be able to directly enter proto-astral spaces coterminous with your location or directly leave a proto-astral space to a coterminous location.
- While within the astral, you will be able to create and maintain a small zone of physical reality around you. This does not grant the ability to enter or traverse the astral.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then you have your decision."

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

"No," Jason said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is he ranking up?" Hector asked.

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

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

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

The onlookers saw three globes of energy inside of Jason's translucent body, circling each other behind his rib cage. One was a sphere of pure darkness while another was a glistening orb of blood. The third was a blue and orange eyeball that gave off a sense of depth and power, as if warning

the onlookers against probing too close with their magical senses and risking annihilation on gaining the eyeball's attention.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He marched over to the aperture and vanished into it.

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

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

“He needs us,” Ketevan said.

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

A Network functionary burst into the tent.

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

“Why didn’t they go through with the others?” Hector asked.

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

FOILED PLANS

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you going to unseal the aperture?" Shade asked.

Jason spent a moment considering it.

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

"We scout the area, then?"

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

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

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

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

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

Word started coming in that something had been spotted moving in the shadows, in more than one location. Since no one had been able to pin down whatever it was, it was assumed to be a stealth-type category two monster. Once they realised that there was more than one of them, the group sent out people to find and stop them. The direct manifestation of monsters in the dimensional space was a threat they couldn't afford to ignore.

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

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

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

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

They could sense the category-two strength from the entity. As it moved into the room, the leader threw out a concussive sphere of compressed air that struck the creature and blasted it apart, far more easily than anticipated. It exploded outright, gobbets of flesh scattering through the room. Moments later, they realised that the chunks of flesh were not the remains of the strange creature but a swarm of leeches. Leeches that were now clinging to the walls, floor, and ceiling on the side of the room that held the exits.

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

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

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

"It won't come out of the dark," one of them said. "Just stay away from the shadows."

"Look around, genius. It's all goddamn shadows."

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

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

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

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

"Uh, guys? Where did it go?"

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

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

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

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

A group of EOA and Network operatives found each other, both having lost members. Many had their flesh blackening with rot.

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

"He took out the healers first."

"He?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

man's flesh was visibly desiccated.

"There!" one of them shouted, pointing in the direction of the stream of life force. Bullets and powers erupted in that direction, just as the draining power came to an end. A shadowy figure emerged from the other direction, dashing forward to bite into an exposed neck with an ornate black and red dagger.

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

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

Farrah stepped out from behind the half-shattered wall.

"Assist me how?"

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

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

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

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

"That is correct," Shade said.

"Who sent you?"

Outside the astral space, the ritualist team that had been examining the apertures were reporting to Hector. They were standing in front of the

aperture Asano had entered while the logistics team was preparing to assemble another tent.

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

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

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

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

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

"The outworlder, Asano?"

"Yes."

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

"Yes, Mrs West. No slip-ups."

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

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

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

"Thank you, Mrs West."

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

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

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

"Which Asano had already agreed to give them."

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

QUITE THE YEAR

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

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

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

"What are you?" she asked.

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

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

“Also harsh. You’ve missed a lot, Farrah.”

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

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

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

“You couldn’t have said something when you were doing my eyebrows?”

“You were quite focused at the time.”

“That’s fair. Do they look good?”

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

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

“Hello?” asked the seemingly forgotten Farrah.

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

“The memories are hazy, but yes,” she said.

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

“Is it really you?” she asked, voice trembling.

He flashed a familiar grin. “I knew my charisma would shine through.”

“I can’t imagine any shapeshifter with so little dignity as to talk that much crap,” she said, tears forming at the corners of her eyes.

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

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

"What are you?" she asked.

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

He started talking.

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

"I can't imagine any shapeshifter with so little dignity as to talk that much crap," she said. "Show me Colin. He's hard to fake."

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

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

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

"I think he missed—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How long?" she asked.

"A year."

"It must have been quite the year."

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

"You kept making those recordings for your family?"

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

"How did you get them back to your world?"

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

"That was your world?"

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

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

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

Jason had experienced an oddly emotionless clarity in the moments after his own torture and captivity, but when the emotions finally came, they crashed down like a tsunami. He wanted to get Farrah out of the astral space and past the inevitable Network attention before it all caught up to her. He suspected that Farrah was mentally stronger than him, but there was

no avoiding the aftermath of the trauma she had suffered. In his case, it had been months before he came up for air.

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

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

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

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

"This environment is probably as good for him as it is bad for us," Espinoza said. "The more extreme the location, the less effective orthodox tactics are. I've been advocating for expansions to our tactical doctrine for years, as has pretty much everyone in my position across all the branches. We're far too reliant on conventional, military-derived tactics. Hopefully, Asano turning up will actually be a spur for change."

"He's only category two."

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

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

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

"I was in the neighbourhood," Jason said.

“De Lange will want to debrief her,” Espinoza said.

“I don’t much care, to be honest,” Jason said. “She’s done being beholden to Network personnel.”

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

“The magical carriages here are better than the ones back home,” she said. “The ones that don’t fly anyway. And these don’t use magic. You know, we all thought you were talking nonsense about your world and what could be done without magic.”

“Wait until you see the plane,” Jason said.

She turned to look at him. “Can I use a power on you?”

“Sure,” he said.

“Don’t you want to know what it is before accepting?”

“It’s you,” Jason said. “I don’t need to.”

She looked at him in silence for a long time.

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

“We have a mythical warrior in my world who uses his fear as a weapon, turning it on his enemies.”

“What kind of warrior?” Farrah asked.

“He’s this super-rich guy that dresses up like a bat and goes around punching poor people.”

“That sounds like a terrible myth.”

“He has special boomerangs.”

“I don’t see how that matters.”

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

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Farrah said happily, leaning into his arm. “How tragically familiar.”

Jason grinned, inwardly crowing as he kept her from dwelling on her ordeal. He’d essentially blasted through the Network, demanding a plane from Hector before dramatically driving away in Shade. His goal was to lean into the strangeness of a world that was new to her, distracting her at

least until they were on the plane. Then, she would have time to sit with what she'd been through, and hopefully get some sleep.

"So, about that power," she said.

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

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

- [Farrah Hurin] is attempting to use ability [Power Bond] on you.

- [Power Bond] will enhance some of your abilities for the duration of the bond and give [Farrah Hurin] access to your knowledge. This is restricted to your knowledge of concepts external to yourself. This ability cannot read your thoughts or access your knowledge of yourself.

- [Power Bond] can be rejected or ended at any time by you.

- If you do not implicitly trust [Farrah Hurin], this ability will fail. Subconscious distrust will prevent this power from working.

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

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

"So, that power lets you gain knowledge?"

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

“How does it work?”

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

“I can do that,” Jason said. He considered for a moment, thinking of common aspects of his world. After looking around, he picked cars. He concentrated on the idea of cars and Farrah’s eyes immediately went wide and she jolted in her seat for a few seconds.

“Are you alright?” Jason asked as the fit passed.

“I am,” she said, although she looked exhausted.

“So, do you know about cars now?”

“I do,” she said.

“Think you could drive one?”

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

“There is a lot to learn,” Jason said, concentrating again.

Once more Farrah was jolted in her seat.

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

“Agreed,” Jason said. “Essentials first.”

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

“Oh, it’s essential,” Jason said. “It’s going to come up a lot.”

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

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

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

FULL HOUSEBOAT

JASON HAD HIS OWN UNFORTUNATE EXPERIENCES WITH HOW ESSENCE users dealt with extreme trauma following periods of captivity. In the time he had spent recovering, he had learned a lot from the priest of the Healer and Rufus's mother, Arabelle Remore. In the weeks he had spent receiving their care, they had elucidated how the response and recovery of essence users tended to go.

Essence users went through their own variation of shock, compared to normal people whose souls had not been magically reinforced. Following the trauma, essence users gained a grace period where their minds were stabilised by their souls. It was a defence mechanism that gave them a chance to seize a critical moment and escape their circumstances.

The price of all this was that once the grace period had passed, their souls would enter a recovery state. Their powers were negatively affected and their mental state crashed, leaving them both fragile and vulnerable. Jason had experienced this himself, and it was not long into the first leg of their return to Australia that Farrah experienced that crash for herself.

Jason knew that there was little he could do for her at the moment, other than keep her safe. He didn't disembark when the plane stopped to refuel, remaining outside the sleeping cabin like a loyal guard dog. Only once he got her somewhere that she truly felt secure could she set out on the long path to recovery.

What that would look like, Jason was unsure. He didn't have access to experienced professionals like Arabelle or Carlos, the priest of the Healer that had helped him. He snorted a laugh at the irony of him, of all people, being disappointed at the lack of a priest.

Jason didn’t bother waiting for the flight to land in Australia, portalling directly off the plane with a blank-faced Farrah. The interior of the houseboat managed to rouse a reaction as she looked around at the white and sunset colours of the cloud-stuff. He could sense the presence of his sister and her family but didn’t announce his presence when he arrived in an empty cabin.

“Cloud house?”

“Yep,” Jason said. “I won Emir’s little contest.”

“You met Emir?”

“Sure did,” Jason said. “We have a lot to catch up on. I’m sorry I won’t be able to help you as well as Arabelle would.”

“Rufus’s mother? How much did I miss?”

“I can’t wait to tell you all about it,” Jason said. “Let’s get you settled in a room, and I’ll make us some…”

Jason glanced through the window at the bright blue sky. His phone had been lost in the plane explosion and after jetting across the world and back, he didn’t even know what time it was.

“…lunch?” he guessed, based on the day outside.

Now that Farrah was secure, Jason's next concern was her recovery. Even if he found a local trauma counsellor he could trust, the circumstances made it very tricky. Anyone who already knew about magic would still have a lot of catch-up to do and would come from one of the local magical powers. Jason didn't trust the Network or the Cabal to not view Farrah as an opportunity rather than a victim, even if they did have the qualified staff.

Jason could find an unaffiliated specialist himself, but there was no way to help Farrah properly without inducting that person into the secrets of magic and alternate universes. That would cause problems with traumatising his new trauma counsellor and he needed someone who could help her with the culture shock.

In many ways, Jason himself was the best choice to help her. He had some relevant experiences, but that did not make him the equal of the people who had helped him through those experiences. He did not want to mess Farrah up more than she already was.

In the end, he decided to compromise. He would reach out to the Network and ask their healer, Gladys, for potential options. First, he would need a new phone.

“Uncle Jason!”

The moment Jason appeared in the houseboat’s galley, his niece apparently confused the concepts of hugging and rugby tackles as she launched herself in his direction. He stood solid as a wall as she crashed into him, ruffling her hair affectionately.

“Uncle Jason…” she complained, straightening it with her fingers. He chuckled as he looked to her mother making lunch. Ian walked in from outside, holding the book he was reading. Ian greeted him with a welcoming smile, while Erika gave him a scolding look.

“You have a lot of explaining to do,” she told Jason. “Like what’s going on with those sunglasses.”

“Jet lag,” Jason lied. “I’ll tell you all about my trip later. You know, it’s sometimes eerie how much you look like Mum when you’re cranky.”

“You do kind of look like Nanna,” Emi said, examining her mother’s face.

Erika’s nostrils flared and her eyes went wide.

“Now you really look like Nanna,” Emi said as her father held laughter back with tightly pressed lips.

“Explanations will have to wait a couple of days,” Jason said. “I promised the men in black I’d stopped randomly telling people stuff before they enter into a secrecy agreement.”

“Since when do you have any respect for authority?” Erika asked.

“I’m always conscientious and respectful,” he lied, moving around the kitchen counter to catch his sister in a hug. She didn't return it, so as not to get food stains on his clothes from her hands as she mixed spices.

“Once Emi goes off to play with Shade,” he whispered to her.

“Suffice to say,” Jason continued in a normal voice, “that a friend of mine was in need of help, and I helped her.”

“This is a mysterious magic friend?” Erika asked.

“Yes, although that requires its own explanation. I’ll make sure you’re up to speed before she’s ready to start meeting people. She’s in a rough way, right now, so don’t expect her to pop out and say hi. I'd appreciate if you could knock some food up for her, though. She doesn't, strictly speaking, need to eat, but she could use the comfort in comfort food.”

“She’s here?” Erika asked.

“It’s a she?” Ian asked as he sat his book on the counter and Jason glanced at the cover.

“*The Shipping News*,” he read from the cover. “I didn't like it.”

“No?” Ian said. “I’m quite enjoying it.”

“It’s a problem of expectations,” Jason said. “From what I saw people saying on the internet, I was anticipating more ships.”

“You know, you left Mum, Kaito and Amy in quite an uproar,” Erika said as Jason washed his hands to assist Erika. “Letting them in on it and then running off to Europe.”

“I know I need to talk to them,” Jason said, “but I have my own priorities right now.”

“They’re coming around this afternoon,” Erika said. “I could have warned you if you had a phone. Why do you not have a phone again?”

“I left it on the plane,” Jason said as he started chopping vegetables. “You could have told Shade. Actually, Shade could have told me.”

“Your instructions were to respect their privacy and only inform you if their activities put them in danger,” Shade’s voice came from Erika’s shadow.

“You know, I don’t love the constant surveillance,” Erika said.

“Non-negotiable,” Jason said, the usual joviality in his voice displaced by a hard edge that made them all turn their heads to him. Erika and Ian shared a glance. Jason kept chopping vegetables, seeming not to notice.

“Your knife skills are coming along,” Erika said, watching Jason's hands move in a blur.

“The advantage of superhuman reflexes.”

“Uncle Jason,” Emi said, “is it fun being a superhero? I bet it’s lots of fun.”

“I’m not a superhero, Moppet.”

“You use the special powers you got in an alternate reality to protect people from danger while wearing an elaborate costume that hides your identity,” Emi said.

“She’s got you there,” Ian said. “You even have a superhero name. You know they’re still trying to figure out who the Starlight Rider is.”

“That’s not a good hero name,” Jason complained. “It sounds like a B-story hero that got cancelled in the seventies once the publisher realised it was a gay allegory.”

“Are we still going to have those people follow us around?” Emi asked.

“I’m not sure yet,” Jason said. “While I’m here, I’m all the security you need. I’ll probably be taking some trips, though, so we’ll see. I was planning to sort a lot of that out this afternoon, but someone set up an impromptu family reunion. I have things to do today.”

“Yes,” Erika said. “You do.”

Kaito and Amy pulled into the marina behind a woman with long, dark hair in a classic convertible.

“Is that Asya Karadeniz?” Amy asked.

“Yep,” Kaito said. They pulled up just along from Asya as she was getting out of her car. She had a briefcase and an expensive, flattering pantsuit.

“Hello, Asya,” Kaito said, getting out of the car. “You’re looking good.”

“Oh, hello, Kai, Ames,” she greeted them, her eyes walking up and down Amy’s outfit as a small smile crept onto her mouth. “It’s been since the memorial, right?”

“Yeah,” Kaito said.

“Why are you here?” Amy asked.

“Work stuff,” she said. “I didn’t realise you’d be here when Jason asked me to come. Besides, I never properly thanked him for saving my life the other day.”

“Wait, what?” Kaito asked.

“Sorry, that’s all classified, but maybe he’ll tell you if you ask. Or maybe he won’t; I don’t know if he still tells you everything like he used to. I only heard what happened between you third-hand, although your marriage itself speaks volumes. Funny how things work out, isn’t it? You even asked me out a few times, didn’t you, Kai? I’m going to go ahead, so I’ll see you aboard.”

They watched her set off down the dock.

“You asked her out?” Amy asked.

“What do you think she meant by Jason saving her life?” Kaito asked.

“Multiple times?”

“It was back in school,” Kaito said. “It kind of threw me. I’d never been knocked back by a girl from a lower year before.”

“How many lower year girls did you ask out, creeper?”

“She’s seven months younger than me,” Kaito said. “She’s older than you.”

“Oh, so you remember her birthday?”

“When did I ever not remember your birthday?”

“That’s not the point. Don’t think I didn’t see you watching her sashay down the dock.”

“How was that a sashay?” Kaito asked. “It was a saunter at most. Her shoes were too sensible for a proper sashay.”

“She never wore heels,” Amy said wistfully. “She was always an annoyingly elegant giraffe.”

“You two didn’t get along in school, did you?”

“Oh, you picked up on that?”

Jason and Erika watched Ian and Emi roar off on a pair of black jet skis.

“I wanted to have a talk,” Jason said, “but we only have a few moments. Kaito and Amy are here, along with the person I’d actually planned to meet this afternoon.”

Erika went to the side of the houseboat to look around at the car park where Kaito and Amy were talking to an attractive Turkish woman in a business suit.

“Did Shade tell you they were here?”

“I sensed them. I have magic powers, remember?”

She moved back and brushed his arm, as if to reassure herself he was really there.

“You feel different somehow,” she said.

“I am. Come around for a drink tonight and I’ll catch you up on everything. I need a favour.”

“Sure, but you have to do one for me.”

“What’s that?”

“Wally has been bugging me about getting you on the new show. We’re filming new episodes all week, down next to the surf club.”

“Fine,” he chuckled. “If you can herd the family away tomorrow so I can get some things sorted out, I’ll be there Monday.”

Kaito and Amy stepped onto the houseboat just as an unfamiliar, sleepy-looking woman with short, dishevelled hair stepped out of a cabin.

“Who are you?” the woman asked them warily.

“I’m Amy, this is Kaito,” Amy said. “Who are you?”

She peered at them blearily.

“Wait, you're the brother,” she said, pointing at Kaito before turning her finger on Amy. “Which would make you the one who…”

“Jason told you about us?” Kaito guessed.

“Yeah,” Farrah said. “Just to be clear, I’m on his side, so as far as I’m concerned, you can both jump overboard and drown each other.”

She wandered back into the cabin, the misty door sealing it off.

A WIZARD DID IT

Amy and Kaito watched Farrah go back into her cabin.

"Do we know who that was?" Kaito asked. "She seemed kind of familiar."

"She did, but I can't place her."

"Wait," Kaito said. "What about that woman from Jason's weird hologram recordings? The one he said shoots lava."

"I think you're right," Amy said. "What the hell has Jason got himself involved in?"

"Wasn't she meant to be in another universe?"

"You realise how absurd that sounds, right?"

"Ames, I don't know what's happening. We went through a doorway that led to the other side of town. How do you explain that away?"

"That's all I've been thinking about for days," she said. "The problem is every explanation I come up with seems less plausible than the last. If we're talking about Jason setting up a wormhole generator in Erika's bedroom, magic seems less ridiculous, somehow."

"It's past time that Jason gave us some answers."

The arrival of Jason's mother had not worked to alleviate Jason's stress. With everyone in the bar lounge, he strove to explain things thoroughly. The constant stream of questions kept derailing things until he held his head between his hands and let out a groan.

“Mum, the answer is the same as it has been for your last five questions: because magic. You want to know why? Because a wizard did it, that’s why. And that wizard is me. I’m the wizard. Magic is real and I have it. I’m a magic man.”

He conjured his sinister dagger of red crystal and black obsidian.

“See this?” he continued his rant. “This is my magic knife. Don’t touch it because it’ll kill you super dead. Why? Because it’s magic.”

He casually tossed the blade away and it vanished in the air. He then tossed his sunglasses aside in the same manner.

“My eyes turned silver yesterday. That’s just what my life is now. Can you guess why? No, you can’t because it was magic, which hours of explanation is apparently insufficient to drill it into your tiny frigging brains! Asya. Could you explain how I saved us when someone detonated a bomb in our plane? Actually, let me: it was magic. And awesomeness. All of you look around. You’re sitting in chairs made of clouds.”

He gestured down with both hands and all the cloud furniture sank into the floor, dumping the occupants. Jason gestured up and the furniture returned, lifting the fallen people as it arose.

“This whole houseboat is A: magic, and B: not a houseboat. It’s a big magic cloud that I keep in a bottle like it’s a genie.”

At this point, everyone was looking on with scared expressions as Jason continued to fly right off the handle. He gestured to his left and Shade emerged from his shadow.

“This is Shade. Some of you have met Shade. His dad is what happens to you after you die, which is especially relevant to me because I’ve died twice already. The second time I came back from the dead, I even brought a friend. I should be with her right now because she spent the last two weeks getting tortured, but instead, I'm here teaching Intro to Sorcery to people who think I’ve got nothing better to do than answer their questions about the nature of the bloody universe. Well, I do and I'm sorry about catching you up in all this, Asya. I didn't realise I'd be having quite so many guests when I asked the Network to send someone. I should just let my friends take care of them. This is Gordon.”

Gordon manifested on Jason’s right with a surge of Jason’s aura that washed over the room like a wave.

“I’m not even sure what Gordon’s deal is,” Jason said, “except he loves Judy Garland and he’s a reality assassin. I don’t know what that means,

exactly, but it sounds really scary once you start to learn about reality, which I have because I'm an interdimensional warlock ninja."

Jason held out his hand, which became wet as blood seeped through it. Everyone in the room recoiled as leeches spilled out of his hand to pile up on the floor. Bloody rags emerged from the pile to bind it into shape.

"This is Colin," Jason said. "He needs a moment to gather himself together. When a super god was trying to possess me, he's the one who had my back. He's been with me from almost the very start and he has two purposes in life: adorable little dances and devouring every living thing on a planet."

Jason threw his arms out to his sides.

"I try to be a good guy, but it turns out I'm really bad at it and kill a lot of people. I've been back less than three weeks and I don't know how many people I've put in the ground. Asya, do you have numbers on that?"

"Uh... somewhere between thirty and fifty is the estimate," she said.

"Those people had it coming," Jason said. "Some of them really had it coming and the only thing I feel bad about is that I don't feel bad about killing them. So, here's what's going to happen now. Anyone who has questions can go to the media room and watch the recordings as much as they like. There's about a hundred and fifty hours of them and no one gets to ask any more questions until they've watched them all. If anyone tries asking me questions before then, they're getting a demonstration instead of an answer, and I showed you my portal ability instead of my other powers for a reason. You do not want a demonstration."

Jason gestured and a portal arch rose from the floor, which he stepped through and vanished. His familiars followed, leaving a room of shell-shocked people staring at the arch, which remained in place. Erika was the first to recover, turning to Asya.

"So, you and Jason went to school together?" she asked pleasantly.

"Um, yes," Asya said.

"It's nice to reconnect with old friends," Erika said, her voice then taking on the same flinty tone as Jason's. "Now tell me about the exploding plane."

Jason stepped into his soul garden. The sky reflected the sunny day outside his spirit vault, a warm breeze carrying the scent of flowers. He was glad that the garden didn't smell of blood and death, which he would have expected.

What it did smell like was Farrah. He knew that outworlders had a distinctive scent to them, which had been described as like springtime, but it was hard to notice his own scent. It was only after catching her smell, once she was cleaned off, that he really experienced the fresh, clean scent for himself.

The garden had the same clean aroma, which combined with the unseasonal warmth to give the feel of a spring day. He took a deep, cleansing breath, something he hadn't done in a long time, and let the stress wash out of him.

The rear of the bottom deck had been lowered into the water to allow Ian and Emi to ride their jet skis directly onto it. The jet skis both burst into dark clouds that coalesced into two of Shade's bodies. One disappeared into Emi's shadow, while the other vanished into the shadow of the upper deck. Ian and Emi were towelling themselves off when Erika came out, blatantly ogling her husband as he wiped down his wet body.

"Do it slower," she said, a lecherous smile on her face.

Ian started pulling the towel back and forth across his back to create what he mistakenly thought to be a sensuous look.

"Gross," Emi said, wrinkling her nose at her parents making eyes at one another. "Where's Uncle Jason?"

"He got a bit frustrated with everyone," Erika said. "I think we forgot while dealing with all the craziness he brought with him that he's had more of it to deal with than all of us. He went through one of his arches and didn't come out. It won't let anyone else in."

"That must be his special place," Emi said.

"Special place?" Erika asked, turning her attention from her husband.

"He told me about it," Emi said. "It's a place that's not really real that only he can go to. I'm going to go have a look."

Emi left her parents behind to go into the bar lounge, still wearing her swimsuit and rash shirt, with a towel slung over her shoulders. Ken had arrived with Kaito and Amy's girls, the older of which, Hana, was telling her parents about her day with Poppy. It was a story with all the clinical accuracy one would expect from a four-year-old.

"…and then we ran under the sprinkler and a hippo came out."

"A hippo," Kaito said. "That must have been exciting."

"No!" Hana said, stomping her foot. "She was a stupid hippo!"

Everyone was actively avoiding the darkness-filled obsidian arch with their eyes as if ignoring the weird magical thing in their midst could make it disappear. The only exceptions were baby Jace, who was straining her arms in its direction from within her mother's firm grip, and Asya. Her eyes were locked thoughtfully on the arch as Emi wandered in. Emi didn't recognise her, so immediately wandered over and stared at her.

"Who are you?" Emi asked.

Asya turned a curious gaze on Emi. "I'm Asya. You must be Emi."

"According to who?" Emi asked, voice filled with suspicion.

"I work for some people who've become very interested in your uncle. Also, you brought snacks out to our security people in their car. That was very nice of you."

"They were healthy snacks, so it wasn't that nice," Emi said. "You're one of the men in black? Aren't you meant to try and blend into the background?"

"You think I don't?" Asya asked.

"Oh, please," Emi said. "No one wears an outfit that makes them look that good by accident. I like your shoes, though. They're nice, but you can still run in them if you have to."

"That's the idea," Asya said with a dry chuckle.

"Why are you here?"

"I was meant to be going over some points of an agreement with your uncle and my organisation, but I wandered into a family reunion."

"That was Mum," Emi said. "Nanna found out about all the magic stuff only for Uncle Jason to run off to Europe. She's been constantly pestering Mum ever since, plus she's figured out that Grand Nanna was healed with magic."

"They sent me because I went to school with your uncles and Aunt Amy," Asya said. "I grew up in Castle Reach."

Emi narrowed her eyes at Asya.

“Did you make out with Uncle Kaito?”

“I did not. I was hoping Jason would have time for me today before I left, but I don’t think things will be very productive today.”

Emi turned to the archway. “He’s in there? It looks just like his teleport archways.”

“Have you ever gone through one?” Asya asked.

“Lots of times,” Emi said. “Well, fourteen. I think that’s a lot compared to most people, though.”

“I’ve never travelled like that,” Asya said wistfully.

“You haven’t? Don’t your secret magic people have a bunch of teleporters or something?”

“No,” Asya said with a chuckle.

“Ask Uncle Jason. I’m sure he’ll take you.”

“What’s it like?”

“Kind of like a theme park ride, except you get the whole ride in one second. You’ll probably throw up the first time. And the second time.”

“Did you?”

“Of course not,” Emi said. “I’m not a scrub.”

“Emi,” Erika said with an admonishing tone as she walked into the bar lounge. “Leave Uncle Jason’s friend alone. Go shower off that saltwater and put on some clothes.”

Emi glanced at the archway sitting dominant in the middle of the room before trotting off without another word. Erika moved closer to Asya, joining her in observing the arch.

“I always wondered how Jason ended up the way he is,” Asya said absently. “After meeting your daughter, I’m starting to suspect that it’s you.”

Farrah didn't have Jason's connection to the cloud house, so her senses were unable to penetrate the walls to see if his family were still around. She'd been sitting in a cloud chair in a daze, aside from when Jason had delivered curry for lunch. That had briefly roused her with its vibrant scents and startling, complex flavours.

She suddenly found herself restless and left through the exterior wall that shimmered as she passed through. Jason's cloud house was far smaller than Emir's palace, but the basic functions were the same. Meandering slowly around the lower deck, she contrasted the exterior of the houseboat to the interior.

The inside was familiar to her, not just from knowing Emir but from a magical aesthetic. The exterior of the houseboat, like Jason's world itself, was a façade belying the magic it secretly held.

She leaned against the wall, feeling lost in so many ways. She finally understood what Jason had felt when they first met. Captured by people with poor intentions with no understanding of what was happening or why. He had done the rescuing in both cases, which irked her, although the thought drew a smile in spite of herself.

The world around her had felt alien, as if its very nature was to reject her. The zone of magical density created by the houseboat was comforting and felt more like home. It was an impressive feature, like a giant, perpetually active mana lamp. Emir had always been reticent about letting her poke around but perhaps Jason would be more amenable.

She resumed her slow wander, the glass exterior of the houseboat darkened from the outside to prevent anyone from seeing in. One of the walls shimmered and a dripping wet, naked child passed through it, pointing a finger at her.

"You're dead. Well, obviously, you're not dead, but you died. You are Farrah, aren't you?"

"I am. And you're naked."

The child yelped and ducked back through the wall, returning moments later with a towel wrapped around her.

"How are you alive?" Emi asked.

"I—"

"You must have come back with Uncle Jason, right?" Emi interrupted.

"Yes, I—"

"But he didn't know because you didn't arrive in the same place," Emi reasoned, again cutting off Farrah's response. "You're the friend he needed to help in France, which he must have only just found out about, which is why he rushed off all of a sudden."

"You don't really need me to answer, do you?"

“You must have been in trouble and then he found out and got super-intense, which I could tell even when he was talking through Shade.”

“Through Shade?”

“Something really bad must have happened to you.”

Emi clasped Farrah in a fierce hug as Farrah looked down at the tiny dynamo before awkwardly patting her on the head.

“I’m guessing you’re Emi?” Farrah said.

“Uncle Jason told you about me?” Emi asked, still violently comforting Farrah.

“He did,” Farrah said. “I see now that he might not have been telling me as much as warning me.”

Emi’s towel came loose and dropped onto the deck.

“Oops.”

THE KING OF EVERYONE

JASON'S SPIRIT VAULT HAD UNDERGONE CONSIDERABLE CHANGE, WHICH he discovered on his first entry after accepting the World-Phoenix's power. Fusing the physical and spiritual aspects of his being had a considerable impact on his spiritual space.

The garden itself didn't occupy any more space, which seemed to be a function of rank, but it was much changed from his last visit. It was now a largely hanging garden, with flower-wreathed bamboo trellises hanging over long sections of flagstone paths. The design was dense but immaculate, allowing the sun passage through the various trellis coverings and open sky areas to create artworks of sunlight and flowers.

In the section of the garden where the flowers represented his blood essence abilities, red flowers covered walls running either side of narrow pathways of blood-red flagstone. Overhead, more red flowers made a canopy that only allowed in dappled sunlight, giving the overall impression of walking through an artery.

The area dedicated to his sin essence had starkly contrasted flower beds of black, red, white and gold. Archways of hanging flowers carved the light into hard segmentations of light and shadow.

The dark essence area was now underground, the pathway leading into a subterranean cave system. Luminescent fungus and white flowers that shone like moonlight covered the walls while the floor of the cave was covered in silver grass that apparently required no photosynthesis. Even with the glow of flowers and fungi, it was hard to see in the dark and irregular natural caverns. Even Jason's power to see through darkness was

suppressed, although it started working when he concentrated on it. It was, after all, his soul, and he was ultimately in control.

The doom essence area used medium-sized trees to create different levels of light throughout. The paths were simple grass trails between bushes and trees. Some of the bushes were explosions of red and orange that, under the light coming through the trees, looked like a fire. Other places had tall, narrow hedges covered in gold, white, and silver flowers. The unobstructed light shining on them gave an appearance reminiscent of Jason's transcendent finishing attacks.

A creek now led into the garden from under one of the walls, winding through the various sections of the garden and crossed by a series of small bridges. In the doom section, the bridges were rustic wood. The sin area had bridges of marbled black and white obsidian. In the blood section, the creek was only heard and not seen, adding to the sensation of being inside a living vein.

The creek ultimately dropped from a small waterfall to pool in an underground fairy grotto, the only part of the dark section open to the sky. Even the dimmer parts of that chamber were filled with a rainbow of luminescent fungus, giving it an ethereal beauty.

As far as Jason could tell, the creek represented a trickle of power sourced directly from the astral. He suspected it was the reason he hadn't needed to take a spirit coin to stave off the magic deficit of Earth during the long plane flight.

At the heart of the space, the gazebo had not only been fully integrated into the garden but transformed into a sprawling pavilion complex, centred on a three-storey pagoda. The marbled obsidian was more white than black, compared to the dark stone of the gazebo, and overgrown with vines and flowers.

Exploring the pagoda, the ground floor was the storage space for his inventory items. To outside observation, the bottom floor had walls, but the inside was a different story. Instead of walls, the interior was a platform situated in a starry void. The contents of his inventory floated nearby and beyond that spread out an infinite expanse of stars, galaxies, and nebulae. It was like standing in the centre of the universe.

“Bigger on the inside,” he muttered. “I suppose I am too, for that matter.”

There were two exits, in the form of apertures that reminded Jason of his portal arches. One was the archway through which the garden outside could be seen. The other was a ring floating in the ceiling, situated over an elevating platform, which Jason rode up to the next floor.

The second and third floors of the pagoda were open to the air, much like the old gazebo. The second story was a sitting area, complete with furniture, while the third storey was a meditation room with a luxurious floor of white moss that rivalled his cloud house for softness. Heading back down, he paused in the sitting area and looked at the chairs.

"Why more than one chair?"

He considered the changes his soul garden had gone through since arriving back home. Until he gained the spirit vault, it had been an unchanging place, aside from the expansion when he ranked up. These new and rapid alterations were obviously a reflection of the changes to his soul. What he needed was some quiet time to adjust and consolidate but there were too many claimants on his time.

With that thought, his mind turned once more to things the new garden had mercifully distracted him from. He was soon back to dwelling on the frustration of his outburst towards the family.

"Damn it," he scolded himself, his hands wringing impotently at his sides.

"You have a lot to deal with," Shade said. His familiars had been comfortingly following him around like apocalyptic ducklings. "Miss Hurin's care, the Network, your family. The changes to the very nature of your being."

"I know," Jason said.

"The man who tried to kidnap you and is now at large," Shade continued to list off, "the EOA, the World-Phoenix, the mysterious painter…"

"I said I know," Jason snapped, then his whole body sagged. "I'm sorry, Shade. Without you, I wouldn't have kept my head above water this long. You deserve the opposite of being yelled at. How about a raise?"

"You don't pay me," Shade said.

"Of course I do," Jason said. "I've been giving the money to Gordon every week to pass along, haven't I, Gordon?"

Jason's nebulous familiar gave no reaction.

"See?" Jason said.

“No one will blame you for getting overwhelmed,” Shade said.

“You don’t know my mother that well,” Jason said. “I can’t allow myself to unleash like that. What if I lose control of my aura and give someone an aneurism? It’s stronger than ever and I’m increasingly finding it getting off the leash when I become emotional. The whole reason I ducked in here was that I could feel myself losing what little remained of my cool. The power disparity means that I don't get to be the one who can't control himself.”

He groaned, running his hands over his face.

“Shade, I don’t know what to do. I don’t see a path where I can do all the things I need to do without my head popping like a pimple from stress.”

Emi marched into the crowded bar lounge, dragging Farrah by the hand. After drying off and putting on clothes, Emi had taken Farrah literally in hand and marched her into the bathroom of Emi’s cabin. She brushed out Farrah’s depression hair, returning her at least a semblance of the appearance she had in Jason’s recordings.

This allowed everyone who had seen the recordings to recognise her on her arrival in the bar lounge, leaving everyone but Asya startled by her arrival. This was double for Erika and Ian who, like Emi, had watched enough of them to learn Farrah’s fate. Asya at least had seen her when arranging Jason’s flight back to Australia.

Farrah’s gaze was drawn to Asya, whose iron-rank aura stood out amongst the normals. Farrah could feel the curiosity and nervousness of the woman, along with a faint strain of fear and hostility. It wasn’t that she viewed Farrah as a danger, but saw her as a more nebulous kind of threat. It wasn’t something Farrah could unravel without knowing the woman and circumstances more.

“They’ve all seen Uncle Jason’s recordings, so they all recognise you,” Emi explained, ignoring the room’s occupants as she pulled Farrah towards the arch. “Not all of them know you’re meant to be dead, though.”

For her part, Farrah was arrested by the incongruous obsidian arch in the middle of the room. She had once found an identical one under a lake, the object of a mission her team had been sent on by Emir.

“How can this be here?” she whispered to herself.

“Oh, this?” Emi asked as they reached the arch. “Uncle Jason makes them.”

“Farrah?” Erika asked, the first to gather her wits.

“That’s my mum,” Emi explained.

“Jason’s sister,” Farrah said, turning to Erika. “He always spoke warmly of you.”

“Erika Asano,” she introduced herself. “Jason told us you were dead.”

“I was,” Farrah said.

“I thought you said we couldn’t go in,” Emi said to her mother. She was arm-deep in the shadow gate.

“It wasn’t working for us,” Erika said, reaching out herself. Her hand was stopped dead on reaching the darkness filling the arch.

“That’s weird,” Emi said. “Farrah, let’s go find Uncle Jason.”

Emi stepped through the arch, dragging Farrah through behind her. After they vanished, Asya stepped up next to Erika and likewise put her hand up against the darkness. It felt like cool, heavy crystal under her hand, completely unyielding.

“I don’t suppose you can tell me what’s going on?” Asya asked Erika.

“I think it might be better to watch Jason’s recordings from while he was away,” Erika said. “I don’t think he’d mind you seeing them.”

Jason was continuing to explore his new, densely packed garden.

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “I believe that something unexpected is about to happen.”

“Oh?”

- [Emi Evans-Asano] has entered your [Spirit Vault].
- [Farrah Hurin] has entered your [Spirit Vault].

“What?” Jason exclaimed. “That shouldn’t be possible.”

He was suddenly reminded of the moment he accepted the blessing from the World-Phoenix. At the time, his only concern had been getting to Farrah and he had closed his interface without looking at it. He wondered if there was a message log and his interface promptly supplied one, allowing him to find the discarded message.

- Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has amalgamated your body and soul into a state that is both physical and spiritual. This state has altered your [Spirit Vault] ability to be a physical space that others can enter.

- Only those who implicitly trust you will be able to enter your spiritual vault. Anything short of complete trust will prevent them from entering. You may seal the vault against any or all individuals. It is not possible to break into the spiritual vault by anyone without existing access to your soul, such as through a star seed or divinely granted essence ability.

- Anyone in your spiritual vault is under your power. They cannot use abilities or affect anything within the vault, including you and each other, with limited exceptions.

- You and your familiars can affect people within your vault in almost any way, except for violating their souls, although you can attack their souls. They may be protected from your influence through a connection to a foreign element in your soul, if present, such as a star seed or divinely granted essence ability.

- You can expel or trap anyone within your spiritual vault, although individuals with a significantly greater soul sense than you may be able to force their way out. Individuals may resist expulsion through a connection to a foreign element in your soul.

"Damn."

In his astral space, the normal rules of reality didn't apply and he controlled it all. He closed his eyes and the pavilion came into view, with Emi and Farrah looking around in surprise. Farrah looked much improved; the simple change of brushing her hair made a huge difference. She was still haggard but much more like her old self. That was a startling turnaround in just a day and one he didn't put much stock in. He knew that her ordeal wasn't something to simply brush off.

Jason vanished from where he was standing to appear in front of Emi and Farrah.

"Ladies," he greeted. "I'm a little surprised to see you here."

"What is this place?" Farrah asked as Emi goggled at Jason's teleportation. "I've been in dimensional spaces created by essence abilities before, and this isn't that. My aura and magic senses aren't even working. Is this some spatial treasure the Order of the Reaper left behind?"

"No," Jason said. "This is the inside of my soul."

"That shouldn't be possible," Farrah said, then shrugged. "I suppose that's never stopped you before."

Jason threw her a grin.

"I see this one dug you out," Jason said, ruffling Emi's hair as she crankily pushed his hand away. "How are you doing?"

"Not the best I've ever been," she admitted. "You?"

"I'm not going to complain, with everything you've just been through," Jason said. "Who am I kidding? Of course I am, but that can wait. You have no idea how happy I am to have you here."

"Can you show us around, Uncle Jason?" Emi asked.

"Sure, although this is quite new to me," Jason said. "I've been experiencing a lot of changes lately, and this place changes with me. How about we take a look around together?"

Emi slipped her hand into Jason's and the trio started walking around the garden.

"So, this is what your soul looks like," Farrah said. "It's oddly tranquil. I would have expected something a little more erratic."

"I can't imagine why," Jason said. "I'm a beacon of peace and harmony."

They wandered the garden, Jason and Farrah keeping the topics light due to Emi's presence. He thought back to the description of why they had accessed his spirit vault. The realisation that they trusted him to that degree filled him with warmth, soothing the raw nerves that had led to him hauling off on his family.

Emi delighted at every new sight, and Jason saved the best for last. He finished the garden tour at the fairy grotto, then took them into the bottom floor of the pagoda to look out into the universe.

"It might be more impressive if your boxer shorts weren't floating past," Farrah said.

Jason made a downward gesture and his inventory items dropped out of sight.

"I really needed this," he said, squeezing Emi's hand. "Emi, can you go tell your mum that I've calmed down and I'll be out in a while?"

"Okay," she said cheerily, skipping out of the pagoda. The archways for his familiars and the vault doorway were still present in the pavilion. Once she was gone, Jason let his true weariness be revealed on his face.

"Something to eat?" he offered Farrah.

"Is it actual food, or will I be nibbling on bits of your soul?"

"It's food," Jason said. "My personal storage space is wrapped up in here."

They took the elevating platform up to the sitting area and settled into chairs that looked like bamboo but had the soft comfort of cloud furniture. The elevating platform descended and a tray of sandwiches came sailing up through the hole, settling onto the table in front of them.

"I'm surprised you're out and about," Jason said. "If it were me, I'd be hiding in my room for weeks. I know because that's what I did do when it was me."

"I'm not you," Farrah said. "I want to take control back. Get productive, do some good. That's not so easy in a world you don't know."

“Tell me about it,” Jason said. “It was bad enough in your world, only for me to come back and discover I never really knew my own.”

“You know more than me,” Farrah said. “I’ll be relying on you to guide me through it.”

“If you're looking for productive, I think I have something. Back in Greenstone, I liked to blow off steam by monster hunting. Vent some frustration and help people at the same time by clearing off the adventure boards. The monsters here appear in proto-astral spaces, which is why no one knows about it. There's some kind of planetwide detection array they use to find and eliminate the monsters before the proto-spaces shoot them out into the world.”

“A planet-sized magical array? I’d love a look at that.”

“We can probably swing it,” Jason said. “I was meant to be meeting with a rep from the local Adventure Society equivalent today. She is out there, but my sister decided to invite my whole family around for a big group talk about magic being real.”

“The iron-ranker,” Farrah said.

“She can get us into some proto-spaces,” Jason said. “I still need to sort out the details, though. My family kind of took over everything and I just lost it and started yelling at them. They wouldn’t have understood much and believed even less.”

“Let me guess,” Farrah said. “You’re sinking all this time and energy into getting them caught up on magic, making sure they’re safe and understand what’s happening.”

“Something like that.”

“Well, you need to stop,” Farrah said. “Just because you came home with a pile of magic powers, that doesn’t mean you’re suddenly the king of everyone. There’s only so much you can be responsible for and to your family. They have to make their own choices and you don’t get to tell them what to do.”

“My coming back into their lives has caused chaos and brought danger.”

“Are you an idiot?” she asked. “Life is dangerous and you can't change that, no matter how much you twist yourself up in knots trying. Do you think you're the first adventurer to bring some weird crap back to hang around their family's necks? Every adventurer that comes up from nothing has some variation on this. Yes, your story has some surprising turns, but so

does everyone else's. You're a little weird, Jason, but you aren't that special."

"So what do I do?" he asked.

"The same thing everyone does. You essence your family up, train any of them that are worth a damn and send the rest monster cores every now and again. Beyond that, you have to let them be responsible for themselves or it all goes wrong. If you're too controlling, they get stifled and inevitably someone makes a stupid choice and betrays the family, be it on purpose or inadvertently."

"It's not that simple."

"Yes, it is," she said. "This…"

She poked him in the forehead.

"…is what keeps overcomplicating things. You need to get out of your own way, magic up the family and let them loose to make their own mistakes, while you focus on what you need to do."

"I'm not even sure where to start."

"I suggest with how we even ended up here," she said. "We're in the wrong damn universe."

I CAME BACK TO SHOW YOU WONDERS

SHADE INFORMED THE FAMILY MEMBERS, WHO WERE VARIOUSLY preparing dinner, looking after infants, or watching recordings, that Jason was about to emerge and they should gather in the bar lounge. As such, they were waiting for him when he stepped out, Farrah right behind him.

"Firstly, my previous statement about asking questions before watching all the recordings stands. Second, this is Farrah. You should all recognise her by now. Let me be plain in stating that she is family. Anyone who has a problem with that can get off my boat. Third, I need most of you to sod off, so you're getting off the boat anyway. I have important stuff to do and can't be dealing with you every bloody hour of every bloody day."

Most of the occupants were herded off the boat by Shade, although Jason made sure to give his dad a hug first. Erika and her family were currently living onboard, so they stayed, along with Asya. Once peace descended on the houseboat, Jason, Asya, Farrah and Erika moved to the kitchen where Jason assisted Erika's dinner preparations—brother and sister side by side behind the counter, finding an old, easy familiarity.

"So," Jason said to Asya. "Did Erika shake the story of my France trip out of you?"

"I didn't do any shaking," Erika said.

Jason gave her a sideways look.

"There may have been some mild jostling," she confessed. "What she told me was insane, though. Aeroplane bombs, kidnapping, secret societies. Did you really kill that many people?"

"Yeah," Jason said grimly.

Erika nudged him with her arm.

“Are you okay, little brother?”

“I’m heading in that direction,” he said, with a glance at Farrah.

“And you were kidnapped?” Erika asked Farrah.

“Yes,” Farrah said. “Lucky for me, they didn’t have any of the magical torture techniques from our world. An essence user can withstand mundane techniques well enough if you’ve been trained to. Especially if they’re trying to break you down mentally instead of physically.”

“You never trained me like that,” Jason said.

“You wanted us to torture you?” Farrah asked.

“No, now that you say,” Jason said. “How did they catch you in the first place? You should have been able to take those guys apart.”

“When I woke up,” Farrah said, “my brain was telling me it had only been moments, but my soul had a longer story to tell. That was disorienting, to say the least, and I wasn't thinking clearly. Plus, I was in a newly formed body and I wasn't human anymore, so it all felt very strange. My old racial gifts were gone and I felt all these blessings ready to evolve my new outworlder ones. In the state I was in, I made what turned out to be a very bad choice.”

“You accepted them all at once,” Jason surmised.

“Exactly,” Farrah said. “I wasn't exactly in a sound state in the first place and six gift evolutions at the same time were too much and I passed out. When I woke up, I was collared and in a box.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Asya said. “They were rogue elements of my organisation.”

“That’s okay,” Farrah said, to Jason’s surprise. “I’ve seen churches and Adventure Society branches go rotten from the inside. So has Jason, for that matter. The mission doesn’t stop being worth doing just because some of the people doing it go astray.”

“I appreciate that,” Asya said. “The Adventure Society are the people responsible for fighting monsters in your world?”

“That’s right. I’d appreciate learning some more about how you do things here.”

Asya explained the nature of the Network, with Jason occasionally contributing to help translate concepts for Asya or Farrah to understand better.

“Asya is here to nail down an agreement for working with them, so I can get to the monster hunting,” Jason said. “I also agreed to teach some of

their people the things that you, Gary and Rufus taught me. I'm assuming you'll want in as well."

"Why don't you just join their organisation?" Farrah asked.

"The Network isn't as open to independent action as the Adventure Society," Jason said. "They tell you what to do, how to do it and expect you to obey."

"Why would anyone agree to that?" Farrah asked.

"Because they control essence distribution," Jason said.

"Ah."

"This is why I've been negotiating an agreement more in line with Adventure Society standards."

"I definitely want to be part of that, then, yes," Farrah said.

She shared a smile with Jason as they sensed the elation in Asya's aura. After all the trouble the Lyon branch went through to forcibly extract information from the two outworlders, she was going to close the deal on voluntary cooperation. If the Lyon branch hadn't been so paranoid about their secret astral space, things might have gone very differently.

"I was thinking that we could take a trip to Sydney tomorrow," Jason said. "Finalise the details, take a look at who you want us to train, and where. Erika, I'd appreciate you helping Farrah to get some clothes."

"That works for me," Asya said. "The International and Sydney Steering Committees have essentially agreed to the current draft of the agreement, and they empowered me to finalise the arrangements here unless you wanted to change things up. I daresay that the inclusion of Miss Hurin is large enough a revision to put it off, but I can't imagine them being anything but happy."

"They bloody well should be," Jason said. "Farrah's probably forgotten more than I'll ever know about magic. So, we'll meet you in Sydney tomorrow, Asya?"

"Actually, I'd like to travel with you, if I may. I'm staying with my parents for a little while in Castle Reach. The Network wants to maintain someone locally and I was the natural pick."

"Do your parents know about magic?" Jason asked.

"No, but I'll have a wing of the house to myself, so privacy won't be an issue."

"Oh, just a spare wing they happened to have hanging off the side of the house," Jason said. "We should probably take a look at the details of the

revised agreement."

The current state of the agreement was dominated by loot distribution. Jason was allowed to keep any personally looted items and received merit points for anything looted by others using his ability. He could trade in loot for more merit points or his merit points for any materials the International Committee had access to.

"I like it," Jason said. "This way, the Network gets the bulk of the items, which is what it needs, and I get a massive pool to select the items I need from. Who determines the merit value of goods?"

"We actually have a valuation system in place, for trading between branches," Asya said. "America exports a lot of gun essences, for example, which is why we have so many amongst our members."

"That seems fair," Jason said.

Dinner was a large affair, with Erika's family, Farrah, Jason and Asya. Hiro and Taika came back. They had been out scouting potential locations for his land investment. Hiro explained his plan of building an Asano family compound to the others over dinner.

"That's a good idea," Farrah said. "If you're not going to go for combat abilities, you should get Jason to give you an essence set suited for wide-area arrays."

"I don't know what that is," Hiro said.

"It's long term or permanent magical installations," Farrah said. "That's my magic specialty, so I can teach you all about them."

"Essences are the magic cubes that give you powers, right?" Hiro said. "Are yours suited to that kind of magic?"

"No," Farrah said. "I have volcano powers."

"I was envious of her powers from the outset," Jason said. "She is seriously terrifying. It's awesome and I haven't even seen her fight flat knacker yet."

"We haven't really seen you fight either," Asya said to Jason. "All we have is the footage of you fighting the category three, and the magical recording of your fight with the hydra."

"Hydra," Emi said. "Like what Heracles fought?"

“Yep,” Jason said, waggling his eyebrows at her. “It was a river hydra, with poison breath and regenerating heads.”

“Did you cut the heads off and burn the stumps?” Emi asked. “You know that Iolaus was the one who did that, right? He was Heracles’s nephew.”

“You can be my assistant, Emi,” Jason said.

“I bet I’m way better than stupid Iolaus,” she sulked.

“What’s a category three?” Farrah asked.

“A silver-ranker,” Jason said. “He got the jump on me, but he wanted me alive and was Greenstone tier.”

“You beat a silver-ranker solo?”

“It was more of a no-score draw,” Jason said. “He knocked me out and left me with his lackeys while he went off to get healing.”

“What kind of idiot tries to take an affliction specialist alive?” Farrah asked. “You got kidnapped? Didn’t they collar you?”

Jason’s eyes moved in Asya’s direction.

“I’ll give you the details later,” he told Farrah.

“You live a crazy life, Jason,” Ian said. “Planes exploding, kidnapping, rolling gunfights with bikies. I don’t want my daughter put in that kind of danger.”

“I’m afraid the world will be facing that kind of danger, sooner or later,” Asya said. “My organisation is doing their best to hold back the tide, but magic is rising in our world. It's reaching the point where we predict that containing all the monsters will become impossible sometime in the next decade. The truth is, we don't contain most of them now.”

“You don’t?” Jason asked.

“The grid only extends over the landmasses,” Asya explained, “and the surface of the Earth is seventy percent water. Sea monsters are real and we’ve been covering them up for centuries. Also, every year, we’re covering up more and more sightings of monsters that have spawned on the moon. The people who think the moon landing was faked aren’t even close to the real conspiracy.”

“Moon monsters?” Jason said. “That’s awesome. Is there a secret Network base on the dark side of the moon?”

“No,” Asya said. “Not that they’ve told me anyway.”

“That’s disappointing.”

“And now we’re having a serious conversation about moon monsters,” Erika said. “Jason, you were always a source of weirdness, but this is getting out of hand.”

“Can I be your assistant when I get magic powers?” Emi asked.

“How old are you?” Farrah asked her.

“I’m twelve.”

“You still have a few years until you’ll get essences. Have you started her training yet, Jason?”

Emi’s eyes went wide as saucers as her head swivelled to look at Jason.

“Absolutely not,” Erika said.

“It wouldn’t be anything strenuous,” Jason said. “A little martial arts and some free running. Really, it would just be some good exercise.”

“Farrah,” Erika said, “didn’t you say that your training involved torture resistance?”

“We wouldn’t do that,” Farrah said. “We didn’t do it for Jason. We could tell that he was soft.”

“Hey…”

“Although he did turn out to be startlingly diligent for someone who seems like he’d give up almost immediately,” Farrah continued.

“Oh, come on.”

“Frivolous,” she carried on. “Flighty. The constant barrage of inane chatter.”

“This is just getting hurtful.”

“You meet him and think he’d fold like a camp chair,” Farrah said. “We have this friend, Rufus, though. He knew from the beginning that Jason had what it took.”

“Finally,” Jason said.

“Rufus is the sexy one, right?” Ian said, having seen Rufus in the recordings.

“Really, Ian?” Jason asked.

“What?” Ian said. “I’m secure enough in my sexuality to acknowledge a beautiful man.”

“Every damn universe,” Jason muttered.

Sunday morning still found the Evans-Asano family lodging in the houseboat. Erika had talked about going back to their home after Jason's return but her husband, daughter, and the idea of giving up cloud beds brought her around.

When Asya arrived for their day trip to Sydney, Jason, Ian and Emi were nowhere to be found. She and Erika managed to find Farrah watching Jason's recordings in the media room, but she didn't know where the others had gone.

"Shade," Erika said. "Where are my brother and my suspiciously absent husband and daughter?"

"They've gone out."

"Out?"

"Yes, Mrs Asano."

"I don't suppose that you'd like to elaborate?"

"Correct," Shade said. "I would not like to elaborate."

"Meaning Jason is doing something dodgy and asked you to cover."

"I prefer to think of it as maintaining security without compromising privacy."

"Shade, if you don't tell me where my daughter is right now, I'm going to have Asya and Farrah here teach me how to use magic and then shake the shadow out of you until you're a pale, skinny white guy who I will then proceed to beat with a cricket bat."

"That isn't a plausible scenario, Mrs Asano."

"You want to test me, shadow man? I don't care who your dad is or what you're made of because I will find something to shove my boot right up into."

"Mrs Asano, you're wearing deck sandals. Also, if you go to the rear deck, you will find your errant family members returning."

The three women made their way to the rear of the houseboat and immediately spotted a trio of figures flying several metres above the water. The water below was being disturbed by the air coming from the heavy devices on their arms and backs. The three figures dropped onto the deck, where the jet suits dissolved into darkness that disappeared into Emi, Ian, and Jason's shadows.

"What the actual hell is going on?" Erika asked.

"I don't think there's an actual…"

Jason was silenced by the death glare that came from his sister, grateful when it was turned on her husband.

“Emi found this video on the internet,” Ian said. “It was these mountain rescue guys in England using jets suits and we wondered if Shade could turn into something like that. It turns out he can.”

“You let our daughter go flying off in one of those things?”

“It was perfectly safe,” Ian said. “Shade took over when we were going to crash into the water or a tree or whatever. *If* we were going to. That totally didn’t happen.”

“You’re meant to be the responsible adult,” she told him, waving her arm at Jason and Emi. “It’s clearly never going to be these two.”

“Hey,” Jason said. He held up his hands in surrender as Erika turned her gaze back to him. She returned her glare to her husband.

“What were you thinking?” she asked.

“That jet suits are super sweet,” he whimpered honestly.

“And that justifies the danger you put our daughter in?”

“She wasn’t in any danger, Eri,” Jason said.

“You keep out of this,” Eri told him.

“No, Eri, I won’t,” Jason said. She opened her mouth to bite back, but something in his eyes stopped her cold. It wasn’t hostile but it was unflinching.

“In the care of me and Shade,” Jason continued, “Emi is safer in the middle of a gunfight than alone in the playground of her school. I'm done playing by Earth rules, Erika. Magic is real, magic is awesome, and it's the new reality you live in, like it or not. I know it seems strange and alien and dangerous, but it's the thing that will keep our family safe. You will never catch a disease that can't be cured. You’ll never be permanently disabled in an accident. A hundred years from now, your family, your daughter, will be alive and well. When you’re sixty, you’ll look better than you did at thirty. If you want to give Emi a sibling at that point, you still can.”

He glanced at Farrah, who gave him an encouraging nod.

“It’s a time of miracles, big sister. I’ve been focused on the dangers, but I came back to show you wonders. I got distracted and lost track of that somewhere along the way. I want you to trust me, Erika. Life is about to get amazing.”

MERCY

"That's a neat bit of work," Farrah said, taking in the Network's Sydney branch with her magical senses. Standing outside the building, she observed the magical array shielding the upper levels. "Whoever put this in place did a great job of working with the low magic area and interweaving low-level magical formations. You'd still need spirit coins to maintain it with the magical density this low, but it must be very efficient."

"By necessity," Asya said. "The Sydney branch doesn't have its own source of spirit coins and is reliant on the International Committee. The astral space that the Lyon branch was hiding will be used to set up spirit coin farms, using records left behind centuries ago."

"I can help you set those up," Farrah said. "Not for free, mind you."

"We were rather hoping that one of you would have some insight," Asya said happily.

For the first time, Jason let himself be taken into the Network's local headquarters. His sister, Asya, Farrah and he went through a conventional security sweep and were given visitor lanyards.

"This is an uncanny feeling," Erika said. "The months I spent trying to find out what happened to you. The truth was more absurd than I could have imagined, and now I'm going into the belly of the beast."

Jason grabbed her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. The elevator rapidly rose through the building, Jason feeling it when they entered the area of the security arrays. Without Farrah's expertise, he would still be hesitant about entering. Annabeth Tilden and Ketevan Arziani met them at the elevator as they reached the upper floors.

“Congratulations on the promotion, Anna,” Jason said after introductions were made.

Jason had learned of the shifting circumstances in the Network’s Sydney branch. With the death of Keith and the disappearance of Miranda, two slots had opened on the eight-person Steering Committee. Anna, already in line for the promotion, was immediately stepped up. Her deputy, Ketevan, now occupied Anna’s former position as Director of Operations.

The second committee seat had been filled by someone transferred from the International Committee as an unofficial liaison. The Sydney branch’s access to the two outworlders was of eminent importance and granting the International Committee some access and influence opened up better access to resources.

“I just wanted to thank you again for saving my life,” Ketevan said to Jason. “If there’s ever anything I can do for you, please let me know.”

“Well,” Jason said, “I think my friend here would love a look at that grid of yours.”

“I wouldn’t mind meeting whoever set up the arrays here too,” Farrah added.

“Easily done,” Ketevan said. “Our magical emplacements team normally don’t like to hear from the operations side, but I’m certain they’ll be eager to pick your brain for otherworldly knowledge.”

“The intention was to finalise the agreement today,” Anna said, “but there’s been something of an issue.”

“Is this to do with me?” Farrah asked.

“Actually, no,” Anna said. “The IC and the Steering Committee had approved the final terms you worked out with Asya. The issue is that the Americans and the Chinese won’t let the agreement go through until they’ve had a chance to send representatives to meet with you both. They both have teams en route to Australia as we speak.”

“They want a chance to poach us for themselves before we make a deal with the International Committee?” Jason asked.

“That’s exactly the case,” Anna said unhappily.

“They have the pull to shut down the agreement until then?”

“Not in terms of codified authority,” Ketevan said. “The United States and Chinese branches are both more unified on a national level than most other regions of the world and they've used collective resources to incentivise high-value members into joining their branches. Add in that

they've been doing it for a century and those two countries represent a massively disproportionate section of the magical materials supply. This is especially true of spirit coins, since they spare no expense to recruit anyone with a looting power."

"Those abilities are inevitably worth whatever it takes to recruit the people that have them," Anna said. "You will be even more valuable, so you can anticipate a generous offer."

"The International Committee would appreciate the chance to counter thereafter," Asya said.

"That's annoying," Jason said. "I want to get this settled so we can get to the business of training people and taking down monsters."

"What we can do today is get some of the legal issues out of the way," Ketevan said. "First, we've established a legal identity for you, Miss Hurin. We can take you through the details and give you the appropriate documentation today."

"I need your help to exist?" Farrah asked, then looked to Jason. He nodded and they both leaned against the wall, to the confusion of the others. Farrah initiated her ability, gaining an understand of identity documentation from Jason.

"Okay, I understand," she said.

"I don't," Erika said.

"Farrah has a power that lets her learn things that I already know."

"Is that a special thing that the two of you have?" Asya asked.

"It requires a certain level of trust to work," Farrah said. "Similar to entering Jason's magical space. Since he's the only person in this world that completely trusts me, he's the only one it will work with here."

"We'll also have you sign secrecy agreements," Ketevan said. "All of this will involve government officials. Miss Hurin's documentation involves government bureaucracy, obviously, and the secrecy agreements are made in accordance with the Official Secrets and Unlawful Soundings section of the Crimes Act. Once that's done, we'll be free to tell you everything about magic without restriction since you will then be legally liable if you do the same."

"This is the template we intend to use for your entire family," Anna explained. "We suggest that once they've signed the agreement, we run them through the same structured information seminar we place new inductees to the Network through. It's basically an eight-hour introduction

to the magical world, and we have one tailored for the families of Network members. Once everyone has signed, we can set up a session."

"I'd like that," Erika said. "Jason has told us a lot, but he's been all over the shop with his explanations. Some structure would be appreciated."

"It would be best if everyone else could sign up together," Ketevan said. "Mr Asano did contact us to ask for a preliminary briefing just for you, Mrs Asano."

"You did?" Erika asked Jason.

"You're going to be in charge of family wrangling," Jason told her. "That works best if you're ahead of the curve."

"If you're going to do a full seminar," Asya said, "I might have my parents inducted as well. Since I'll be staying with them for a while, it would be better to avoid any unfortunate surprises."

"We'd also like to brief you, Mr Asano, on the fallout from events surrounding the France excursion," Anna said.

"Well, how about we get the paperwork out of the way first," Jason said. "Then Erika can take Farrah clothes shopping while you get me up to speed on the rest."

"Oh, so you're just going to send the women off clothes shopping while the important man does the important work?" Erika asked.

"Yep. Begone, woman."

"You know sexism humour is tired and lazy, right?" Erika asked.

"Sorry," Jason said. "I can take Farrah shopping; just give me back the money I budgeted."

"Oh, you meant 'begone woman' ironically," Erika said. "I just didn't get it. That's funny stuff."

The detainment suite in which Kylie Chen had been placed was more like a motel room than a prison cell. Aside from the lack of a window, it had a bed, fridge, and bathroom. She also had a chair to sit in and watch the decently sized television or play the attached game console. The television had access to various streaming services, but otherwise, there was no internet connection.

Kylie was far from in any mood to binge-watch a TV series. After discovering that she'd been used as part of a plan that killed several Network personnel—people she knew —she had been trapped in a prison of self-recrimination. She went through the events that brought her to this point over and over in her mind.

The Frenchman's cell had been far less nice than hers, much closer to the prison model. It also had more secure magical protections, which she had unsealed using the instructions provided by the committeewoman.

Despite Miranda Ellis's assurances, Kylie had been wary of the French prisoner. In most cases, she withheld her prodigious senses, refraining from spying on people's emotions. More than concerns about privacy, knowing the true emotions of the people around her had always been a disheartening experience. She did not hold back against the Frenchman, however.

Examining him as she read the packet Miranda had given her to pass along, she sensed the exact moment he resolved to kill her, escaping before he had the chance. As he was category three, he had not anticipated her having the perceptual strength to read his emotions.

She had raised the alarm herself, knowing that she would be punished for her terrible mistake, but Miranda's preparations had been thorough. The Frenchman was gone by the time security dealt with the impediments Miranda had put in place, although not without killing a few of them on his way out.

Since then, Kylie had been dwelling on the fact that if she'd read Miranda's emotions, she might not have been taken in so easily. Miranda had apparently known of her aversion, as well as the fear of Asano that had driven her to accept Miranda's plan so readily.

The door opened. She looked at it curiously, as it was off-schedule for her meals. When she saw the man that stepped through, her blood ran cold. Asano didn't move further into the room, standing just inside the door. Kylie jumped out of her seat, retreating to the opposite side of the room from Asano.

"Can I sit?" he asked with an awkward smile.

"If I say no, will you leave?"

"If that's what you want," he said. "I asked to see you after I was briefed on the recent excitement. My sister and my friend are out shopping and I had a little time, but if you don't want to speak to me, I'll go."

He waited, and when she didn't respond for a long time, he opened the door to leave.

"Wait," she said hesitantly.

He turned back to look at her.

"You're sure?"

She nodded and he closed the door again before moving into the room. He turned the seat around so that he could face her if she sat on the bed, moving it away a little to give her space. She didn't sit on the bed, instead retreating into the corner like a scared animal.

"Have they told you what happened since you turned yourself in?" he asked.

After her experiences with Miranda and the Frenchman, Kylie did not hesitate to explore him with her senses and was startled by what she found. He felt profoundly different from the last time she had seen him. More than just a different person, he felt like a different kind of entity altogether. It was to the point that she suspected him of being an impostor, some kind of bizarre interrogation tactic. It didn't matter, since she had already told them everything, whether they believed it or not.

Looking closer, she felt something in his aura. It was an aspect of his aura she had noticed before that her instincts told her would be difficult, if not impossible to replicate. It was like an authentication mark on his soul, unchanging even when his soul underwent a grand transfiguration. The man sitting in front of her was Jason Asano, but transformed from the man she had met less than a week earlier.

Once she believed it was him, she started realising the similarities, alongside the differences. His aura was still domineering and resolute, with dangerous and powerful undercurrents. Stronger than ever, it felt like a solid wall in front of her. Even her powerful senses were unable to penetrate it and grasp his emotional state.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"People had my friend and I had to become something new to get her back."

She didn't ask if he succeeded. She would never put herself in between that man and whatever it was he wanted and pitied anyone that did.

"Did the Frenchman come after you?" she asked. She still had some desperate hope that Miranda's plan and her part of it was at least partially authentic and that she wasn't just a fool and a traitor.

“No,” Jason said. “As best they’ve been able to figure, the person who convinced you to release him never intended to send him after me. That’s what you said the idea was, right?”

She nodded.

“Miranda Ellis and the man she released haven’t been heard from since,” Jason said. “Rather than send the man for a second round with me, she had a bomb placed on the Network plane carrying me to France. I lived, obviously, but eight Network personnel did not. The entire flight crew, most of the security team and one Steering Committee member.”

She flinched.

“I didn’t know,” she said. “They don’t tell me anything in here.”

“Did you know that the Frenchman killed more Network personnel as he escaped?”

“They told me,” she said. “Is that why you’re here? To get revenge by telling me about all the people my mistake got killed.”

“You feel responsible for the people on the plane?”

“If I’d read her aura, I might have known that she was deceiving me.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because people can be vile inside their own heads.”

“Ah,” Jason said. “Your sensitivity must almost be akin to mind-reading, except you feel people's baser instincts instead of their loftier thoughts. You get all our ugly urges without the higher ideals that keep us from savaging each other like animals. Or capitalists.”

“Not yours,” she said. “Your aura was already too strong, too controlled. All I caught was glimpses of your emotions. Now I get nothing but what you let people see. Your aura is unlike anything I’ve ever seen.”

“That makes you all the more scared,” Jason realised. They both knew that her emotions were an open book to him.

“Why are you here?” she asked again.

“I’m not sure myself, to be honest. They told me about you, and I felt compelled to see you. Realising how scared you were of me in that dimensional space shook me a little. Not as much as you, obviously. I’m not responsible for your decisions. I am, at least partially, though, the impetus that led you to where you are now.”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“We’re all responsible for our own choices,” he said. “Inevitably, we make bad ones. Sometimes we pay for that and sometimes others pay for

us. I've been thinking a lot about my own choices lately. The people I've killed and the smaller number I've let live. Once you've done it enough, killing becomes easy, in the moment. Satisfying, even. Vanquishing your enemies can be intoxicating."

He paused in recollection, Kylie only watching him and not speaking.

"I was on a job, early in my career," he said. "It wasn't much more than a year ago, although it feels like forever. There was a man that tried to kill me and I let him live. I was still doing that then. This man went on to be a henchman for a local crime lord and rose up the ranks rather quickly, being an essence user. When the crime lord had me kidnapped later, I don't know if he was aware of my connection to the man."

Jason got up and went to the fridge, opening it up and taking a bottle of water.

"Do you mind?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Thanks," he said, returning to his seat.

"The Frenchman wasn't the first silver-ranker to kidnap me," Jason continued. "Sorry, that's a category three. I was category one back then, so I didn't resist as well as I did the Frenchman. Of course, that time I was still kidnapped, but I got my arse kicked first, so maybe there's something to be said for going quietly."

Jason shook his head.

"Anyway," he continued, "I was quite thoroughly at the mercy of this crime lord, and he was not a man of mercy. In fact, he had a rather unpleasant device designed to not just torment my body but also my soul. Their plan was to hand both over to a… well, that doesn't matter. Suffice to say, I was in a bad situation."

He opened the bottle of water and took a sip.

"One of the people guarding the location I was held in turned out to be the man whose life I'd once spared. He chose to run off and tell my friends where I was, in return for having not executed him when I had every chance and right to do so. His sneaking off panicked the people holding me and they had a falling out, giving me the opportunity to escape. Otherwise, I never would have been able to endure what they put me through."

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked.

"You got the Network's people killed, so your fate is theirs to decide. I've asked Annabeth Tilden to be lenient with you, for what it's worth. The

choice to be merciful saved my life once and that's a path I'd like to find my way back to. Maybe one day, you'll have the chance to make a better choice and help others, instead of hurting them."

"That doesn't help me," she said.

"I didn't come here to help you," he said. "I had a sense that speaking to you might assist me in coalescing some thoughts that have been floating around in my head for a while."

"Did it?"

"Does it matter?" Jason asked, getting up out of the seat. "As you said, it doesn't help you."

He returned the chair to the position he found it. Kylie had not moved from her place in the corner. He knocked on the door and it was opened from the outside. He paused as he was about to leave, turning back towards her, still in the corner.

"I'm sorry I derailed you so badly, Miss Chen," he told her. "We can never see all the consequences of our actions. Something we've both learned the hard way, I suppose."

In the corridor, Michael Aram was hurrying towards him as the security guard closed the door behind him.

"Mr Aram," Jason said with a smile. "Good to see you well."

"Anyone who saves my life can call me Mike," Aram said. "We've just got a category three hit on the grid. Kete… Ms Arziani was wondering if you and your friend were interested in jumping in."

IDEAL CIRCUMSTANCES

JASON IGNORED THE SOUND AND MOTION OF THE TRANSPORT helicopter as he read from the book in his hands.

"Is that Pashto?" Aram asked loudly over the helicopter, peering at the open pages.

"Yep," Jason said.

"You speak Pashto?"

"I speak everything," Jason said. "Magic powers, you know?"

"Right. Why are you reading a book in Pashto?"

"I came across this during my very brief stint at university, before I dropped out to enter the exciting world of retail stationery. I really liked it and I finally get to read it in the original language."

"What's it about?"

"Imperialist foreign influences in nineteenth century Afghanistan."

"Sounds like a real page-turner. The profile I read about you said you were all about terrible eighties pop-culture."

"My interests do go beyond *Thundercats* and the *A-Team*, you know."

"Glad to hear it," Aram said. "The Network is laying a heavy bet on you. It's a little worrying if the person we need to be a transformative influence is taking his own influences from the *Transformers* cartoon."

"Oh, you can forget about the *Transformers* G1 stuff," Jason said. "Pure nostalgia goggles. *Transformers Prime* is where it's at. It's a far superior series and has the best depiction of Starscream across the entire franchise."

"You're not filling me with confidence, Mr Asano."

"You can call me Jason, Mike."

Jason and Farrah had been flown from Sydney to South Australia, with Michael Aram as an escort. The Sydney branch had negotiated with the Adelaide branch to let the pair accompany the tactical response team into the incursion. They were flown to a military base in South Australia, where they joined the response team in a series of transport helicopters.

Their destination was near the top end of the state, deep into central Australia. Scrubby flatland spread out for miles, red earth dotted by patches of yellow grass and pale green scrub. Nearing the astral space aperture, Jason encountered something unusual.

- You have entered a region coterminous with a proto-astral space. You can enter the proto-astral space directly.

Jason's new physical state came with new physical sensations. The world around him felt different, although he knew the difference was him. The wall between dimensions was thin enough that he could feel it. He ignored the sensation and didn't try crossing over— that was a rabbit he wanted to keep in the hat.

As the response team's support unit set up camp and prepared to open the invisible aperture, Farrah looked around at the landscape.

"This looks kind of like the western edge of the Greenstone Desert," Farrah said. She and Jason had passed through the fringes of that territory not long after Jason's arrival in the other world.

"Yep," Jason agreed. "Are you sure you're up for this?"

"I'm hungry for it," she said. "I might even try out some of these new abilities. I'm going to miss the old ones, though. Losing the personal space is rough. I would say it had all my stuff, but I think I saw some familiar-looking books floating around in your soul pagoda."

"When we cleared out your things," Jason said, "Gary and Rufus thought I should have your books. You were always trying to get me to study magical theory."

“Did you?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I’m going with astral magic as my specialisation, for obvious reasons. Also, that’s Clive’s specialty, so he’s taught me a lot. Rufus and Gary took the rest of your things, although I think they gave a lot of it to Padma.”

“You met Padma?”

Padma was a young graduate of the Remore Academy that Farrah had taken under her wing. She had come to Greenstone with her team for Emir’s competition, only to be shattered upon hearing of her mentor’s death. As someone Farrah had also mentored, Jason had felt a kinship with the younger adventurer.

“Your parents too,” Jason said. “They came to Greenstone with Rufus’s parents.”

“It feels unreal, talking about my memorial service.”

“I got to watch mine,” Jason said. “One of my cousins recorded it on his phone, which seems a little tasteless. My mum made the whole thing traditional Japanese, which I am not allowing the next time I die.”

Farrah frowned and gave Jason an assessing look.

“If you have all my books,” she said, “did you look at the one bound in black leather with a rose embossed on the cover?”

“I glanced at it,” Jason said. “I wasn’t sure what to do with it. I mean, it felt wrong to throw it away, but I wasn’t going to read your porn book.”

“It’s not porn. It’s sex magic.”

“I can’t tell if that’s better or worse.”

“Sex magic is worth learning. Aside from the obvious benefits, it’s quite multi-disciplinary. It touches on recovery magic, buff magic, aura manipulation. Specialisation is important in magic, but it pays to be at least a little grounded in other fields.”

“I have been dabbling in artifice a little,” Jason said. “I used a skill book so as not to soak up too much of my time.”

“They’re good to broaden the knowledge base,” Farrah said. “Don’t use them as an excuse to skimp out on theoretical studies, though.”

Aram waved at them as he approached, along with an Indigenous Australian man in paramilitary gear with a silver-rank aura.

“This is the Ditto, Tom Cotsworth,” Aram introduced. “Ditto means Director of Tactical Operations,” he explained to Farrah.

“G’day,” Cotsworth greeted.

“G’day,” Jason said, shaking the man’s hand. “I’m Jason Asano and this is Farrah Hurin. Do you prefer Ditto, Cotsworth, or Ditto Cotsworth?”

“Mate, if you can clean up the category threes and keep my people out of harm’s way, you can call me Susan for all I care. You two are the mysterious specialists who’ll be roaming about the country taking first crack at all the big ones, yeah?”

“That’s us,” Jason said.

“You’re confident that you can do it with just the two of you?”

“I think it’s more of a take turns situation, yeah?” Jason said, looking at Farrah.

“Don’t get dismissive,” Farrah admonished. “With a bad match-up, a silver-rank monster could still take either of us down. Mostly you, but still.”

“I know,” Jason said. “But if they don’t push us at least a little, then what’s the point?”

“True,” Farrah acknowledged.

“So, how do you want to arrange us?” Jason asked Cotsworth. “It’s your show and we’re at your command.”

“We are?” Farrah asked.

“Within reason,” Jason told her. “They’re going to assume a certain amount of operational discretion on our part.”

“I can tell that you two are going to be a headache if I try and keep you on a leash,” Cotsworth said. “Since it was made very clear that your inclusion is mandatory and I’m to extend every courtesy, how about you two take point and show us how they do it in wherever the bloody hell they found you two?”

“That’s exactly what I want,” Farrah said. “I could really stand to kill some things.”

“Bonza,” Cotsworth said. “That doesn’t sound at all like some lunatic powerhouse gearing up to plunge my life into chaos.”

The inside of the astral space was indistinguishable from the outside, with the same flat scrubland.

- You have entered an unstable physical reality. Your presence will decrease the rate at which it will destabilise.

Jason ignored the message and looked around. It was almost entirely open ground, so the horde of monsters was not hard to find, some two or three kilometres off into the distance. Jason's bronze-rank perception was more than enough to make them out clearly.

A tightly packed herd, they were grotesque mockeries of normal animals. There were horses with spider legs and mouths that split wide like a crocodile's. Snakes, each with a mouth that ran along its back, the full length of its body. Lizards with three heads and no eyes. Floating over the herd as if swimming in the ocean were barb-tailed mantas.

Amongst the hundreds of animalistic monsters were several hulking creatures that stood three, four, even five metres high. There were giant, lumpen toads, and hairy humanoids that looked like sasquatches. One was a vaguely humanoid creature with bright red skin whose entire upper body was a bulbous cross between a toad and fish head.

"Looks like three gigantoads, two yowies, and a yara-ma-yha-who," Cotsworth said.

"Yowies," Jason said, looking at the sasquatch creatures. "No kidding."

"No tricky powers, the yowies," Cotsworth said. "Not real fast either. It takes an awful lot of punishment to drop one, though, and if they hit you, you're done. Proper done. Pulverised flesh scattered over a hundred metres of ground done."

"I'll take them, then," Jason said. "What about the others?"

"The toads will shrug off little hits, but get a good enough whack to penetrate the skin and you can do some real damage. They're not zippy, but they can make a good-size jump, so make sure they don't land on you. Aside from that, watch out for the poison spit. Big, awful gobbets of the stuff, about the size of a wheelbarrow."

"And that red thing?" Farrah asked.

"Yara-ma-yha-who," Cotsworth said. "Not as tough as the others, but it's the worst of the bunch. It's plenty strong, and while it might look clumsy, it's actually quite agile. It can also make some big jump attacks,

with more precision than the toads, so watch out for that. The big danger is its tentacle fingers. They'll latch on to you and suck out your blood like you're a cherry smoothie."

"I'll take that one first," Farrah said. "You want to start with the hairy ones and we split the toads?"

"Sounds good," Jason said. "If you want to take the front, I'll come in from the back. There's bit of an army between us and them, though. I think we'll be relying on the expertise of your people to thin out those numbers, Cotsworth."

"Let me try something," Farrah said. "They don't seem to have noticed us, yet, so do you mind me getting their attention, Ditto?"

Cotsworth took a look at his teams forming up as they came through the aperture.

"We're almost in and formed up," he said. "Facing them as a horde like this, we're going to set up for continual waves of fire, but we also like to make an early strike in mass horde scenarios. We have an area specialist who I'd like to put alongside you."

"You're the host," Farrah said. "I would appreciate going first, though."

"No worries," Cotsworth said.

"Let me set up communication first," Jason said. "You've been briefed on this, Ditto?"

"Yep," Cotsworth said. "I spoke with Koen Waters, my Sydney counterpart. He said good things, which is why I'm willing to be accommodating. He also told me not to keep you on the shelf."

Jason sent out party invitations to the two platoons of Network personnel, which was one fewer than the Sydney team. While Cotsworth ran the sections through comm checks, he sent one of his silver-rankers to move forward with Farrah.

"I'm Farrah."

"Melinda. Just Mel is fine."

"What's your approach?"

"Chains of fire spears. You?"

"Fire bolt chain."

"Oh, classic," Mel said. "You must have it up to category three, if you're chaining."

"Yeah," Farrah confirmed.

“I thought you felt close to ranking-up from your aura. There’s a pair of category threes up in Darwin who’ve got fire bolt and it’s apparently something to see. It’s not often we get them all gathered up like this for big chains. You should start, because my spears do more damage if the targets are already burning. Normally, I get the fire essence users in the ranks to spray things down first, then move in to sweep up. This should be much more convenient.”

“That works out nicely,” Farrah said.

The two women made an odd pair, both with the refined good looks of multiple rank-ups. Farrah was dressed casually, wearing jeans and an open check shirt over a white tee, hair cinched back at the neck. Melinda had short-cropped hair and was covered neck down in what Jason continued to think of as death squad apparel. The black tactical armour worn by the Network’s silver-rankers was magical, although only bronze-rank gear.

“Time to try something new,” Farrah said as Jason moved forward to join them.

“Mind if I take a look?” Jason asked.

“Go ahead,” Farrah said.

Jason pulled up her ability description through his party interface.

Ability: [Ghost Fire Mystic]

- Transfigured from [Outworlder] ability [Spiritual Flame].

- Create threads of ghostly flame. Flames are incorporeal and non-harmful to ordinary individuals but are highly effective against incorporeal entities. Threads can be used as a whip, rope, web, or other cord-based objects.

- This ability gains an alternate function to draw magic diagrams, including ones that float in the air. Power-amplifying diagrams for

fire abilities have increased effect when created with this ability.

Farrah drew a magic diagram in the air with her finger, reminding Jason of the many times he had seen Clive do the same. Instead of Clive's golden light, though, Farrah drew in threads of red and yellow flame that glistened like liquid.

When she was done, she used an ability from her potent essence, Boost, which caused an amber light to shine from within her body. Boost was similar to the Bolster power that Neil possessed, in that it enhanced the next ability used. The key difference was that Boost only worked on the user.

Only after drawing out the ritual diagram and using her support ability did she hold up her hand and chant a quick spell.

"*Fire Bolt*."

Fire Bolt was from a family of ultra-quick attack spells commonly possessed by spell casters and used as a basic attack. It could be fired as far as the eye could see and was very quick to use, but traditionally lacking in power. Stacking enhancement effects the way Farrah had done was common practice.

The ball of flame that shot out of Farrah's hand was larger than what Jason had seen from other fire essence users, due to the Boost ability. Once it hit the ritual circle, the circle was consumed as the ball grew larger still, trailing flames like a comet as it shot low over the ground in the direction of the monster horde. It also changed colour, moving from orange through yellow to a bright yellow-white.

"That's a strong one," Mel said.

In the distance, they heard the roar of monsters as the higher-ranked enemies sensed the approaching magical attack.

"My Fire Bolt ability has already gotten to silver," Farrah said. "Even so, it should only kill the lowest-rank stuff outright. You want to follow on so you can chain off the weak ones while they're still burning, Mel?"

Mel grinned, not bothering to respond. She raised her hand and chanted a spell.

"*Blazing Spear*."

A spear that looked to be made of molten metal appeared in front of her and shot off after the fire bolt. It didn't seem to have any concerns about gravity, flying in a perfectly flat trajectory.

The fire bolt reached the monsters first, landing on a spider-legged horse that let out an alien shriek as flames engulfed it, as if it had been covered in accelerant. New bolts of fire shot out from the burning monster at other nearby monsters, who suffered the same fate. Fire bolts then emerged from them, continuing to chain from creature to hideous creature as flames overtook the horde like a rising tide.

The blazing spear propagated in much the same way, striking a burning monster, around which more spears were conjured to spread out and out, chasing after the wave of fire bolts. The collaboration of the two basic attack spells, chaining over and over, was devastating to the weaker members of the horde.

"Uh…" Jason said, watching the carnage.

The iron-rankers amongst the horde were falling like raindrops, with the bronze-rankers mostly surviving but in such a wrecked state that the Network team with their firearms should have little trouble mopping up. The larger monsters were burning, but they seemed largely unfazed. The fires on them soon went out, revealing some discoloured skin and scorched hair, but little more than superficial damage.

"Now for the finishing touch," Farrah said. She held her hands out to her sides, palms up, slowly raising them as she chanted a spell.

"*Let the fires rise and claim their ashen due*."

In the distance, the horde was a sea of flame emitting horrifying shrieks of agony, heard even from so far away. With Farrah's spell, the fire burned brighter, the screams growing louder before starting to fall silent. Jason took another peek at her abilities.

"What spell was that?" Jason asked.

"Look for yourself," Farrah said.

Ability: [Rising Flames] (Potent)

- Spell
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 3 minutes.

- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Damage dealt by all instances of [Burning] inflicted by you slowly increases.

- Effect (bronze): Shortly after an instance of [Burning] reaches maximum damage potential, it detonates, consuming the instance of [Burning] and dealing all potential damage immediately.

- Effect (silver): When instances of [Burning] detonate, they inflict damage in a small area around the victim.

"Strewth," Cotsworth said, walking up to Jason as he looked into the distance, scratching his head. "Looks like the rest of us can knock off. Good luck with the big ones."

Aside from a few bronze-rank monsters barely clinging to life, only the silver-rankers were left.

"You know," Jason said to Farrah, "I have a power that, when you stab someone, makes the bleeding slightly worse. How is that fair?"

"Always with the complaining," Farrah said. "The circumstances just happened to suit my abilities."

"The circumstances being an army of monsters."

"Exactly," Farrah said. "You have your own ideal situations. Put three people in the dark and you'll probably kill them. Eventually."

"Oh, that's hilarious," Jason said as he was shrouded in dark mist. "At least my ideal circumstances include having mana left four minutes into the fight."

"Your fights take longer than four minutes?" Farrah asked. "Maybe your abilities are terrible."

When the mist dispersed moments later, Jason's casual outfit had been replaced with his combat robes, his starlight cloak already draped over him.

"Shade, if you would?" he asked.

Three of Shade's bodies emerged from Jason's shadow to take the form of robust dirt bikes, naturally all in black.

"I don't know how to ride this," Farrah said as Jason mounted up.

"Do not be concerned, Miss Hurin," Shade said. "Straddle me firmly and I will take good care of you."

"Shade," Jason admonished. "Time and place."

"Mr Asano, that level of innuendo is beneath you. Or, at the very least, it should be."

"Fair point," Jason said. "That was low humour and we need to focus on the job at hand. Farrah, go ahead and put Shade's throbbing machine between your legs."

"I'm feeling very uncomfortable," Farrah said.

THE BLOOD AND DEATH GUY

THREE BLACK OVERSIZED DIRT BIKES ROARED ACROSS THE RED landscape as the sun beat down from overhead, casting sharp shadows on the ground. One bike had an uncertain-looking Farrah while another Jason, his cloak trailing behind like the ice tail of a comet. The third was Shade riding himself.

"Your vehicle forms aren't normally this loud," Jason shouted.

"I will remind you that I transform through your power," Shade said. "If any of the traits I take on are yobbish in nature, while I might be the one bearing it, you are the one responsible."

"Are you calling me a yobbo?"

"I've seen the maternal side of your family, Mr Asano. Your mother may try and hide it, but you come from hillfolk stock."

"Wait, I like that side of my family." He pumped a fist in the air. "TEAM YOBBO!"

"What is wrong with you?" Farrah yelled at him.

"I'm a man of the land!"

Farrah shook her head, turning her attention back to not falling off her bike. The supernatural suspension of Shade's dirt bike form made it a minimally taxing endeavour, but she still didn't trust the artificial mount. Even with magical assistance, the rough ground made for occasional sharp bumps.

"Couldn't you have turned into a heidel?" Farrah yelled at her bike.

"The shape-changing power is Mr Asano's power, not mine," Shade said. "According to him, a heidel is out of the question because they don't exist in this world. I could manage a camel."

“What’s a camel?”

“It’s like a horse’s gangly, awkward cousin,” Jason shouted from alongside her.

“What’s a horse?”

They were drawing closer to the few surviving monsters. There was a candy-red fish-toad with tentacle fingers, four giant toads, and a half-dozen of the looming, hairy yowies.

Farrah’s bike slowed to a stop while Jason and the other dark rider swerved wide in the direction of the hairy giants. Shade turned from a bike to a cloud of darkness that disappeared into Farrah’s shadow as she conjured a set of full body armour around her. It was made of glossy obsidian shards swept into wing shapes with a red glow shining from between the segments.

In her hands, she conjured a giant, obsidian weapon that only vaguely resembled a sword. The double-edged blade was segmented like her armour, with sections of serrated obsidian teeth over a magma-red glow.

As the two remaining motorcycles swooped around the toads, one of the humungous creatures leapt in their direction. Despite having the size and mass of a quaint rural cottage, it hurtled itself through the air with alarming speed. It was on target to crash into Jason, whose bike exploded into darkness. The dark cloud engulfed him just before the creature landed and smothered it.

On the second motorcycle, Jason emerged from the shadowy rider, occupying its place as the rider disappeared into the bike. Taking control of the bike, Jason swerved it hard to circle the huge toad. It didn’t move, sedentary outside of its ability to make repositioning leaps. Rather than move into the attack, it struck out via the bulging pustules all over its body, which burst explosively to spray pus over Jason.

- You have been afflicted with [Congealing Toad Venom].
- You have resisted [Congealing Toad Venom].
- You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
- You have gained an instance of [Integrity].

Resisting silver-rank poison was nothing new to Jason, with his ability to ignore rank disparity and his stacked resistance bonuses. That made the worst part of the attack the stench, which was akin to rotting whale blubber.

It wasn't rainbow-smoke bad, but it was enough that Jason had once cancelled a beach holiday over a similar aroma.

Not letting the bursting pustules bother him, Jason made a quick lap around the creature, his shadow arm stretching to score its skin with his dagger while he chanted spells. The dagger barely penetrated the coarse, damp skin, but Jason had never needed deep cuts. In the short time it took him to loop the toad and ride off in the direction of the yowies, he had locked in his full suite of afflictions.

"This mounted combat thing might really work out."

Farrah was squaring off with her own leaping monster, the bright red fish-toad-humanoid abomination called a yara-ma-yha-who launched itself at her. She didn't have the mobility of the bike or even the mobility of not being encased in stone armour, so she didn't dodge. Instead, two halves of an obsidian dome rose from the ground to close over her.

The three-metre-tall monster landed on the dome, the impact spreading spiderweb cracks across its surface. Perched on the dome, the monster immediately started hammering away with tentacle hands balled into fists. It clearly had the strength to smash through in short order, but the dome exploded outward, tossing the monster back and peppering it with obsidian shards that dug into its flesh, although not deeply.

From within the expanding cloud of obsidian fragments, Farrah pointed to a spot on the ground.

"*Flame of the earth, await the call*."

The monster's agility was incongruous with its awkward-looking physique, but it twisted in the air to land on its feet. Farrah, predicting its landing point, had used her spell to create a glowing sigil on the ground, right under its feet. She snapped her fingers, no mean feat in a stone gauntlet, and a magma geyser erupted from the ground. The force of the magma stream staggered the monster, the molten rock clinging to its body.

Farrah strode forward, three flaming orbs manifesting and floating over her head. They each shot fiery beams at the monster, which ceased scraping at the magma with its hands and rushed at her instead. Farrah stomped her

foot as she moved and obsidian shards erupted from the ground in a curtain, adding to the fragments already embedded in the monster's flesh.

The creature quickly moved aside, dodging much of the cloud of shards, only to see another ability coming for it. Something underground was rapidly digging its way forward. The monster moved again, but the burrowing thing changed tack to keep pursuing. Finally, the monster grabbed a huge rock like it weighed no more than dollhouse and hammered it down, trying to kill whatever was hidden in the ground.

After the rock slammed into the ground, it was broken apart. A two-metre obsidian column smashed through it as it rose from the ground in front of the monster. The column then shattered, burying yet more shards in the monster as Farrah chanted a follow-up spell.

"*Children of the volcano, be reborn in fire*."

All the shards of obsidian, almost a patina coating the front of the monster, suddenly turned into molten magma. The small globules of molten rock merged together, burning all the hotter with each addition.

The entire front side of the monster was turned to molten slag, catching fire and drizzling onto the ground like syrup to reveal the creature's hideous innards. Even so, the monster did not die. Monsters might have lacked an essence user's arsenal of powers, but their resilience put all but the most indestructible essence users to shame. At silver rank, any monster took a lot of killing.

Farrah didn't let up, approaching now with her sword, swinging it in a wide, horizontal sweep. The segments of blade whipped away, strung along a cord of glowing magma. It wrapped around the monster twice, the serrated edge digging into flesh. It was especially vulnerable in its ruined front. The sword retracted, cutting into the monster like a saw as it shrank back to the hilt.

Even that didn't kill the monster, but the creature was no longer a threat, lying almost helpless on the ground.

"Time to try another new trick," Farrah said to herself.

The sword in her hands transformed. Instead of a sword, it became an unwieldy saw blade on a heavy handle, the glowing hot edge spinning rapidly. Though too awkward for a fight, it was just the thing for dismembering a monster already all but done.

Physically tougher and stronger than the other monsters, the yowies were still less powerful, lacking the speed or special abilities to leverage that might. At silver rank, strong and tough wasn't enough anymore, which was perfectly highlighted by an enemy like Jason.

Literally riding rings around them on his bike, he quickly loaded them up with afflictions before leaving them to percolate, heading after the remaining toads. He started with the one he had already gone to work on. Loaded with afflictions that built up while Jason handled the yowies, the toad's flesh was already covered in ugly splotches of dead flesh. Jason's Punition spell delivered an immediate burst of necrosis for each affliction, which was enough to finish the toad off.

Farrah was coming away from having killed the most dangerous monster and was eyeing the two toads closest together.

Leaving them to her, Jason took the last one. Once again, he rode around the monster on his bike, shadow arm flicking out to land a pair of knife wounds. He had the arm emerge from his cloak, using his own hands to keep control of the bike as he rode it wildly over the uneven ground. This was more familiar to him than his fight against the bikies, having learned to ride dirt bikes on Uncle Robbo's farm as a boy.

The toads had thick skin, but as Cotsworth had told them, their insides were much more vulnerable. Jason's afflictions ravaged the toad's insides, and he didn't wait long before switching to the second phase. After hitting it with his Punition spell, he used his Feast of Absolution to drain the noxious afflictions. For each instance of curse, unholy affliction, poison, and disease removed, three holy afflictions were left in its place.

Penance inflicted inescapable transcendent damage that diminished over time. Legacy of Sin made the target count as more damaged than they were for execute attacks, which only added to the fact that by the time Jason laid it on, the target was already plenty damaged.

Against lower-rank monsters, Jason had needed to work to use his finisher. Most monsters were done by the time he was ready to pull it out. Finally faced with silver-rank enemies, the power of the finisher was truly something he could use to close out a fight.

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

A column of transcendent light crashed down on the toad, descending like the judgement of the heavens.

Ability: [Verdict] (Doom)

- Spell (execute).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (99%)

- Effect (iron): Deals a small amount of transcendent damage. As an execute effect, damage scales exponentially with the enemy's level of injury.

- Effect (bronze): Damage scaling is increased by instances of [Penance] on the target.

As of bronze rank, the triple-stack scaling of damage and the two afflictions made Jason's finisher a force of absolute annihilation, wiping the toad from existence.

- You have defeated [Gigantoad].

- [Gigantoad] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.

- 8 gobbets of [Silver Toad Jelly] have been added to your inventory.
- [Healing Unguent (Silver)] has been added to your inventory.
- [Monster Core (Silver)] has been added to your inventory.
- 10 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.

Since his Punition spell had a cooldown, it would take him a moment to go through each of the yowies he had left behind. After felling the toad, he pointed a hand in their direction.

"*Suffer the cost of your transgressions.*"

One of the yowies stumbled as clumps of hair started falling out of stricken flesh.

Farrah didn't bother messing around with the last two toads but decided to go all out. She started by drawing a fire diagram in the air and then activating a power. Amber light shone from her body, before turning silver as her aura went from bronze rank to silver. Then she cast a spell.

"*Burning heart of the world, show your might.*"

The first toad had leapt at her while she was drawing the diagram, but she didn't dodge, raising an arm in its direction. A metre-wide stream of lava erupted at the toad, coring its weak insides like an apple after punching through its tough skin. Pus and jelly rained down on her as she pointed her hand at the second toad. Another burst of lava made short work of it.

Afterwards, she dismissed her armour. Lava Cannon was a mana-devouring spell at bronze rank, but artificially raising it to silver with her Limit Break power made her mana drop off like a calving glacier. She stood bent over in a recovery position, hands on knees as Jason arrived on his bike. Seeing her covered in toad goo, he cast his cleansing spell.

"*Feed me your sins.*"

"How do even your healing powers sound evil?" she asked as Jason tossed her a recovery potion.

"I used it on the fourth toad," Jason said. "That should tell you what you need to know."

“I saw that big column of smiting power,” she said. “Was that transcendent damage?”

“That’s my finisher,” Jason said.

“What happened to you being the blood and death guy?”

“I also offer absolution. But absolution comes at a price.”

“I see you’re still the melodrama guy,” she said, looking in the direction of the yowies. “What about those ones?”

Jason glanced back and cast another Punition spell.

“I’ll finish them once they get over here,” Jason said. “Let me just loot this lot first.”

“You don’t have any more crystal wash, do you?”

“I’ve got two left,” Jason said. “I figured I’d save them for rank-ups.”

“Good idea.”

“Speaking of rank-ups, though, I’ve got that feeling…”

Amber light started shining out of his body.

“Didn’t even wait for me to meditate,” he said. “That ability was right on the cusp.”

- Ability [Verdict] (Doom) has reached Bronze 3 (100%).
- Ability [Verdict] (Doom) has reached Bronze 4 (00%).

- All [Doom Essence] abilities have reached [Bronze 4].
- Linked attribute [Spirit] has increased from [Bronze 3] to [Bronze 4].

Jason leaned forward on the bike, letting Shade support him through the disorientation.

“Mid-fight rank-up?” Farrah said. “It seems that you aren’t taking these monsters seriously or your soul wouldn’t be relaxed enough for that to happen.”

“The fight is basically over,” Jason said.

“Looks like your monsters feel the same way.”

Jason turned to take a closer look at the hairy monstrosities.

“Have they turned around?” he asked. “It’s hard to tell with all that hair and how slow they are.”

“I think they have,” Farrah said.

“Oh, come on,” Jason said. “Why would you run when you can’t actually run, you stupid monsters?”

He took off on his bike, leaving Farrah with Shade, who emerged from her shadow to take the form of a black horse with a white mane. It was sleek and beautiful, with hair so shiny, Farrah could vaguely see her reflection in it.

“Now this is more like it,” she said.

A LOT OF ANOMALIES

While Farrah and Jason fought the silver-rank monsters, Cotsworth looked on through the monitor displaying what the camera drone above the fight recorded. Although the transmission was occasionally spotty due to magical interference, he had a fairly clear vantage on what was taking place. Mel stood next to him, likewise looking on.

"They certainly don't fight like us," she said. "Taking on multiple category threes is incredible. I can't imagine keeping up that kind of output over the long term, though. I don't have the mana."

"Hurin is probably exhausting herself quite quickly," Cotsworth observed. "She's well-suited to blitz-attacking the most powerful enemies but would fare worse in a general DE sweep. Asano is a different beast altogether. At a glance, he doesn't seem to be doing anything."

"Poison?" Mel posited. "He only ever makes two attacks against an enemy, which are presumably special attacks."

"The Perth branch has a poison specialist," Cotsworth said. "It's hard to even notice that their abilities are taking effect. They shine against the toughest enemies, although it does take longer to drop them. The advantage is that they are highly resource-efficient, which is presumably why we're seeing Asano move from one fight to the next here."

"There's talk of new strategic approaches based on the way these two fight," Mel said. "Any truth to the rumours, sir?"

"I believe that is the idea. What do you think?"

"I don't see throwing out our existing approach," she said. "Her methods are too resource-intensive and he's too slow for a large-scale sweep-and-clear. They are taking us to school on the big stuff, though. Developing

some strike teams specialised in eliminating ADE targets could really do some work. To be honest, I don't see why it hasn't happened already."

"There's been a lot of push for it from the branches," Cotsworth said. "The International Committee has been pushing back, though. Threats of reduced resource allocation for branches employing what they call 'unnecessary high-risk' practices."

"That sounds like a load of crap."

"It is," Cotsworth said. "The IC doesn't like it any more than we do. It's the Chinese and the Americans threatening to withhold resources if the rest of the world doesn't play by their rules."

"Bunch of pricks," Mel said. "They poach all the looters, then leverage them to hold it over the rest of us."

"That's why Asano represents a chance to make a change," Cotsworth said. "Word is, the Sydney branch is willing to share him and his looting abilities with the rest of the country. That's why he's here in the first place."

Even as they spoke, the tactical teams were using their connection to Jason to clean up the loot from the army of dead monsters. They stuck to the periphery, making sure to stay clear of Jason, Farrah, and the silver-rank monsters.

"These two can also provide specific tactical guidance," Cotsworth continued. "If we're trying to work up new strategies blind, it's not worth the backlash. If we can quickly and efficiently work up new approaches, though, suddenly, it's a lot more viable."

"And what happens if the US or China swoops in and takes these two away?" Mel asked.

"Then we're back where we started," Cotsworth said. "At the beck and call of the superpowers."

As they continued to watch the fight play out, the head of the support team approached.

"Ditto Cotsworth," she said. "We're getting some odd readings off the dimensional space."

"Odd how?" Cotsworth asked.

"We've been observing the integrity of the space, as per normal. A dimensional space normally takes forty-three hours to break down, with a natural variance. When we first came in, our readings came back normal, but now our projections are off. It's looking like this space might last as much as sixty hours, maybe a little over."

“Explanation?”

“I only know of one-dimensional incursion phenomenon that has operated outside of the normal time frame,” she said, looking into the distance at the ongoing fight. “I can't confirm that the change happened when they entered the astral space, but I can't rule it out either. I will say that the Sydney branch didn't record anything like this the last time Asano entered a dimensional incursion space. It could be the other one or it could be unrelated.”

“Alright,” Cotsworth said. “Just record everything so we can hand it off to…”

He trailed off as a blinding column of light appeared in the distance.

“Uh, sir,” Mel said. “I think I may have noticed the effect of his abilities.”

“Eleven silver-rank monster cores,” Jason listed as he lay the loot out on the table. “Thirty-one tubs of toad jelly; not sure what that’s for.”

“You put it in tubs?” Cotsworth said.

“It came that way,” Jason said. “My looting power can be funny like that. We took our cut of the silver spirit coins and we’re keeping the lower rank ones we looted ourselves. I daresay the army of monsters will give you enough to be going on with. Three tins of healing ointment— that’s the good stuff, so save it for your category threes. Lucrative loot, from those toads. A spool of bark-thread hair from one of the yowies. The big red thing didn’t cough up anything too special, sadly.”

“We’ll make sure everything is tallied up,” Cotsworth said. “I understand you’ve got a preliminary arrangement with the International Committee about the harvest results.”

“It won’t be finalised until I tell the yanks and the Chinese to get on their bikes,” Jason said.

“You don’t anticipate being tempted away?” Cotsworth asked.

“I don't see what they have to offer that I'm not already getting from the International Committee. Sure, they could offer me more of it, but if I wanted more, I would have negotiated harder. Maybe they have some big secrets they could bring me in on, but that doesn't sit well with me. At the

end of the day, the job is to protect people from monsters and that means all the people. We have a lot to offer, and the rising tide should raise all ships. From what I've heard, that isn't the way the US and the Chinese will want to go."

"I won't lie, that's exactly what a lot of us wanted to hear," Cotsworth said.

By the time the plane returned Jason and Farrah to Sydney, it was late in the evening. Erika had refused the ride home offered by the Network in favour of a hastily arranged induction briefing on magic. She had a lot of questions.

Jason portalled them back to Casselton Beach, with a ten-minute mid-way pause on the secluded beach he had been using as a discreet stopover point.

"Maybe you should have dropped us closer to the chip shop," Erika said.

"I'm trying not to be too blatant about magic," Jason said. "Anymore."

After returning to the houseboat, he set up a video call with the Network headquarters in Sydney.

"Gladys," he greeted. "I'm sorry our meeting today got put off."

"Getting interrupted by alien invasions from another dimension is something you get used to around here," Gladys said.

They spoke for a while about Jason's grandmother and her ongoing treatment, which was going well.

"I still wouldn't go dropping any bombs about magic being real quite yet," Gladys advised. "With her advanced stage of Alzheimer's, her grasp of reality was fragmentary at best. Give her time to adjust before letting her know that everything she knows about actual reality is wrong."

"Thank you for taking such good care with her treatment."

"Thank you for saving at least some of our people. I knew that Miranda was a sea skank, but I didn't think she was bad enough to murder our own. Keith wasn't a bad young lad, and he didn't deserve to go out like that."

"Any trace of her yet?"

“No, it’s like she dropped off the face of the Earth. Anna said the Lyon branch is missing a portal user and we haven’t caught that Sebastian guy’s scent either. Best estimate is that they either have or still are portal-hopping to whoever is behind it all.”

“Any movement on figuring out who that is?”

“Still just postulation at this point,” Gladys said. “Barbou sacrificed EOA and Network personnel. It could be some faction in either organisation, the Cabal or some smaller group looking to make a big play. Don’t anticipate learning more until they make their next move.”

“I really don’t like that Barbou got away,” Jason said. “I’m worried enough about Farrah without having the guy who tortured her still out there somewhere.”

“She’s the reason you wanted to meet with me, yes?”

“Yeah.”

“How is she doing?”

“To all appearances, like nothing happened,” Jason said. “That just worries me all the more. As much as she might brush it off, you don't go through something like that—for weeks—without it leaving an impact. I'm worried she's burying a psychological cancer that won't show itself until it metastasises.”

“Well,” Gladys said, “the first thing you need to do is put away your assumptions. Culture plays a huge role in our psychological makeup and she’s from an entirely different world. We also don’t know how much having magic affects the way we process trauma. The short-term effects seem positive, but the long-term implications remain a mystery because we don’t have the research base yet. It could be that our minds just handle it better, or we may pay for those short-term protections down the road.”

“So, you’re saying no one knows and there’s nothing I can do.”

“I’m saying don’t push her to respond the way you think she should. Listen to what she tells you. Watch for what she shows you. Be there for her if and when she needs you. And don’t underestimate the power of shared experiences. You went through some stuff yourself, while you were on the other side, right?”

“Where did you hear that?”

“I didn’t need anyone to tell me when you’re running around like an angry thorn bush,” she said. “Your friend isn’t the only one in need of

recovery. My recommendation is for you both to take things easy for a good long while. Springtime is coming to that nice little town of yours. Enjoy it."

He didn't respond, his mind churning over.

"I know it's not what you wanted to hear," Gladys said. "You want to be active and do something for your friend. Sometimes, the best thing you can do is step back and not make things worse."

Lance Houseman entered the hotel room in Sydney where his assistant, Franklin, waited. Lance was a broad-shouldered man whose silver rank made him look thirty, while his true age was almost double that. Franklin was a slender iron-rank black man holding a computer tablet. Both wore impeccable suits.

"Room's clean, sir," Franklin said. "The locals didn't try anything, magical or otherwise."

"They'd be stupid if they did," Lance said. "You've gone over the materials?"

"Yes, sir," Franklin said.

"Then let's take a seat and go over them. Did anything happen while we were in the air?"

"Asano worked with the tactical team of another branch. This time, he brought the woman he liberated with him."

Franklin handed over a file as they sat, side by side, in the large suite's comfortable armchairs.

"This is everything we have on her, which is, essentially, nothing. The most concrete thing we have is an analysis of her abilities, courtesy of a drone recording. I've put the raw footage and an analysed breakdown of it on your laptop but, in brief, she's a blitz attacker. Highly capable, extreme damage output. She seems to have an ability to ignore rank barriers, as there was no noticeable damage impedance from the silver-rank monsters. That's possibly just a factor of the poor video source, however."

"She's another Trelawney, then."

"Initial assessment is that she's potentially more capable than Trelawney, although that assessment has received some pushback."

“Of course it has,” Lance said. “Our people aren’t used to not having the best there is, but this woman comes from a world where our best is the norm. Value assessment?”

“Our best guess is that she’s very close to crossing the line to silver rank. Tactically, she would be an asset, but no more than any other top-flight silver. It’s the knowledge she brought back from the other world that’s valuable. Our assets inside the Sydney branch claim that Asano has asserted that her value in this regard is higher than his.”

“And what about him?” Lance asked. “Did we finally get a look at his abilities?”

“Yes, sir, although not a good one. We believe he’s an affliction specialist, so his abilities have limited visual effect. Most of them anyway.”

“Oh?”

“His abilities appear to work in stages. Initially, his powers inflict a rapidly accelerating necrosis, which he puts in place before moving on to other combatants. Then he comes back and switches to attacks based around what we believe to be oblivion energy.”

“He’s wiping stuff out of existence?”

“Yes, sir. Allow me to show you a clip.”

Franklin pulled up a video file on his tablet, showing a man on a motorcycle trailing a dark cloak of stars behind him as he circled some stricken-looking hairy giants. A huge column of light crashed down on the giants, one after another, wholly eradicating each one.

“That's a lot of oblivion energy, if that's really what it is,” Lance said. “We're sure this guy is bronze rank?”

“There are a lot of anomalies in that regard,” Franklin said. “He also seems to ignore rank suppression, which is possibly due to items or a learned ability from the other world. We have no information on anything like that existing, but our knowledge of the other world is centuries out of date. It may well be a more recent development. The analysts think it's more likely a result of individual abilities, though. We do have one of our own who can do that, after all.”

“What else?”

“His aura is highly anomalous. He did something we don't understand while he was in France that had a physiological effect similar to a rank-up. Since then, he appears different, magically. His aura was already reported to be significantly more powerful than his rank suggested and now it's

something else entirely. It apparently still reads as bronze rank but with a strength that easily matches silver. One of our informants referred to it as feeling like…"

Franklin scrolled through his notes on the tablet.

"…being bludgeoned to death by the Ten Commandments," he read.

"How colourful."

"As best we can tell, he's bronze rank. With the unusual factors surrounding him and the borderline strength of the other outworlder, our analysts suggest treating them as silver, from a tactical perspective."

"What do they make of Asano's tactical value?"

"We don't have a full handle of his abilities yet, but early assessment places his value at extremely high. High endurance, escalating damage, oblivion energy. He's built for taking down ADEs. His high mobility and stealth capabilities are just sweeteners. The problem is his behavioural profile."

"Oh?"

"He's erratic. Rash. It's hard to predict when he'll fight versus when he'll talk. He's willing to accept extreme consequences for bold moves. Strongly anti-authoritarian. Even so, he's made connections in the Network and the Cabal. He values friendship over alliances. He also appears to be suffering from post-traumatic stress we believe stems from an extended period in some kind of combat zone."

"They think he's been to war?"

"Or something like it," Franklin said.

"What's the suggested approach?"

"Personal benefits won't win him over," Franklin said. "He seems to value relationships, so offering benefits for the other outworlder and his family will be better received. It's all in the packet I left in your room. He doesn't respect politeness. Be honest, show strength. He'll respect that. Do not threaten him, however. He cannot be intimidated and he'll see it as a challenge."

"He sounds like a huge pain in the ass."

"That sums up his behavioural analysis, quite neatly, if more colloquially than the written report."

PITCH MEETINGS

The film crew set up next to the Surf Club, with a crowd of onlookers gathered around. The kitchen set was put out, with the fridge and oven hooked up.

"Today, we have a special guest," Erika said to the cameras. "As viewers of my previous program may remember, I would occasionally have my little brother on before his untimely passing. As it turns out, he faked his death in circumstances he has yet to adequately explain, so for the first time on *Beachside Kitchen*, please welcome my brother, Jason Asano."

"What kind of introduction was that?" Jason asked, walking into shot.

"Well, if you'd like to explain to the viewers what you've been doing for a year and a half? Maybe why you're wearing sunglasses."

"I have an eye condition. I'm definitely not hung over."

"Well, I hope you've brought a better recipe than you did an explanation," Erika said. "It's dessert week on *Beachside Kitchen* and Jason will be helping me make a Russian honey cake. Before that, though, we've each picked out a simple dessert recipe that we'll be making. What do you have for us, little brother?"

"I'm going with a brioche frangipane apple pudding. How about you?"

"I thought I'd pay deference to the lovely warm spell we're enjoying here in Casselton Beach by making a simple and summery key lime pie."

"West Indian lime pie," Jason corrected.

"Most people will know it as a key lime pie, Jason."

"We're in Australia, Eri, and in Australia, they're called West Indian limes, not key limes. Ergo, West Indian lime pie."

“Ergo? Are you trying to make the viewers hate you? Key lime pie is universally acknowledged as a delicious summer dessert, while the internet will tell you that West Indian lime pie is a gross sex thing.”

“It’s the internet, Eri. Everything is a gross sex thing,” Jason said, pulling out his phone. “You probably made that up anyway, so I’m going to look it up.”

His expression froze for a moment, then he put his phone away and flashed the camera a big smile.

“So today, Erika will be making a delicious key lime pie…”

Out of shot, standing next to the executive producer, Taika leaned over to whisper a question.

“You don’t put the bickering in the show, do you?”

“We edit it back for the airing,” Wally said, “but we do a special cut for the website. It’s a massive traffic driver every time he’s on. The audience love them together. I’d have him co-host if he’d just agree to it. Selling stationery and he doesn’t want to be a TV star. I don’t suppose you could try talking him into it?”

“I don’t think so, bro. He doesn’t sell office supplies anymore.”

Several hours later, Jason was dealing with a group of stern Chinese men who did not look like big *Beachside Kitchen* fans. The man at the front was the leader of the group and one of only two that had spoken during the meeting. The only flower among the rocks was the leader’s beautiful, young-seeming daughter, wearing the same sharp suit and sharp expression as the rest.

“You are a fool to reject our entreaties, Mr Asano,” the leader said.

“I was already a fool, Mr Li, so it wasn’t out of my way.”

A smile teased the corner of his daughter’s lips, but she quickly schooled her expression. They were standing in the conference lobby of Castle Reach’s largest business resort, although the only other one was just marginally smaller. Li Ning and his daughter, Li Li Mei, were both silver-rankers, while their unspeaking flunkies were all iron.

“You will come to regret being so flippant,” the elder Li said and marched away. The flunkies followed in lockstep, but his daughter

remained behind.

“I always do,” Jason confided in her. “Actually, that’s a lie; I thought it would sound cool. To be honest, I’m killing it.”

“You are an unconventional man, Mr Asano,” Li Mei said. “Although we have not come to an agreement today, I hope you will consider yourself open to perhaps a more modest collaboration in the future.”

“Modest isn’t really my thing, but I’ll try and be open-minded. You know, I respect the approach you’re taking. You figured out that you didn’t have anything that would swing me, so your dad comes in all bluster, making me feel powerful in rejecting him. Then you step in, reasonable, graceful and measured, to keep the door open.”

She gave him a wry smile. “Did it work?”

“Definitely,” Jason said with a grin. “I’d give you my phone number, but something tells me you already have it. How about you give me yours?”

She gave him a sunbeam smile and handed him a business card with both hands. Jason looked it over, seeing her work numbers on the front. He chuckled as he turned it over and saw another number, hand-written in pen and labelled ‘personal.’

“Is your dad really like that, or was it a show for my benefit?”

“This approach was his design,” she admitted, “although he was playing to his strengths.”

“I think you both were.”

“And what do you think my strengths are, Mr Asano?”

“Most things, from what I can tell. Not blending in, though. I have trouble imagining a crowd where you don’t stand out.”

“Daughter!” her father barked from the lobby entrance. “We are leaving!”

“I have to go, Mr Asano.”

“I am genuinely disappointed, Miss Li. I look forward to seeing you again.”

As the Beijing Network delegation left, Jason wandered over to one of the lobby couches and crashed down.

“Strewth, that was a good plan.” Jason said. “I think they may have sent the most beautiful woman in China.”

“She is silver rank, Mr Asano,” Shade pointed out. “She most likely heard what you just said.”

“Oh, you’re right,” Jason said. “Whatever will I do now? She’s heard me call her the most beautiful woman in China.”

“Ah, you intended her to hear. I may have spoiled your intentions by drawing attention to it.”

“No, I expected you to point that out.”

“Then why say it?”

“Because she doesn’t need me to tell her how gorgeous she is. But this way, I get to do it while demonstrating that I thought things through this far, knowing that she’s listening to us right now.”

“Aren’t you concerned she might see you as smug?”

“I am smug, Shade. I find it best to put that right out there, given it’s a core character trait.”

“When will you let her know about the melodrama?”

“Ideally while I’m rescuing her as she’s falling off a building.”

“She’s a silver-ranker, Mr Asano. I imagine she would rescue herself.”

“That does make it tricky,” Jason agreed. “How hard would it be to arrange another rolling motorcycle shootout?”

“I believe events of that nature are best left to occur organically.”

“How often does something like that happen organically?”

“Well, Mr Asano,” Shade said, “how has your week been so far?”

“I was hoping we could meet on your remarkable houseboat,” Lance Houseman said in a neutral accent. It reminded Jason a little of Farrah, whose translation ability made her English somewhat flat. Not everyone had Jason’s aptitude for forcing colloquial flavour through the sieve of a magical translation.

The American’s accent was not the result of a translation power, however. It was the classic mid-Atlantic banality, designed not to offend anyone yet slightly annoying everyone. Or perhaps that was the work of the smug self-confidence, Jason considered. He wondered, for a moment, if that was how people saw him, then dismissed the thought.

They were sitting in a Castle Reach café, the American with a long black and Jason with an iced chocolate, piled high with cream. Houseman had chosen to meet him alone.

“Your people have been examining my houseboat for days,” Jason said. “You should ask them.”

“That wasn’t us,” Lance said. “You might want to look to the Chinese for that.”

“You just lied to me, Mr Houseman,” Jason said. “Not a great start.”

Jason sipped at his iced chocolate, getting whipped cream on his nose but seeming not to notice. The American’s attention was drawn to it, distracted, but he didn’t say anything.

“Why don’t we get straight to the point,” Lance said. “My understanding is that you’re not a man to beat around the bush.”

“And you’re not a man to act incautiously,” Jason said. “All those category threes lurking around. Do you really think I’m that dangerous?”

“If you weren’t, you wouldn’t be worth my time, Mr Asano.”

“Sure I would,” Jason said. “I could be a bumbling fool and you’d be here, so long as I was a bumbling fool with a looting power. Even if that’s the only worthwhile thing I picked up over there, that’s money in the bank.”

“I don’t think you want money, Mr Asano. We can offer you more than the locals, no question, but you don’t care because you don’t need it. You’re waiting to hear what we can give you that they can’t.”

“Actually, I’m waiting for you to leave. I made a deal that I can’t close because you and your people are obnoxious enough to insert yourselves where you aren’t wanted. I feel like an oil-rich nation.”

“That’s a cheap shot, Asano.”

“You present such an easy target. I’ve heard that the Chinese and US branches are a lot more unified than most of the Network.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a strong national identity.”

“Fair enough. You know I’m Australian, right?”

“Australia is the kiddie pool. We look at you and see a man with infinite potential, but you’re stuck teaching the children to swim. Join the adults who already know how or you’ll never fulfil your potential.”

“Oh, I didn’t realise you could explain it with an easy-to-understand metaphor; you’ve totally turned me around.”

“Sarcasm is also cheap.”

“And you’re treating me like an uneducated white voter. We may keep voting our own idiots in, here in Australia, but we’re not America yet.”

“You seem to have a problem with my country, Mr Asano.”

“Mate, everyone has a problem with your country. You made children fear the sky and that was the president people liked. Do I even need to talk about this one? Everyone knows you haven’t read him in on magic existing because he hasn’t bragged about it on social media.”

“Mr Asano, you sound like a hipster art student. One semester of political science does not make you Noam Chomsky. Whatever you may think of my nation’s politics, our magical community is something else entirely.”

“For now.”

“If you remain here, Mr Asano, you’ll spend all your time lifting others up. Come with us and you’ll be the one who rises.”

“That’s a very capitalist pitch,” Jason said. “You’re proposing I choose selfishness over helping others.”

“You’re very high-minded for someone who tried to sell gold to Armenian gangsters.”

“Everyone’s a hypocrite, Mr Houseman. I’m not responsible for the largest military and the largest economy on the planet, so my selfish choices can only hurt so many people. Making selfish choices is your country’s political doctrine at this point.”

“We need to move on from this unproductive topic, Mr Asano. You can hate our politics all you like, but as you just pointed out, we have the money and we have the power. This is as true of magic as it is of everything else. If you ever want to get your friend home, you’ll need the greatest knowledge base and the largest pool of magical resources on the planet. That’s us.”

“Speaking of my friend,” Jason said. “You should call off your people looking for the chance to approach her separately. You won’t like what happens if they do.”

“You can’t threaten me, Mr Asano. We aren’t some half-baked French traitors trained in the worthless strategies that we forced on the rest of the world. Our silver-rankers are more than capable of fighting on your terms. I know you aren’t stupid enough to think you can beat one of them, let alone a small army of them. You can feel them around us. This is how many silver-rankers we had to spare just to come talk to you.”

“I’m not going to fight you,” Jason said. “I’m going to give the world the tools to stand up to you.”

“You aren’t as valuable as you think, Mr Asano. Don’t throw away a golden opportunity out of stubbornness. Think about your family. You can

essence them up here, but we can make each and every one of them a powerhouse. They can all have mansions in Miami with a cupboard for monster cores in every one. We'll turn them all into silver-rankers, guaranteed. No expense spared."

"And all I have to do is clip a leash on my neck."

"I'm not looking to put you in a box," Lance said. "If you want to be a bigger fish, you need a bigger pond."

Jason let out a laugh.

"You have no concept of how big the pond gets, Mr Houseman. This whole planet is the kiddie pool. Trying to impress me with how big and powerful your corner of the Network is will not work."

Lance shook his head.

"It pains me to look at someone like you, with all you could be, running around like a racehorse with blinders on. All you can see is the narrow path someone else has put in front of you. I want to open your eyes and let you see the world."

"As long as I see the parts the tour guide wants me to."

Lance sighed.

"I didn't want to bring this up," he said, "because I knew it would be a delicate topic. Your friend, Farrah. She's been through a lot. I wanted this to be a pleasant surprise after you signed on. We have expert counselling services that specialise in magic-related trauma. Our people can help her recover after the terrible circumstances she experienced because they have the training, the knowledge and the experience to give her the help we both know she needs."

"You seriously think that I would trust your people to crawl inside her head?" Jason asked. "I think we're done here."

"Negotiation is a long road, Mr Asano. We'll talk again."

"Mr Houseman, I apologise for my ambiguity. I don't think we're done here. I know we are. Definitively. This is a hard no."

Houseman stood up and adjusted his jacket.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mr Asano. The time will come when you realise that we aren't trying to recruit you because we need you. We're doing it because you need us."

Jason remained seated, spooning some cream from his iced chocolate into his mouth.

"That's alright, Mr Houseman. The hard way is kind of my thing."

Houseman left and got into the back of a black Mercedes that drove away. Jason felt the nearby silver-rank auras retreat.

"He said silver rank, rather than category three," Shade observed.

"I noticed that too," Jason said. "Did you spot that one aura?"

"The silver-rank one that was free of monster core residue?" Shade asked. "Yes, I did. It was holding back, mostly likely outside of what they believed to be the range of your aura senses."

"It seems that he wasn't lying when he said that I'm not as valuable as I think. The Americans already have the training methods for non-core advancement."

"It's not overly surprising," Shade said. "If they could figure out the right meditation techniques, it wouldn't be that hard. It's unlikely they're as refined as what Mr Remore and Miss Hurin have taught you, but it's clearly above what the rest of the world has."

"That makes sense," Jason said.

He had learned that many branches had someone like Nigel who attempted to muddle through advancement without cores. They even swapped insights, the rest of the world not being as exclusionary to one another as the major powers. Jason suspected that, like anyone with looting powers, the Americans snatched up anyone who made real progress.

Being in Castle Reach already, Jason offered to pick Emi up from school. Erika agreed, especially since they were still living in Jason's houseboat. When Jason and his niece arrived home, they heard music blasting from the rear of the houseboat.

Jason sensed Hiro in his cabin with the soundproofing to maximum, while Farrah and Taika appeared to be dancing on the rear deck. Farrah shut off the sound system as Jason approached, rushing up to him.

"Tina Turner is old!" she said.

"I'm aware," Jason said.

"We need to get her essences now."

"I don't think the Network will be okay with that," Jason said.

"Did you ask?"

“Did I ask if it was okay to give Tina Turner a set of essences? No, I did not.”

“Well, you have the speaky thing in your pocket, right?”

“You want me to call up a secret society of wizards whose core purpose includes hiding magic to ask if we can give magic to an internationally famous singer?”

“That would be great, thank you,” Farrah said.

“It wasn’t a suggestion,” he said, running an exasperated hand over his face.

“It can’t hurt to call, can it, Uncle Jason?”

“You too?” he asked Emi. “Don’t give me the puppy dog eyes, that isn’t going to … oh bloody hell.”

He jabbed a finger at his niece as he fished out his phone to make a call.

“I cannot believe I’m doing this. It’s only because I need to call Anna anyway, and you both owe me for— Anna, g’day.”

“What can I do for you, Mr Asano?”

“You can just call me Jason. Look, I’ve been asked to check if it’s at all possible to give essences to Tina Turner.”

“I’m afraid not,” Anna said with a laugh. “The International Committee had to put a stop to giving celebrities essences in the eighties.”

“It did happen, then?” Jason asked.

“Oh, yes,” Anna said. “Willie Nelson, Christie Brinkley. They should have been more careful with the essences they gave Ozzy Osbourne.”

“Is that why he’s not dead? What about Australians?”

“Well, the Perth branch is almost entirely made up of cricketers everyone thinks are dead. They keep proposing to magic up Steve Waugh and I know at least one instance they tried to give Boonie essences on the sly.”

“So, that’s a no on Tina Turner?”

“Maybe take it up with the Americans. Did you talk to our foreign guests yet?”

“I did, but found their proposals unappealing. I’ll come to you and finalise our agreement tomorrow.”

“Oh, that’s fantastic,” Anna said, not hiding the relief in her voice. “They couldn’t tempt you away?”

“You helped me get Farrah back,” Jason said. “I know you and the International Committee had your own agenda, but you helped us and lost

people in the process. I won’t forget that.”

MOVING FORWARD

On the top deck of the houseboat, Asya, Farrah and Jason were enjoying lunch as they looked over the final version of the agreement with the Network.

"While we have the agreement documented," Asya said, tapping the papers on the table, "it's a fiction, legally speaking. What court could we pursue violations in? In the end, it's just a symbol of intent."

"I like that, though," Jason said. "For all intents and purposes, it's a handshake deal. It's held together by integrity, and I'm all about integrity."

"You are?" Farrah asked.

"Yep. When I sell out my principles, they stay sold. Although, if I sold out *that* principle, then they wouldn't stay sold because that principle is no longer in effect, which means my principles would get unsold, meaning that particular principle *was* in effect, which would mean…" His ramble trailed off as he scratched his head in confusion. "Ethics is hard."

Farrah shook her head.

"You know," Asya said to Jason, "I never gave you a proper thank you for saving my life."

The mock confusion dropped off Jason's face as he looked her square in the eyes.

"I know that you were the one that pushed to get my chance at freeing Farrah. You never have to thank me for anything again. Ask and I'll be there."

"An infinite supply of favours?" Asya asked.

"Friends don't count favours," Jason said. "They just show up."

"Is that what we are?"

“Don’t look down on friendship,” Jason said. “It’s the foundation of every positive relationship. I love my dad, I love my sister and my niece. While I love my mum and my brother too, even after everything, it isn’t the same with them. They’ll always be family, but the friendship isn’t there. Some family you want to see every day, and some you only see at Christmas. That extends to every relationship, from lovers to co-workers to people you escaped a cannibal cult with.”

“That was a weird way to meet,” Farrah said. “One of these days, I’ll be the one saving you.”

“Friendship,” Jason continued, “is having people to share the best and the worst days of your life with. Friendship is knowing there will be someone you can rely on, no matter what. Friendship can let you travel back in time.”

“What?” Asya asked.

“Wait,” Jason said, frowning. “That last one might just be *Final Fantasy VIII*.”

“Don’t underestimate having Jason as a friend,” Farrah said. “Even when I was a stranger, he risked everything to save me, when he had every expectation of getting killed. Once I was a friend, he brought me back from the dead.”

“I don’t think that was technically me,” Jason said.

“Shut up, I’m telling a story.”

“As you were,” conceded an admonished Jason.

Farrah walked Asya off the boat.

“I’m not a threat to you,” Farrah said.

“I never thought you were,” Asya said, drawing a chuckle from Farrah.

“I can help you with aura control,” Farrah said. “It’ll make your emotions less of an open book.”

Asya’s eyes went wide. “Does Jason…?”

“Yes,” Farrah said. “His aura is strong, as I’m sure you’ve sensed, and emotions are easy for him to read. He restricts himself, of course, to respect the privacy of others, but when someone is weaker than him and has poor

control, clear and strong emotions are like shouting. He can't help but overhear."

Asya buried her face in her hands.

"Don't walk off the deck," Farrah warned with a chuckle. "I wouldn't worry about it. It's not like you've made any secret of your intentions, even disregarding magic."

"Should I just ask him out?"

"I don't know," Farrah said. "I think there's a good chance he'd say no for the simple fact that he doesn't need any more complications in his life. On the other hand, do you want someone else sweeping in and taking your opportunity?"

"No," Asya said firmly.

"Then make a social overture. The worst thing that can happen is he says no."

"What if it makes things weird?"

"Your biggest risk is him feeling smug that a woman like you would be interested in him. It would just get lost in his regular smugness, so it'll be fine."

"He has always been very confident."

"Or seemed that way," Farrah said. "He's good at masking his fear and uncertainty, even in his aura. It's like the first person he convinces is always himself."

"Well?" Cleary asked.

Houseman was talking over a secure video link with the Assistant Director of Operations, Los Angeles Network branch.

"He's too inculcated with anti-American sentiment. As if his government was any different. They're just worse at it."

"That's unfortunate," Cleary said, "but we've come across principled people before. We don't land every fish."

"I'm not sure we can afford to let this one off the hook. I think he intends to democratise some of the advantages that we've been hoarding. He potentially poses a threat to our position."

“We can live with that,” Cleary said. “We anticipated leaking some of this in the next few years anyway. Things are coming to a head, and we’ve heard China was looking to make some overtures to the world at large as part of their goals to become the sole hegemon once magic goes public. If we can’t beat them to that punch, we can at least take some wind out of their sails by letting the treasures they were going to bestow come from a source that doesn’t pose us any threat.”

“You’re saying we should walk away? We don’t want to consider taking the outworlder off the board?”

“Are you advocating that?”

“No,” Houseman said. “The guy unnerves me. I was told about his aura beforehand, but nothing prepares you for experiencing it for yourself. If he stands and fights, we can put him down, no question. If he runs, though, our security team isn’t confident of containment. My instincts tell me that he is not an enemy I want out there, waiting for his moment in the dark.”

“You’re the man on the ground, so your opinion holds a lot of weight. It also aligns with our own concerns. The International Committee knows what the outworlders represent. The IC may just be there to rubber stamp the things we want but they’ve had a taste of the good stuff now. They’ll buck if we snatch it right out of their mouths. If the outworlders come to us on their own, that’s one thing, but us taking them out is another.”

“We could blame it on the Chinese.”

“Too risky. That’s my sense anyway. Our response will have to be decided above the branch level, so we’ll take your report to the National Council. Anticipate them wanting a video briefing from you. I imagine the response will be to let it go, though. We have no idea what kind of tricks he brought back from the other world. In the meantime, hold tight, stay quiet and don’t cause trouble.”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s not like we won’t get any nuggets of gold that he drops on the International Committee anyway,” Cleary said. “In fact, we get first pick off the pile. Most likely, we’ll shift our approach to dominating the International Committee’s interactions with the outworlders.”

“I know that decision is above my head,” Houseman said, “but I think that would be the sound approach.”

Jason and Farrah were sat at a table in the houseboat, going over lists.

"You'll need to trade some of these essences with the Network," Farrah said. "You have far too many growth and plant essences. You can certainly use some of them, but you should swap them out for a selection of common essences before we take a proper look at what we give to your family."

"The renewal essence I have I want to give to Taika," Jason said. "I was thinking an immortal confluence."

"That's generous," Farrah said. "Renewal essences can sell for as much as peak-rarity ones."

"Taika has already agreed to be the head of security for my family," Jason said. "I want him to have topflight powers, plus I feel responsible for dragging him into this."

"That puts him on the list of people we train instead of feed up with cores," Farrah said. "We need to determine which members of your family go on that list."

"The only ones I'm willing to consider are Erika, Ian and, eventually, Emi. The rest get cores, end of story. My guess is that Erika and Ian won't go for it, though. Just convincing them to let us train Emi will be a thing."

"They're too old anyway, to be honest," Farrah said. "If this world had skill books, it might be a different story, assuming they even got the power to use them. If you want family members who are trained properly, you need them to be Emi's age or younger and start training them now."

"That would mean expanding the pool of family members who know the truth," Jason said. "We just promised the Network to be careful about that."

"We also promised to train up a group of young people from the Network's families," Farrah said. "You and I will do better to retain a level of independence, but your family joining the Network as a whole would be nothing but beneficial."

"You think the Network would go for that?"

"They'd do it just to sink their roots into you," Farrah said.

"Good point," Jason said. "They have the experience and resources for a mass induction, too. All I could do would be to set up a movie theatre and show them all my holiday vlog."

"I'm going to train Hiro in array magic," Farrah said. "That should be more manageable than adventurer training, especially with the right essences."

There was a whiteboard next to them with two columns labelled ‘trade’ and ‘keep’. As they went through Jason’s essences, picking combinations for his family, they had been sorting the essences into the two columns.

Jason glanced at the keep column, where the first three listed essences had been reserved by Farrah for Hiro. Two were amongst his highest-rarity essences—the vast and rune essences. The third was the common, but still valuable, magic essence. That would produce the prosperity confluence, which was shared by Neil from his team back in the other world. The resulting powers would be very different, though, being a combination hand-picked by Farrah to synergise with array magic.

“I’d love to have a set like that myself,” Farrah said, “but it’s not suited for adventuring. It’s a classic crafting combination. Almost everyone who has it is a core user. Not to say that it can’t be used in a fight, although it seriously lacks efficiency when operating on less than a battlefield-scale conflict.”

“It’s common, then?”

“The vast essence is of the highest rarity, so common isn’t the right word. It’s probably the most widely used combination involving that essence, though. Anyone who has it is never lacking for work in any high-magic regions. You’ll see why as Hiro and I work on your family compound project together.”

The park at Castle Bluff had an oddly elaborate obstacle course, courtesy of a town councillor obsessed with fitness. Since he was so adamant about acquiring funding for healthy school lunch program and child fitness initiatives, he had no concerns about retaining his seat year after year. Now in his seventies, he could still be found using the obstacle course himself every week. Jason and Farrah knew him enough to say hello after using the park for mobility training every day for weeks.

They picked up Emi from school and, wary of being seen using portals, drove to Castle Bluff Park. On this day, there was a pair of people mover vans following them around.

“Is this the best use of our time?” a man said as people clambered out of the van. “I don’t see why we couldn’t do all this in Sydney.”

“You’re the ones who rocked up early and I’m not shifting my schedule,” Jason said.

“If you’re not on a monster hunt, you don’t skip training,” Farrah added. “You can either join in or stand around and complain.”

“Bugger it, I’m in,” Cotsworth said. “I want to see what kind of routine you get up to.”

The Directors of Tactical Operations for every Network branch in Australia had descended on Casselton Beach to discuss a nationwide training program. They arrived three hours early, which was how they ended up trailing along behind Jason and Farrah.

“Who are they?” Koen Waters asked Jason. He inclined his head in the direction of a gaggle of teenagers holding up phones. Around half of them were wearing uniforms from local private schools.

“High school students,” Jason said. “They started filming us last week. I had Shade check them out, but they’re just putting our training up online. We make sure not to show them anything too outlandish. Are you going to join us?”

“No, thank you,” Koen said. “I have my own routine.”

“Well, if you’re just hanging about, take the others and try out that food truck over there,” Jason advised, pointing. “I recommend the kimchi fries.”

That evening, the assembled Network personnel were gathered in the media room of the houseboat.

“Can I buy one of these chairs off you?” Cotsworth asked, luxuriating in the cloud furniture.

“No,” Jason said. “Technically, they’re not chairs. They’re part of the houseboat, which is not technically a houseboat.”

Behind him was a screen with paused footage from one of his most recent forays into a proto-astral space.

“I know you’ve all been analysing the way Farrah and I fight, but tonight, we’re going to go over that together, along with comparisons of our approach versus the standard Network tactics. We have two goals to achieve before you leave at the end of the week. One: build a framework to train your future tactical units to include strike teams specialising in the

elimination of high-rank dimensional entities. Two: develop a retraining program to establish those specialist teams using existing tactical personnel in the short term."

He sent a mental command and the media player produced by the houseboat produced an image.

"We're going to start by looking at Farrah. In the fight we're about to watch, observe how many different essence abilities she uses and contrast that with your standard tactics. Note that instead of using her abilities to occasionally supplement attacks, she chains abilities, one after the other…"

FLEMISH BAROQUE

In the office at her restaurant, Erika was talking to Jason through an incarnation of Shade. After weeks of such communication, it was starting to feel normal, which, when she thought about it, was rather concerning.

"I told him you had costume contact lenses," Erika said. "What was I supposed to say? That your eyes changed when you became a gestalt entity of body and spirit? I don't even know what that means."

"Well," Jason said, "it basically means that… actually, I'm still kind of figuring it out."

"When will you be back?"

"Not until I pick up Emi at school. Will you be coming to the houseboat for dinner?"

"Yeah, although I'm concerned about bringing him to the houseboat. Ian hasn't forgiven me yet for making him go home and give up the cloud bed."

"You know that you're welcome to keep staying here."

"I just want to maintain some normalcy," Erika said. "Is that so bad?"

"I get it," Jason said. "I just know from experience that when you stop obsessing over normal and give yourself over to magic, life gets amazing."

"You realise you're starting to sound religious when you talk like that."

"Speaking of religious, did anyone tell Great Aunt Marjory about magic yet?"

"No, and we're not going to," Erika said. "If she finds out that you came back from the dead, heal the sick and can walk on water, she is not going to keep the secret. Will anyone on talkback radio believe her? Probably not,

but she's already intimated that the devil sent you back. I don't want her roaming around town yelling 'false prophet' at passers-by."

"That's fair."

"You know, Jase, what you said about giving over to magic. It's not all good. It's getting harder to go around living my life with everything I've learned. How do I treat everything as normal when I know about teleporting, secret monsters, and alternate worlds? You're a sorcerer. It suddenly hit me the other day that you can cure cancer with a literal magic spell. How am I meant to go around living an ordinary life like that?"

"You're not. There's a clock running on ordinary life for everyone. The difference is that you get a head start, with the time, knowledge and resources to get ready for it. I've just been waiting for you to accept that so we can move on to the next step."

"Like Taika."

"Exactly."

"How's he doing?"

"He's monstering it," Jason said. "I don't know who taught that guy to fight, but he can fight. A lot like Farrah, actually, so she's helping him adapt to his new strength and speed."

When they had discussed essences with Taika, he had opted out of the combination Jason had picked out for him. After discussing his options, he had forgone the renewal essence and the immortal confluence it would bring. Instead, he had picked out for himself the more economical combination of might, swift, and bird that produced the garuda confluence.

"Garuda is the devourer of snakes, bro. That's hardcore."

"I hope there's more to your decision than that," Farrah had told him.

"Bro, Garuda is the fastest and strongest warrior there is. Speed, strength, skill. No offence, but those powers you picked out would just make me the big, tough, slow guy. I don't want to accuse you of looking at me and immediately thinking that, but you looked at me and immediately thought that."

"That's the kind of reasoning we wanted to hear," Farrah said approvingly. "Also, don't call me bro."

Farrah had been concerned that the bird essence might produce some abilities that were less combative and more like the power to talk to birds. That was fine when there were intelligent, magical birds flapping about, but seagulls were less likely to be a combat asset and more likely to keep asking for chips.

Jason had traded with the Network to obtain the much rarer wing essence for Taika. The resulting combination would still produce the garuda essence, with a result in line with Humphrey. He also had the might and wing essences leading to a supernatural creature confluence, in his case, dragon.

Jason and Farrah had anticipated a power set similar to Humphrey's, producing a mobile, high-resilience brawler. They had only awakened around a third of Taika's abilities, but the results, thus far, were falling completely into line. Clive had taught Jason about shaping a power set not by seeking out specific powers, but by aiming for powers within a certain scope.

This was proving out with Taika. Jason was deeply familiar with the Humphrey-style mobility brawler role, while Farrah knew how to fight like Taika, adapting his approach to his new abilities. His performance had helped convince the Network to grant him a spot as an external auxiliary to their tactical teams. He lacked the independence of Jason and Farrah but had gotten to go face to face with monsters. After the usual reaction of being taken aback when faced with a living, drooling creature, he started going to town on the iron-rank monsters.

There had been quite a crowd when Taika underwent his essence rituals. Jason's family all knew that essences were coming to them and were anxious to see what it looked like. At first, they were quite enthusiastic, up until Jason was hosing the gunk off the newly iron-rank Taika on the rear deck. It was universally agreed that it was the worst thing any of them had ever smelled.

"So, are you spending your day training Taika and the magic soldiers of tomorrow?" Erika asked.

“No, I’ve largely offloaded that on Farrah. She has more experience with the training methods than I do. She mostly gets me in to help with aura training.”

“What are you doing with your day, then?” Erika asked. “The Network’s secret magic clinic?”

“Yep. I have to say, it feels good to be helping people without killing things. I did a lot of that in my early days over in the other world. I kind of lost track of that as life took over, and it’s nice to get back to it.”

“I’m proud of you, little brother,” Erika said. “It’s the one part of all this that isn’t horrifying.”

“It can’t be the only part. I mean, look at how awesome Shade is. He’s like a phone, except snide and somehow British.”

“And flies my daughter around in a rocket suit. Which you have not done again, right?”

“Of course he hasn’t,” Jason said. “Have you, Shade?”

“I find it best not to involve myself in family disputes,” Shade said.

“See?” Jason asked.

“That was not a denial.”

“I didn’t see you complaining when he was a bunch of horses running along the beach at sunset.”

“I don’t think you’re allowed to take horses on that beach,” Erika said weakly.

“The medication will make you feel a little loopy,” the nurse said. “You might also have some mild hallucinations. Most patients report seeing a red glow, possibly some other colours.”

“Are you sure I can’t go in with her?” the girl’s mother asked.

“I’m afraid no one can be in the treatment room,” the nurse said. “That’s for legal and medical reasons. You did sign the non-disclosure, yes?”

“I did,” the mother said. “It was very strongly worded.”

The nurse glanced over at the receptionist, who nodded.

“We’re working with experimental procedures,” the nurse said. “The company is protecting millions, sometimes billions in research investment. We’re able to provide you with free care only because you’ve agreed to

provide testimonials once the product rolls out. I'm sure you'll be more than enthusiastic once you see the results for yourself."

Several minutes later, the young girl was sitting upright on an examination chair, disoriented from a potion that would dull her senses and leave her memory hazy. Her head was held in place by a head frame, like that of an optometrist, on which she was resting her chin. She was also holding on to handles on the side of the frame, which helped her not topple over from the potion-induced dizziness.

"That's excellent," the nurse said. "You may hear something behind you, but I need you to keep your head in the frame and not look back, alright?"

"Okay," the girl agreed in a doped-up, sing-song voice.

Behind the exam chair, a hidden door opened in the wall and Jason stepped silently into the room, his cloak of stars already in place. That way, if he was spotted, it would fit into the hallucination story the clinic was selling. Since his display at the children's hospital, numerous individuals had subsequently come forward, claiming to have been healed by, or even be, the Starlight Angel. With the waters already muddied, it was easy to pass off what children said as echoing what they saw on television.

Jason murmured his spell as quietly as he could get away with and still have it work.

"*Feed me your sins.*"

"Ooh, I see the colours," the girl said. "I feel funny."

"You're doing great, sweetie," the nurse said. "Just keep looking forward for me."

After he was done, Jason retreated through the door, which closed silently behind him. All through the clinic, other essence users were doing similar things. They had even taken to wearing dark cloaks with sequins to further the Starlight Angel narrative.

Jason was the only person at the clinic whose cleansing power actually replenished his mana rather than burning through it. This made him one of the clinic's most valuable assets. The ability to clear out poisons and toxins was valuable; the inability to heal injuries was his only major shortfall.

Dealing with highly visible wounds was a trickier prospect for the clinic than largely invisible afflictions. They did not deal with normal injuries, as that would rapidly get them exposed. They left such cases to ordinary

hospitals. Instead, they specialised in ‘experimental procedures’ that would allow otherwise permanent injuries to recover fully over time.

The clinic did have an emergency department, where arrangements had been made to redirect the worst injuries before they reached a hospital. Those cases had a frequent occurrence of the person’s injuries turning out to be not as bad as the initial EMT assessment.

After Jason was done, the girl was given a bed in the recovery ward for observation. This allowed the staff to watch for any adverse reactions to the magic while adding enough medical rigmarole to make the results seem like less of a miracle cure.

The private clinic was almost the size of a full hospital but operated without fanfare or even signage. Network-affiliated personnel in hospitals around the country made quiet referrals and transfers to clinics all around the country, making sure any inconvenient medical records discreetly disappeared.

Jason increasingly spent his mornings and early afternoons at the Sydney clinic while Farrah settled in at the Network’s training facility outside the city. In the afternoon, they would portal back, pick up Emi from school and do their own daily training routine, much of which had to be hidden from prying eyes.

They would start with Emi in Castle Bluff Park for physical training, followed by meditation. They would then return her to the houseboat, her home or her mother’s restaurant before engaging in heavier training. Weights could be done on the houseboat, while the more extreme mobility training required portalling to a remote location.

Farrah had claimed a section of ground on Ken’s property and used her earth-shaping power to create an outlandish obstacle course that looked more like an art installation than anything navigable by people. Ken would often watch, astounded by the acrobatic prowess of the two bronze-rankers.

Any of these processes could be—and were—interrupted by dimensional incursions which, given the scope of the whole country, took place every day. The most common were category-one incursions, which Jason didn’t participate in. Farrah did while training recruits, who were exposed to carefully curated iron-rank monsters.

Most days had a category two somewhere in the country. Jason participated in almost all of them so that the Network could make use of his communication and looting services. It didn’t take long before he had

participated in incursions across each of the eight states and territories, showering riches down on the country's various branches.

Jason and Farrah both took the lead in category-three incursions. Rather than take on the silver-rank monsters they were best suited for, they started going for less ideal matches to push themselves. Jason only did this to a limited degree; many silvers still provided him with plenty of challenge.

Farrah would go further, taking on creatures like yowies where it was not her skill but her resource management that was pushed to the limit. Her power set gave her the strength to overpower even the stronger silver-rank monsters in short order, but doing so exhausted her reserves. The challenges that would help her cross the line into silver were not ones of power but of endurance.

Weeks became months as Jason and Farrah settled into life on Earth. Farrah's façade of being all right following her ordeal slowly became reality. They did not lose track of the idea of finding a way back to the other world, however, as they went over their large collection of astral magic books every night.

"This grid the Network uses is incredible," Farrah said. "Compared to what gets used in my world, it's much less complicated, yet far more elegant in design."

"They have monster early-warning systems?"

"Yes, but they need certain levels of power to operate. That's why there isn't one in Greenstone. Regions with lower magic have to make do with much less efficient systems, like the adventurer boards. The fact that grid here is so simple yet so effective reflects an understanding of the magic involved that goes much deeper than what's available in my world."

"Like the astral magic the Builder brought into play," Jason said.

Spending the increasingly pleasant evenings on the open top deck of the houseboat, they studied the astral magic books together. Farrah had the superior grasp of theory for the moment, but astral magic was not her focus. Jason had the advantage of much of his learning coming through the same books they were studying, so he didn't need to adapt his learning from a lesser knowledge base. Clive had seen little point in educating Jason in

astral magic that would soon be obsolete when the goddess Knowledge had provided such an unparalleled asset.

Jason had the original books on astral magic given to him by Knowledge, and they were riddled with notes made by Clive both before and during their time in the astral space.

“Astral magic isn't my area,” Farrah said, “but even I can tell this is far more advanced than what we had in the past.”

“That’s what Clive said,” Jason told her.

“How smart is that guy?” she asked, shaking her head as she read through his notes. “This is beyond advanced, and he deciphered it like it’s nothing. Every book I pick up is full of brilliant insights. The guy’s a monster.”

“Good thing too,” Jason said. “He’s the reason that Greenstone wasn’t wiped out and a bunch of diamond-rank super golems aren’t rampaging across your world. I just wish I knew if they made it out alive.”

“They did,” a voice drifted up to the top deck. Jason and Farrah had both sensed a person on the marina, but the unfamiliar, normal-rank aura had caused them to dismiss it. They went to the edge of the deck to look at the person standing on the dock in front of the houseboat.

It was a woman who looked around thirty, with alabaster skin and long, ruby hair. She was wearing a white summer dress with orange and yellow accents.

“Permission to come aboard?” she asked.

“Who are you?” Jason asked.

She frowned.

“Sorry,” she said. “We’ll have to do this later.”

“Do what?” Jason asked.

His and Farrah’s phones started beeping, the message that meant there had been a dimensional incursion.

“Another day, Mr Asano,” the woman said as she walked away. “It was nice to finally meet you, though.”

“But not me, apparently,” Farrah muttered.

“Who are you?” Jason called out.

“Your favourite painter,” she called back without stopping or turning.

“You’re Peter Paul Rubens?” Jason asked in a confused voice.

The woman stopped and turned around to give him an incredulous look.

“What?” Jason asked. “You claim to be a man who died in 1640 and you’re the one who looks surprised?”

NOT READY TO LEAVE

Despite their outward dismissiveness, Jason and Farrah had no trouble finding challenge from silver-rank monsters, although in very different ways. Farrah was all about frontloading damage, making endurance the key for her.

Jason was just the opposite.

The start of a fight was the most dangerous time for him. The enemy was at their strongest, with full reserves, while his abilities lacked immediate impact. His one instantaneous damage power required considerable setup, which left an eruption of Colin and Gordon's exploding spheres as his only blitz moves.

The longer a fight went on, the better for Jason, as the enemy grew weaker and he grew stronger. The best way for Jason to challenge himself, then, was to fight weaker enemies in higher numbers, consigning himself to a constant state of the beginning portion of fights.

When he had taken such fights against bronze-rank monsters, it had been a frustrating experience. They lacked the fortitude to survive long enough for Jason’s full abilities to come into play. In most instances, Jason had to work hard to even use his execute before the monsters died, making it a difficult power to advance.

Even that required effort incommensurate with the results. Starting all the way back at iron-rank, his powers had often felt pointlessly elaborate, when a simple chunk of immediate damage was so much more effective. Watching Humphrey carve through monsters had been an almost emasculating experience; his team had deliberately left Jason monsters to

kill on his own. Only against the toughest monsters did he feel like he was truly contributing, leaving him as an addendum to his own team.

It was once they started challenging silver-rank monsters that Jason felt his powers come into their own. Even the weakest silver-rank monster had a startling resilience, which meant that Jason was no longer racing to use all his abilities on an enemy before it died. At the same time, adventurers Jason had long envied, like Humphrey, were no longer taking down one or more enemies with a single sword-swing.

Although fighting packs of silver-rank monsters was objectively more difficult than their lower-rank equivalents, Jason finally felt like he was truly pushing himself. No longer was he reaching the end of the fight just as he was hitting his stride. In his latter days in the astral space, and now the proto-spaces of Earth, he felt that he was becoming the adventurer he was meant to be from the beginning.

"I think we told you this from the start," Farrah said as Jason shared his feelings on the flight home from the latest proto-space. "Affliction specialists are kind of a waste at low rank."

"I still need to work on fighting in the open," Jason said. "Shade does a great job of letting me jump between his bodies, always moving where I need him. I need to work on making the most of the opportunities he sets up for me."

"Stick to bronze ranks for that, for now," Farrah advised. "Until you're better at it, taking on silvers in the open is too much of a risk unless they're as sluggish as a yowie."

Jason had been incorporating Shade's mount forms into his combat style more and more against the larger, slower monsters. The new approach was a way to develop in a new direction using enemies he was traditionally strong against, which typically didn't help his advancement.

To make the most of his superhuman coordination and reflexes, he sought out environments to practise this new methodology. He went out bush to find improvised obstacle courses for Shade's motorcycle and horse forms, along with more alien and exotic animals.

"They have mantis beetles on Earth?" Farrah asked, having joined him one such excursion.

"Definitely not," Jason said.

"So, Shade can take forms from other worlds?"

"Yep," Jason said.

“Then why can’t Shade take a heidel form?”

“Technically, the shape-changing is Mr Asano’s power,” Shade said. “You will need to ask him.”

“Magic’s very complicated,” Jason said. “Who amongst us can truly claim to understand all its vagaries?”

In Jason’s cabin, the furniture was currently configured into a pair of large armchairs in which Jason and Farrah were sitting. They were looking at the two paintings on the wall, specifically the one titled ‘The Invasion of Pallimustus’. It depicted a series of orbital cities floating around Farrah's home world.

“And that woman who came by painted this?”

“Most likely,” Jason said. “She goes by the name Dawn, although she’s suspiciously elusive. The Network and the Cabal have been trying to find her for months and coming up empty.”

“She was definitely a normal person,” she said. “Unless she’s so powerful that she can fool our senses, but that would have to be diamond rank. My perception power enhanced my aura senses when it hit silver, and with your soul strength, your senses aren’t much weaker.”

“Can a diamond-ranker even survive in magic this low?” Jason asked.

“I don’t know,” Farrah said. “When it comes to diamond-rankers, the rules you and I live by are more like guidelines. For all I know, she’s somehow artificially reduced her rank. More likely, she’s fronting for someone else, though. Since when do you and I warrant the attention of a diamond-ranker?”

Jason nodded at the painting. “Since that became an issue, I suspect. Assuming it’s actually happening. If your world really is suffering an invasion, I’m guessing the painting is a metaphor. Rather than an invasion from space, I would put money on it being dimensional.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I’ve already helped stop one dimensional invasion and I doubt we were the Builder’s biggest concern or he would have sent more powerful people. Plus, there’s the fact that someone clearly wants us involved. Maybe because we’re outworlders.”

“Someone?”

“My money would be on the World-Phoenix,” Jason said. “Otherwise, what reason would she have to intervene in my affairs? I’m less than a speck of dust for a being like that to brush off its shoulder.”

“Do you think it’s happening right now?”

“I don’t know any more than you,” Jason said. “My intuition says no. Why bother to tell us about it when we don’t have a way back yet?”

“You still think the astral magic books will have one?” Farrah said. “There's a lot of information about dimension crossing, but breaching an astral space is very different from crossing realities.”

“When Knowledge gave me those books, she was the only person in the world who both knew that I had the World-Phoenix token and what it would do. I suspect she chose the contents of those books very carefully. I just need to study them until I understand it. Thankfully, I have Clive’s notes to guide me.”

“You’re not ready to leave yet, though.”

“No,” Jason said. “Once we find our way back, there’s no telling if I’ll ever be able to return to Earth. Even if I can, it could easily be decades. Before I go, I want to make sure my family is equipped for whatever comes their way once magic comes out into the open.”

“You haven’t even started giving them essences, yet.”

“I’m leaving that decision to Erika. I feel like I don’t have the right perspective. I think she’s coming around, though.”

Asya and Farrah arrived at the marina together, getting out of Asya’s car.

“You still haven’t asked him out?” Farrah asked.

“The timing just hasn’t been right.”

“It’s been months. ‘Timing’ clearly means that in all this time, you’ve never worked up the nerve.”

“No!” Asya said. “Okay, yes. But it is unnerving. He knows what I'm feeling every time I stand in front of him.”

“He knows what you’re feeling right now,” Farrah said. “Your aura training is coming along nicely, but Jason’s so good in that area and his soul is so strong. If it’s even still a soul anymore.”

“What does that mean?”

“The body and soul are intrinsically connected, but there’s still a dichotomy between them. One is physical and temporary. The other is spiritual and eternal. Jason doesn’t have that dichotomy anymore. He’s flesh and spirit in one—the physical embodiment of his soul.”

“Does that mean his soul is now temporary?”

“I don’t know,” Farrah said. “Even he isn’t sure exactly what price he paid to come get me.”

“You can feel the difference,” Asya said. “From before and after he did whatever it was to get access to that astral space. He didn’t hesitate for a second. Did you and Jason really never…?”

“Why do people keep asking that? Do you not have friends in this world? There’s no one I’d rather have beside me when the world burns down, but he isn’t even close to my type. I mean, Jason’s great, but he’s also a lot.”

“Some of us want a lot.”

“Then why are you standing in the car park talking to me? He’s over there on the appropriately ostentatious houseboat.”

As they were about to head off down the dock, a car pulled up beside them and Jason’s old friend Greg stepped out. He was visibly nervous at the sight of the two startlingly attractive women.

“Hello, Greg,” Asya said. “It’s been a while.”

“Asya,” Greg greeted uncertainly. “Miss Hurin.”

Greg had gone to school with Asya and Jason. Farrah, he met only briefly, although he had driven past her and Jason on their insane runs to Castle Bluff. He fished a large, squared-off bag from the back seat of his car.

“I, uh, didn’t realise you’d be here,” Greg said to Asya.

“Jason said you were bringing some board games for us to play,” Asya said.

Somewhere inside of Greg, his fifteen-year-old self let out a whimper.

“Yep,” he said, his voice oddly high.

Craig Vermillion pulled up on the other side of Greg, also getting out of his car. Greg looked from Asya’s 1962 MGA Roadster to Craig’s 1967 Maserati Ghibli, then at his 2017 Ford Taurus.

“I’m the boring one, aren’t I?” he asked. “This is high school all over again.”

Asya gave him a smile. “Come, on, Greg. If all your friends are cool, what does that say about you?”

“That they need a designated driver.”

They made their way along the dock to the houseboat. As Greg was still in the dark, magic-wise, the houseboat's interior was disguised. Jason had turned the bar lounge into a bar and game room, with two large game tables. The tops that had been removed to reveal sunken, felt-lined interiors. Another table was covered in snack trays.

Jason and Taika were waiting when they arrived. Jason mixed cocktails behind the bar as Taika clipped cup holders onto the sides of the tables.

“Your houseboat comes with a dedicated board game room?” Greg asked.

“It’s kind of modular,” Jason said. “At this point, it pretty much comes with everything.”

“This houseboat is crazy.”

“He has a whole other superyacht he has moored at Castle Reach,” Asya said.

The EOA, as it turned out, took Jason at his word when he told them he was taking the yacht he had commandeered following the plane attack. As part of a scramble to avoid retaliation for their participation in Farrah's incarceration, they had signed it over and sailed it to the east coast of Australia. Not knowing what to do with it, Jason left it at the Castle Reach marina. There he didn’t have to rent a second slip for the huge vessel, the way he did with the houseboat at Casselton Beach. Giant yachts were much more the norm there.

“Jason,” Greg said, “not to put too fine a point on it, but are you a drug dealer?”

“No, although funny story: you remember how we used to play *El Grande* all the time back in school?”

“Sure,” Greg said.

“Well,” Jason said, “not long after I got back, I was selling some gold to these Armenian mobsters and they had *El Grande* set up. Proper game table and everything; I thought of you immediately. Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Armenian mobsters?”

“Yeah, bro,” Taika said. “I was there for that. All these hardcore-looking blokes hanging about, looking like they’re going to break your legs. Then

you spot the board game and realise that we're not all so different after all. It was kind of heart-warming."

"Selling gold?" Greg asked, still looking at Jason like he was an alien.

"I did some work out of town while everyone thought I was dead. That's where I met Farrah, actually. Anyway, I came back with a bunch of gold bars I picked up in the Kalahari—not really meant to talk about that—and I needed some walking-around money. You know my uncle Hiro was always a bit shady, and he hooked me up."

"This all sounds completely ridiculous."

"You've got no idea, mate," Jason said. "I can't even begin to tell you the big stuff. Can I?"

"No," Asya said firmly. "Like I told you when you wanted to tell the butcher: you made a confidentiality agreement."

"But the anecdote doesn't really work unless—"

"Then the answer is to not tell the anecdote," she said.

Greg took the games out of his bag, one of them catching Jason's eye.

"That one's about hunting a vampire, right?"

"Yeah," Greg said. "It's an all-versus-one game."

"That's a bit insensitive," Jason said, glancing at Craig.

"Why?"

"Uh, no reason," Jason said, Asya glaring at him again.

Shortly thereafter, Ian, Erika and Emi came aboard, Emi moving straight to Jason.

"Virgin piña colada," Jason said, handing her a readied drink. "At least, I think that's the virgin one. If not, don't tell your mum."

"Stop corrupting my daughter," Erika scolded. "Greg, it's great to see you. I meant to tell you how amazing that costume was that you wore to my fancy dress party."

"Thanks," Greg said. "I was worried an elaborate Iron Man costume might make people think I was lonely enough to have time to make it."

"No," Erika said with a straight face. "Nobody thought that."

DECISION

As everyone packed up to go home, Greg found Jason in the kitchen.

"This was really great," Greg told Jason. "Most of our old friends left for university and never came back, and I've never been great at making new ones. There was Amy, but after what she did, forget that."

"You came back so you could inherit your dad's law firm, right?"

"Yeah, but that's not working out. David's big-city career didn't work out, so he's back. Dad hasn't exactly said it, but he was always the favourite, so…"

Jason groaned. "I'm not a big Bible guy, as you know," he said. "I'm starting to come around on the idea of killing all the firstborn sons, though. Also, your dad sucks. Is your mum still super-hot?"

"Dude, that's not cool."

"I'm just saying, your mum is super-hot."

"How would you feel if I went and hit on Farrah?"

"Mate, if you've got the courage, then go for it."

"I do not. She's super cute, though. Is she an athlete or something?"

"Private security contractor."

"Like a mercenary?"

"Yeah. She was one of the people that trained me."

"Wait, that's the mysterious job?"

"It's complicated, but sort of."

"I do like your friends," Greg said. "They're a little weird, but cool weird, you know. You've always been good with people like that. Are we going to do a night like this again?"

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I can’t guarantee a regular schedule, but I’d like that a lot. My life is aching for some normalcy.”

“Well, mine is aching for some weirdness.”

“I can probably arrange something like that.”

Jason’s guests left. Shade served as designated driver for Craig, Ian and Asya since the only ones who hadn’t been drinking alcohol were Greg and Emi.

“What if a cop pulls us over and there’s a shadow man in the driver’s seat?” Ian asked after Greg had driven away.

“You mean Paul?” Erika asked. “Nah, he’s running bingo tonight.”

“Right,” city boy Ian said. “Small town.”

Erika remained behind; Jason wanted to discuss the family’s essence situation. After seeing the others off, Jason, Erika and Farrah settled into comfortable chairs to talk.

“I know we said that we would hold off on the family’s essences until you felt the time was right,” Jason told Erika. “We’re going to move forward with Hiro’s, though.”

“I’ve been teaching him formation magic,” Farrah said. “He’s still a novice, but he’s far enough along that with the right essences and awakening stones, he’ll be setting himself up as a good formation specialist. After some trading with the Network, we have those ready to go.”

“Hiro has purchased some land and he and Farrah are going to start planning out the development,” Jason said.

“We need to know what capabilities Hiro will be bringing to the table before then,” Farrah added.

“He’s bought land already?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “A nice stretch of clifftop land down the coast, nestled right in a gap between national parks. A development group bribed the Deputy Premier to get it approved for commercial development, only to pull out of the project very suddenly, for undisclosed reasons. They sold the land to Uncle Hiro for a steal.”

“And you expect the family to move there?”

“I have no expectations,” Jason said. “It’ll be available to the family, which I suspect they’ll be glad of sooner than I’d like.”

“You really think things will get that bad?” Erika asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I don’t see a scenario where magic goes public and it’s a safe, smooth transition, though. Even if there aren’t any magic complications, which seems unlikely at best, there’s no telling what kind of social upheavals could take place. If everything works out, then great. If not, we’ll have a sanctuary.”

“I’ve seen enough of your society to know that while you claim to be equal, you are anything but,” Farrah said.

“The families connected to the Network will be the new oligarchs,” Jason added. “We don’t have to join them, but we don’t want to be beholden to them. We need an infrastructure in place to pass magic on to the next generation. The Asano estate will be the centre of that.”

“The Asano Estate,” Erika repeated. “This is really happening, isn’t it?”

“I keep telling you that everything is going to change,” Jason said. “I think that the reason you’re dragging your feet on the essences is that you understand that. You know that once we start magicking-up the family, we're on a road heading straight off from normal that doesn’t loop back around.”

“You’re right,” Erika said. “Ian and I have been talking about this a lot. I told you that it was hard living an ordinary life knowing everything I know now. I don’t like that feeling.”

Jason narrowed his eyes at his sister.

“You’ve decided something,” he realised.

“I don't want to dabble,” Erika said. “We don't, me or Ian. I know you're looking to bring Emi all the way in…”

“I would never do anything with her you were against,” Jason said. “But whatever you may want, a day will come where she has to make her own choices. I think we both know how that’s going to go and I want to give her every advantage.”

“I know,” Erika said. “That’s why we’ve decided that we want to go all the way in too. If we’re going to live lives of magic, we want to do it properly.”

“We can make that work,” Farrah said. “Monster hunting isn’t for you, but we can set you up with utility combinations. Jason has already picked out an essence set for you, based around magical cooking.”

“Magical cooking?”

“Yep,” Jason said. “I picked it up while I was away, so I get to teach you for once. You can be the world’s first magic celebrity chef.”

“Be serious, Jason.”

“I am. The Network is going to be looking for ways to normalise magic, once it goes public. The idea of dimensional pockets full of monsters is going to freak people out. A TV chef making meals from ingredients taken from those same places will let them shift the narrative.”

“You want me to be a propaganda tool?”

“How else do you expect to get through to people?” Jason asked. “Facts and reasoned argument?”

“Fair point,” Erika acknowledged. “I take it you’ve made plans for Ian, then?”

“Ian’s a doctor,” Jason said. “There’s no reason that has to change. The Network has been integrating healing magic and medical science for decades. We’re looking to give him some healing powers and take him to the clinic I work at. They can teach him to incorporate magic with the skills and knowledge he already has.”

“I think he’ll like that,” Erika said.

“I would have discussed it with him before this,” Jason said, “but I didn’t want to push you faster than you wanted to go.”

“What about Emi?” Erika asked. “What plans do you have for her?”

“We don’t have anything set in stone,” Jason said. “It’ll probably be three years at least before she can receive magic, so we have plenty of time. We want a power set that doesn’t waste her cleverness and also keeps her safe.”

“There’s a combination we’ve been considering,” Farrah said. “It’s a known combination that uses magic to protect other people. Unlike most protection-type combinations, it’s more about standing back and directing events, rather than getting up close with enemies.”

“Why does she have to have enemies?” Erika asked.

“She doesn’t,” Jason said. “But she will. I think you know that.”

“She already wants to do what you do,” Erika said. “She should be too old to want to fight monsters when she grows up. It all still sounds ridiculous. Not many of your recordings had monsters in them. You mostly just talked about them a lot.”

“Did you show her the recording of you murdering the Geller kids?” Farrah asked.

“What?” Erika asked.

“I didn’t murder any kids,” Jason assured her, glaring at a grinning Farrah. “It was a combat trial in sort of a magic holodeck thing. No one was even hurt, let alone died. And you know I hate that recording, Farrah. I definitely didn’t bring it with me.”

“She hasn’t seen you fight, then?” Farrah asked.

“I’ve seen him fight,” Erika said softly.

Farrah felt the turbulence in Erika’s emotions and threw a questioning glance at Jason.

“There were a bunch of criminals that were forced out of Greenstone,” he explained. “They went out into the veldt and turned bandit. The Adventure Society did a sweep and my team was assigned with clearing out a village that they’d completely taken over. I went in alone and my team recorded it.”

“You showed her a recording of you killing a bunch of people?” Farrah asked.

“You know how absurd what we do sounds to people from my world,” Jason told her. “I needed Erika to know the seriousness of what you and I do.”

“Don’t try and feed me crap,” Farrah said. “You didn’t have to jump all the way to a killing spree for that. You wanted someone to tell you that you weren’t a bad person, in spite of the things you’ve done. So here you go: you’re not a bad person. Gods, Jason, you don’t go showing normals things like that.”

“I needed her to understand who I am now,” Jason said.

“Oh,” Farrah said, shaking her head. “I forgot who I'm talking to. You're the guy who was lecturing me about killing when he had no damn idea what he was talking about. You don't want to be told that you're not a bad person; you want to be told that you are. Inside that twisted mind, you still haven't balanced yourself out, have you?”

“I’ve killed a lot of people, Farrah.”

“A lot of people have it coming. You and I are going to talk about this later. At length.”

“I’m meant to be the one helping you,” Jason said.

“Clearly, I’m a lot more together as a person than you are.”

“I won’t deny that.”

“I should probably go,” Erika said, suddenly feeling sidelined.

“You haven’t told us what your decision was,” Jason said.

“Maybe now isn’t the time,” Erika said.

“You might as well tell us,” Farrah said. “If you’re waiting for this guy not to be caught up in self-indulgent introspection about how grimdark he is, that boat’s never going to dock.”

“Grimdark?” Jason asked. “You need to stop watching movies with Taika and start watching them with Gordon.”

“And you need to make it through a whole conversation without it getting repeatedly derailed,” Farrah said.

“Coming from the woman who just accused me of excessive brooding.”

“Yeah, I’m just going to go,” Erika said.

“No,” Jason and Farrah said, turning on her.

“Sorry, sis,” Jason said. “You’ve made an important decision and I want to hear it.”

“Alright,” Erika said nervously. “You intend to go back, don’t you? To the other world.”

Jason and Farrah shared a glance.

“Yeah,” Jason confirmed, “but we don’t know when or even how.”

“Well,” Erika said, “when you do, we want to go with you.”

Jason opened his mouth to respond, then closed it again as the ramifications of his sister’s intentions played through his mind. Farrah was not so contemplative.

“Great,” she said. “There’s a lot you should know before making a final choice like that, though. For one thing, we don’t know if or when we’ll ever come back here.”

“We’ve thought about that,” Erika said. “Ian doesn’t have any close family, and if Uncle Hiro’s plans work out, we can go without worrying about ours. I don’t love the idea of never seeing Dad again, but even so, we want to do it.”

Erika watched Jason’s expression, which held a deep frown.

“Farrah’s right that there’s a lot you need to know before even considering it,” Jason said. “I’ve only seen a tiny fragment of that world myself and I’ve seen how dangerous it can be.”

“Jason and I aren't important there, the way we are here,” Farrah said. “We would be much less able to protect you.”

“It sounds like you’ll have plenty of time to tell Ian and me all about it,” Erika said. “I don’t think we’ll change our minds, though. We don’t want to spend our lives in the house I grew up in. It was the comfort we needed after you died and Mum and Dad got divorced, but we always intended to show our daughter the world. It just turns out that the world is a lot bigger than we ever realised. If there’s a magical world, we want to see it.”

“This world will be getting more magical in the years to come.”

“That’s not the same and you know it,” Erika said.

“Yeah,” Jason admitted.

“If nothing else,” Erika said, “Emi will want to go with you. I don’t want to tell her she can’t when I feel the same way, and I won’t let you take my daughter away.”

“I would never do that.”

“I know,” Erika said, shining a warm smile on Jason.

He stared at his sister for a long time, searching her face. He could feel the resolve permeating her aura.

“We can look into it,” he said. “There’s a ridiculous amount to go over, while we don’t know if we even will find a way back. Once we do, there’s no telling if we can bring you along.”

“If you can get back, the rest of us can,” Farrah said. “All we have to do is trust you.”

Jason looked at her for a moment, then nodded. He made a gesture and an archway rose from the floor.

“When I first showed you this,” Jason said to Erika, “You couldn’t go in.”

“That goes to the special place that Emi talked about?” Erika asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “The only way in is to trust me completely. Back then, there were still a lot of mysteries surrounding me. You didn’t understand what I’d been through or what I was doing since getting back. Now, you’ve seen all the recordings and asked me all your questions. So here’s my question: can you trust your little brother?”

Erika stood up, reaching for the arch with a trepidatious hand. She inched it forward, but unlike the past, it didn't stop. Her finger passed into the darkness and vanished. She looked over at Jason, who gave her an encouraging nod. She stepped through.

“This is really your soul?” Erika asked as they roamed through the gardens of Jason’s spirit vault.

“A representation of it anyway,” Jason said. “Is it so hard to believe?”

“Not really,” Erika said. “It’s ostentatious and full of twisty paths.”

“Oh, that’s lovely,” Jason said.

“To get in, I have to trust you,” Erika said. “Not put up with your rubbish.”

They reached the edge of the garden, where the walls showed signs of battle damage, revealing an eerie darkness beneath the stone. Erika ran a hand over a ragged gash in the dark brickwork, as if she could feel the brutal attack that made it.

“If you really want to go to the other world,” Jason said softly, “then you have to understand that there will be dangers. Threats unlike anything in your world.”

“You mean our world,” Erika said.

“No,” Jason said. “The brother who was a part of your world died. I belong somewhere else. If you want to as well, I’m willing to help you. Tomorrow, we’ll sit down with Ian and really talk about the ramifications of you doing this. Then we get onto essences. We need you as full of magic as we can get you.”

Jason frowned, tilting his head. Since his transfiguration, his senses were able to extend outside the spirit vault and he sensed an aura approaching the houseboat.

“What is it?” Farrah asked.

“The painter,” Jason said. “She’s back.”

Jason had Erika wait behind while Jason and Farrah left the spirit vault. They found the woman waiting on the dock, ruby hair shining in the moonlight.

“Are you a celestine in disguise?” Jason asked.

“I am,” Dawn said. “Permission to come aboard?”

“Give me a moment,” Jason said. “I need to deal with something.”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t portal your sister home,” Dawn said. “I think you should let her know the stakes you’re playing for.”

WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO

"Well," Jason said, sitting around a table with three women. "This is complicated."

"I may be getting used to being the most ignorant person in the room," Erika said, "but that doesn't mean that I like it."

"How drunk are you?" Jason asked Farrah.

"I'm fine," Farrah said, moving her head like she was trying to balance it on her neck.

"Me too," Jason said. "I mean, yes, I wore a suppression collar to turn off my poison resistance, but I only drank that one bottle."

"That's two bottles," Farrah said.

"Really? I thought I was seeing double."

"Are you seeing two of anything else?" Farrah asked.

"No, but I think I might be bad at counting. Do you want me to sober you up? I have magic powers, you know."

"No! There's hardly any bronze-rank booze left."

"You shouldn't pay any attention to these two," Erika confided loudly to Dawn. "They've been drinking."

"I think we should start by you telling us exactly who you are and why you're here," Jason said to Dawn. "Eri, we can catch you up on context later. Spoiler: she's an alien."

Dawn looked at Jason from under raised eyebrows.

"You're weird," Jason said. "Your aura is normal, but there's nothing in it. It's like trying to eat a very realistic wax fruit, but that's okay. I'm playing up being drunk so you underestimate me. I'm very clever."

"You're doing a really good job," Farrah assured him.

“Thanks! So, who are you, lady?”

“What if I called myself a prophet?” Dawn asked.

“I could call myself Barry Van Dyke,” Jason said. “That doesn’t mean I replaced Jan Michael Vincent in the lead for the fourth series of *Airwolf*.”

“Really?” Erika asked. “You’re bringing up *Airwolf*?”

“Eri was not happy with the fourth season,” Jason confided.

“All the flight shots were reused footage,” Erika decried. “Why?”

“Eri, we’ve been over this. It was broadcast television in the eighties. They wanted enough episodes for a syndication deal on the cheap.”

“What about Caitlin, Jason? They blew up Ernest Borgnine’s body double, but what happened to Caitlin?”

“I told you: it was broadcast television in the eighties. They didn’t care about the female characters.”

“Am I meant to be following any of this?” Dawn asked.

“No, just ride it out,” Farrah advised. “Do you watch television?”

“No,” Dawn said.

“I’ve seen some Tina Turner concert recordings, but otherwise, I don’t see the appeal,” Farrah said. “Oh, they’ve jumped to *Knight Rider*; that usually means they’re winding down.”

“They brought Bonnie back,” Jason said.

“She never should have left,” Erika said.

“I’m not arguing that she should have,” Jason said. “I don’t hear you complaining about April, though.”

“April can bugger off.”

“She did. You realise that she was an early female character who excelled in STEM fields,” Jason argued.

“So was Bonnie! Who they had her replace because Bonnie wasn't blonde!”

“They brought her back,” Jason said. “The Hoff and Edward Mulhare were all ‘bring back that lady,’ and they did. Eddie Mulhare was a sexy-arse ghost.”

“He was a sexy-arse ghost,” Erika agreed.

Farrah interjected to try and bring things to a close.

“Maybe we should stop talking about… whatever this is, and talk to the weird magic woman instead.”

“Fine,” Erika complained, turning to Dawn. “So, what’s your deal? And no mysterious prophetess nonsense.”

“Agreed,” Jason said. “If you’re here to play enigmatic guide leading us forward through vague clues, you can get on your bike and trundle off.”

Dawn was taken slightly aback by the suddenly hostile brother-sister duo.

“You’ve already surmised who sent me,” Dawn said.

“Yep,” Jason said. “I’ve also surmised that your boss wants something.”

“It wants you to save the world.”

“From what?” Jason asked. “If the EOA’s built a weather machine, I’m one-hundred percent in.”

“I’m afraid it’s more drastic than that,” Dawn said. “A magical link has been forged between this world and Pallimustus.”

“I’m just going to jump in real quick,” Erika said. “Who exactly is this boss and what is Pallimustus?”

“She works for the World-Phoenix, who is basically an interdimensional super god,” Jason said. “Pallimustus is the name of Farrah’s world.”

“Super god?” Erika asked.

“Yep,” Jason said. “Regular gods are more along the lines of your Zeus, Thor, Brian Dennehy, etc.”

“I don’t think Brian Dennehy was a god,” Erika said.

“Who am I thinking of then?” Jason asked.

“Bacchus?” Erika suggested.

“He did look like a man who enjoyed the odd sandwich,” Jason said, then turned to Dawn. “Actually, since you’re here, do you know if there are any local gods?”

“There isn’t enough magic yet,” Dawn said.

“Yet?” Farrah repeated.

“The link between worlds,” Dawn said. “It’s been siphoning off magic from Pallimustus to this world for centuries. It was slow, at first, but the rate of transfer has been rapidly escalating over the last century and a half.”

“The proto-spaces,” Jason said. “That’s where they’re coming from.”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “Each proto-space that breaks down without the anchor creatures being destroyed deposits its magic into your world. Individually, that has little effect, but after centuries, the magical density of your world has started to rise. This strengthens the link, which feeds the loop. More spaces appear, collapse, and dump even more magic into the environment at an ever-increasing pace.”

“Someone knew this was coming,” Jason said. “There were outworlders who built the grid and established the Network in preparation to stop it.”

“That is my understanding,” Dawn said. “However, whoever these Network founders were failed to prepare a response to proto-spaces appearing deep in the oceans. The proto-spaces that open there go undetected and deliver magic into your world.”

“Most of which is covered in water,” Jason said. “Meaning that the Network’s mission of containment was completely stuffed from the start.”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “What they have accomplished is to slow the rate at which your world’s magical density has risen. For now, it remains low, but is approaching a dangerous threshold.”

“The proto-spaces,” Jason said, eyes going wide. With the information Dawn had provided, his study of astral magic allowed him to connect the dots to form a terrible revelation.

“What is it?” Farrah asked him.

“I just realised what happens once the magical density crosses the minimum threshold for iron rank,” Jason said.

It was Farrah's turn to be startled.

“No more proto-spaces,” she realised. “Direct magical manifestation.”

“There will most likely still be proto-spaces forming for the more powerful manifestations,” Dawn said. “Lower-rank monsters, essences, and awakening stones will start manifesting directly, however. Once that begins, there will be no way to prevent the magic they bring with them from accelerating the rise in magical density even further.”

“I’m not following much of this,” Erika said. “From what I understand, though, you’re saying our world is going to be more magical? Is that bad?”

“It’s bad,” Jason said.

“Monsters randomly appearing in the streets,” Farrah said. “The societies of your world are not prepared for that.”

“That’s not even the real problem,” Jason said. “Worlds aren’t built to handle extreme changes in magical density. The dimensional membrane—that’s the inbisible… inbisivle… the thing you can’t see that keeps the magic out. If that goes sploot, the whole planet gets washed away like a sandcastle when the tide comes in.”

“Wait,” Erika said. “You’re saying the planet is going to be destroyed?”

“If we don’t find a way to stop the magic coming in,” Jason said. “If we can trust what this lady is saying. I think she might not be real.”

“How long until that happens?” Erika asked.

“It's hard to be certain,” Dawn said. “The World-Phoenix reinforced the dimensional membrane of your universe billions of years ago, which is how your world has endured thus far without overt effects. So long as the Network continues to intercept what proto-spaces they can, direct manifestation will begin in roughly a decade. The breaking down of the dimensional membrane will start causing weather effects at some point after that. Minor, at first, but conditions will escalate. Half a century from now, the geological effects will begin. The dimensional membrane will lose integrity entirely at around the two-hundred-and-fifty-year mark, but your planet will be uninhabitable for at least a century before that.”

“So, monsters on the streets in ten years,” Jason said. “Then it ramps up into a constant sequence of disaster movies and no more people in a century and a half.”

“Assuming nothing intervenes to move the clock one way or another,” Dawn said.

“What about that power your boss gave me?” Jason asked. “That stabilised physical realities, right?”

“That might work for a proto-space, Mr Asano. It won’t work for an entire planet.”

“Is it just the planet, or a whole universe thing?”

“Fortunately, the effects are localised,” Dawn said. “The likelihood of a chain reaction affecting the universe at large is very small.”

“Very small isn’t nothing,” Jason said. “We’re totally going to save the universe, which will totally get me some action. I’ll be all ‘hey, ladies, I’m the guy who saved the universe,’ and they’ll be all ‘that sounds like hot nonsense, but you’re way better looking than Kaito, so let’s make out.’ Then I’ll be all ‘I can’t do that; I respect women,’ and they’ll be all ‘it’s totally our choice.’ Since I’m all about female agency, I have to go along with it at that point because it’s the feminist thing to do, so we’ll go the supermarket and buy all the whipped cream…”

“Moving on from that grotesquery,” Farrah said. “You mentioned a link between worlds. Are we to assume that the link is both the cause and solution to the problem?”

“Yes,” Dawn said. “The link is predicated on the history of your two universes and the connection they have always shared. Allow me to explain.

Your two universes, like all universes, were created from a seed, what you might know as a singularity. These seeds are created by the Builder."

"Hold on," Jason said. "I had a fistfight with the guy who created the universe?"

"What?" Erika asked.

"The Builder you know is not the Builder who created your universe. The original Builder was sanctioned by the other great astral beings for treating your two universes as an experiment."

"There's a lot to unpack there," Jason said. "Let's start with what sanctioned means."

"I don't know," Dawn said. "All I know is that for all intents and purposes, the old Builder is gone. A new one was then chosen from amongst mortals."

"You're saying the mortal used to be some guy?" Jason asked. "Who did they pick?"

"I don't know," Dawn told him. "I believe there was some controversy amongst the great astral beings, but there are many things to which even their highest servants are not privy."

"What was that about treating our world as an experiment?" Erika asked. "I'm not sure I can express the degree to which I don't like the sound of that."

"The Builder's role is to create universe seeds," Dawn said. "Each one new and unique, which had been the case until your two universes. What the old Builder did was to not just create identical seeds, but to create them by reproducing elements of existing worlds. This does not literally translate to specific elements of those other worlds appearing in yours, but the potential is there. Think of it as having those elements built into the DNA of the universe. They may express themselves or they may not. If and when they do, it may be in very disparate ways. This is especially true given that one of the worlds was given a more rigid dimensional membrane, which is why your world has less magic than Pallimustus."

"Are you saying we weren't even the proper experiment?" Jason asked. "We were the control?

"What's DNA?" Farrah asked.

"It's kind of like the magic matrix in your body," Jason said. "Except instead of magic, it's goop that gives you eyebeams when you fall in a vat of toxic waste."

“I have no idea what that means,” Farrah said.

“People always say to that to me. And they keep telling me my name. I meet someone and they’re all ‘you’re Jason Asano.’ It’s like I’m a soap opera character that was presumed dead and then came back with amnesia and was played by a different actor.”

“It’s totally like that,” Erika said, laughing. “That makes a super amount of sense.”

Dawn ran a hand over her face.

“What it means,” she said, “is that the intrinsic elements that make up your world share certain traits inherited from other worlds. Take elves, for example. They have existed longer than either of your worlds, yet they appeared natively in both. In Pallimustus, they evolved into one of the world’s natural, intelligent species, while on Earth, they appeared in the form of myth and legend. This is true for many things.”

“I noticed that,” Jason said. “When I was in the other world, I was constantly surprised when things matched up to my old world. Like the way we measure time. Wait, hold on. If the world just makes things happen, is that some kind of pre-destiny?”

“No,” Dawn said. “Think of it as a voice in the back of reality's head, pushing it in certain directions. This largely affects things without agency, such as geological forces, which is why the two worlds have similar size and geography. It will affect people as well, but this is extremely rare and always those who are susceptible, for whatever reason, to outside influence. Those who believe they see visions of the future or receive messages from a higher power. They are not, strictly speaking, incorrect. In a broad sense, at least. They have a habit of becoming invested in details largely conjured in their own minds.”

“Like how God hates gay people and poly-cotton blends,” Erika said.

“Something like that,” Dawn said.

“Are you following this okay?” Jason asked Erika.

“I think so,” Erika said. “It might go better if I hadn’t had so many cocktails.”

“Oh, hold on,” Jason said, then chanted a spell.

“*Feed me your sins.*”

Erika blinked as if she’d just stumbled into the light, shaking her head as the haziness of alcohol was drained away. Then she gave Jason a flat look.

“Feed me your sins?” she asked.

“So melodramatic,” Farrah said.

“It’s the chant for my spell,” Jason said. “I didn’t get to pick it.”

“The people we’re talking about have a habit of becoming invested in details largely conjured in their own minds,” Dawn said, looking pointedly at Jason.

“Bloody women,” Jason said. “I need to start hanging out with some dude-bros. I bet Kaito knows some.”

“You would hate hanging out with dude-bros,” Erika said. She got up and went behind the bar to mix herself another cocktail, now that she’d sobered up.

“No, it’ll be great,” Jason insisted. “I’m turning over a new leaf. I’m going to start talking about my man-cave and asking people how much they lift. It’ll be less than me because I’m super strong. Women are objects!”

“Might I remind you two that we’re talking about the end of the world?” Farrah said.

“And banter is how we save it,” Jason said. “Have you not seen a superhero movie?”

“No.”

“Oh, well, there's a big sky-beam or a magic rock everyone wants and we win through the power of quips.” Erika said. She finished making her cocktail, immediately drained half of it and started making another one. “Anyone else want one?”

Dawn looked at them like they were monkeys throwing their own poop.

“This is who the World-Phoenix is relying on to save the world,” she muttered.

“It’s fine,” Farrah assured her. “The day I met Jason, he saved my whole team pretty much by acting like this. So, how are we meant to save the world, exactly?”

“That’s a good point,” Jason said. “Emi thinks I’m a superhero, which is super adorable. I pretty much have to save the world now.”

“Around half a millennium ago,” Dawn said, “an outworlder came from this world to Pallimustus and fell into the service of a Pallimustus deity. When he acquired the means to return to his own world, he came back with tools and a mission from that deity. He set up a global magical infrastructure that would strengthen the bond between the two worlds. Over

the centuries, more and more of the magic building up on Pallimustus was siphoned into this world."

"The monster surges," Farrah said. "That's why they've been taking longer and longer. The magic that fuels them has been siphoned off to here, which siphons more and more as the dimensional membrane weakens."

"What does that accomplish?" Jason asked.

"The current Builder is the original source of the magic techniques through which the link was strengthened," Dawn said. "He passed that knowledge along to the deity behind all this. Much of which is now in your hands, Mr Asano."

"I get it," Jason said. "As soon as that knowledge entered Pallimustus, the goddess of knowledge had access to it. She found a reason to pass it to me, knowing that I would inevitably get home where I could do something about it."

"The link is a threat to Pallimustus as well," Dawn said, "but of a different nature. The delay in the monster surges also destabilises that world's dimensional membrane. The longer the delay, the more dangerous the things that can finally make it through."

"You're talking about an increase in diamond-rank manifestations during the monster surge," Farrah said.

"That is only a by-product," Dawn said. "The goal is—"

"The invasion of Pallimustus," Jason said. "Like your painting."

"Yes. The god Purity has struck a bargain with the Builder. Purity lays the groundwork for the Builder and the Builder helps Purity cleanse the world of what Purity has come to see as the unclean elements. The Builder takes the world's abundant astral spaces and leaves Purity to rebuild civilisation in his own image."

"That's insane," Farrah said. "The other gods won't stand for it."

"There was already some kind of religious council formed to deal with the church of Purity when I left," Jason said.

"Purity has long made preparations in secret for the invasion of your world," Dawn told Farrah. "The church is more prepared than anyone realises, except for Knowledge. That goddess has likewise been making secret preparations to combat Purity."

"Why not just warn everyone?" Farrah asked.

"She has rules," Jason said. "I'm pretty sure telling everyone would be such a huge deal that it violates her central tenets. She's big on people

learning things for themselves."

"Exactly right," Dawn said. "Transcendent beings are power incarnate, but they have limitations that do not bind we physical beings. The most she can do is prepare to act once the knowledge is widespread. When the invasion begins and Purity reveals his hand in full, so shall she."

"So, our part is to find this link enhancer and shut it down," Farrah said.

"Yes," Dawn said. "You have the tools."

"I can learn the astral magic, given enough time," Jason said. "How are we meant to find this link make-biggerer so we can turn it off?"

"She said a global magic infrastructure," Farrah said to Jason. "Sound familiar?"

"The Network's grid," Jason said.

"Even if the two aren't connected," Farrah said, "I'll bet we can use one to find the other. Once you figure out what it is we're looking for."

"I was already hitting the books," Jason said. "I don't have to change anything there. I definitely haven't been slacking off to read Farrah's sex magic book, especially not the thing on page forty-one with the chilled fruit."

"This world is doomed," Dawn muttered.

"It'll be fine," Jason said. "I'm great at fighting evil. I mean, did I hurt the bad guy? No. Did he kill me? Yes, he did. But we won! Will I get credit? Probably not. All the women will be like 'hey, Humphrey, your shoulders are obviously so large because of a glandular condition, but we're totally into that.' Then Humphrey will be all 'sorry, gaggle of women, but I have to mourn my even more handsome friend,' and they'll be all 'hey, we're super ready to comfort you,' and he'll be all 'well, I suppose my handsome friend did show me how to whip cream.' Then they'll go off to a local purveyor of dairy goods and—"

"I think I can feel myself becoming lactose intolerant," Erika said.

"I think it may be time to go," Dawn said. "You now know the task ahead of you and the agenda of the World-Phoenix that has been concerning you. All she wants is to protect your world, and for you to be her instrument."

"Was that a knob joke?" Jason asked.

"No," Dawn said flatly. "Now that events surrounding your return have largely settled, it was time to show you the path forward. It's possible my timing was not ideal."

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “To be honest, I’d be way more suspicious sober.”

“When we’re done, can the World-Phoenix send us home?” Farrah asked.

“The objective is also the reward,” Dawn said. “You will return home before your task is done.”

“Well, this is a sobering conversation,” Jason said. “Literally; I think I do need another drink. Dawn, you don't know anywhere I can stock up on bronze-rank booze, do you? I'm running low. Actually, at this point, I need to start in on the silver-rank stuff. I don't want to go collaring myself every time I drink. I lost the key for a while. It was in the component bowl with the sheep tokens, which is why it took me so long to find. Nobody wants sheep.”

Dawn shook her head.

“There’s an alchemist in the Network’s Stuttgart branch,” she said. “I’m sure your Network allies can make a connection.”

“Oh, nice,” Jason said. “Thanks, dimensional space lady.”

“You know what you have to do now,” Dawn said.

“Sure,” Jason said. “I would like to know why you don’t do it yourself, though.”

“Several reasons,” Dawn said. “For one thing, there are rules about how much the great astral beings and their higher agents can intervene in physical realities. If the World-Phoenix had servants native to this world it would be possible, but this world does not produce high-rankers. Also, you see how little power I have.”

“I thought you were just hiding it,” Farrah said.

“If I were here in person, the disparity between my power and the lack of magic in this world would be crippling, spirit coins or not. This is only an avatar I am projecting from outside your reality. You lack the knowledge to understand how impressive that is, so let me assure you that the answer is very. Even if either I or my dimensional vessel breached the dimensional membrane of your world, in its delicate state, the raw power would be like dropping a stone on a pane of glass. The best I can do is share knowledge.”

As Jason and Farrah were showing Dawn off the houseboat, she paused on the lower deck before stepping onto the dock.

"May I ask a question for my own edification, Mr Asano?"

"Go for it," Jason said.

"You knew the vessel that the Builder took in Pallimustus, yes?"

"Actually, there were two and I knew them both," Jason said. "The first I didn't know well, although he did knock me unconscious with a shovel several times."

"Wait, the shovel guy?" Farrah asked.

"Yep," Jason said. "The second was Thadwick, who I knew a bit better. Dated his sister for a while. I did, I mean; he didn't date his own sister. That would be weird. Why do you ask?"

"When great astral beings interact with physical beings, or even each other, they use living vessels," Dawn explained. "Unlike temporary, lower-rank vessels, long-term vessels such as myself do not burn out. The astral being can possess and release us harmlessly many times, over many years. It takes decades, often centuries, before the strain threatens permanent damage and a new vessel must be arranged."

"Sure," Jason said.

"One of the side effects of inhabiting physical bodies is that the astral beings have to operate by the same means the bodies do," Dawn said. "The result is that we vessels shape the behaviour of the great astral beings while they inhabit us. Permanent vessels are carefully chosen, while temporary vessels pose a choice. Either sacrifice a follower who thinks exactly the way they want their followers to think, or use an expendable vessel."

"Ooh," Jason said. "That explains why the Builder was such a tool bag."

"In the case of very strong personalities," Dawn said, "rapidly switching from one vessel to the next can create a lingering effect, where the first vessel's personality affects the second one."

"I think I see where this is going," Jason said with a chortle.

"Those of us who serve as vessels like to stay in touch because there are few who truly understand our experiences," Dawn said. "A man named Shako is the primary vessel of the Builder in this region of the cosmos, as I am for the World-Phoenix. He described his last experience of being the Builder's vessel like having a toddler running around in his head making all the decisions. I was curious as to what manner of man was the vessel that prompted such a reaction."

“He was the worst,” Jason said. “Literally the worst. There's a guy punching a baby who's all ‘take that, baby,’ yet can still console himself with not being Thadwick. Thadwick sold out his friends, his family, and his entire world. That guy sucked. His whole family did, to be honest, except for his mum and his sister, but a bloke doesn't kiss and tell. His sister, I mean. I didn't sleep with his mum, although she's very attractive. Like, very, but she does have the silver-rank thing going on.”

“That’s quite enough information, thank you,” Dawn said. “The issue of the vessel was a matter of some curiosity in our little circle.”

“Can I ask you a question?” Jason said.

“Certainly,” Dawn said.

“You seem to know a lot,” Jason said. “Did you know that Farrah was in this world and where to find her?”

“Ah,” Dawn said, making an apologetic expression. “Yes, but—”

Jason’s fist crashed into her nose, sending her crashing over the rail and into the water.

“Yeah, she’s definitely dead,” Jason said. Using his cloak’s weight-lowering power, he was standing on the water over her corpse.

“You killed her?” Erika asked in horror.

“This was just an avatar projection,” Jason said. “I doubt I could hurt her actual self with a magic rocket launcher.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to loot her,” Jason said. “She should have told me about you.”

“I don't know if that's such a good idea,” Farrah said.

Jason reached down and touched the floating body. He then walked back to the houseboat as the corpse dissolved into rainbow smoke behind him. Erika, never having seen it other than in projections, watched with a mix of fascination and horror.

- 10 [Diamond Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 100 [Gold Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 1,000 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.

- 10,000 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 100,000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.

"Ooh, jackpot."

On a dimensional ship within the astral void, a ruby-haired woman shook her head in disbelief.

"That little fuc…"

THE DIRECTION WE WANT THEM TO GO

"You can't just go around killing people," Erika said.

She stood next to Farrah as Jason stepped off the surface of the water, rainbow smoke rising up behind him.

"If you're going to go back with us to my world," Farrah said, "then you'll have to learn the same lessons that he did. Starting with yes, he can just go around killing people."

"That wasn't a person," Jason said. "It was a projection. I didn't kill her so much as smash her phone."

"That's still not cool," Erika said.

"She knew that I was being tortured and could have told Jason on the day we arrived," Farrah said. "The next time I see her, I might punch her nose through her brain."

"You know what is cool?" Jason asked. "Sleepy time."

"We have a lot to talk about," Erika said.

"We have a lot to sleep off," Jason said. "Tomorrow, sis."

"Don't go thinking you can skip out on that," Erika warned.

"Sure," Jason said. "Stay here so I can't slink off. I'll portal in your husband and aggressive strain of hugging vine."

"Emi will be in bed by now," Erika said.

Jason gave her a flat look and opened a portal. Moments later, a pyjama-clad rocket flew out to grab Jason in a hug.

"What's that smell?" Emi asked, wrinkling her nose at the lingering scent of rainbow smoke. "It's super nasty."

"It's your mum," Jason said. "She's been concealing it all this time through an unhealthy overuse of scented hand soaps, but now her secret's

out."

"Don't be mean to Mum, Uncle Jason," Emi scolded. "She looks cranky. What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," Jason insisted. "Maybe we talked about *Airwolf* a little."

"Which season?" Emi asked in the tone of a drill instructor handing a recruit just enough rope.

"Fourth," Jason mumbled, bowing his head guiltily.

"What were you thinking?"

"I had a lot to drink."

"That's no excuse," Emi scolded. "Really, what is that smell? It's like an animal died inside a slightly larger animal."

"It was a magic phone lady I broke," Jason said.

"Okay. Can we stay here tonight?"

"Yes," Erika said. "Go get your dad."

In the sober light of morning, the previous night's revelations played through Jason's head. His spirit attribute had improved his memory to the point that even magical alcohol didn't impair it, at least of his own rank. If it was brewed from silver-rank ingredients, the story could easily change. He had no hangover, as his recovery attribute was more than up to the task of refreshing him over the course of a night's sleep.

On the top deck of the houseboat, all the current occupants were sitting around a table sharing a buffet breakfast courtesy of Jason. Erika was a little too seedy for extravagant morning cookery. Ian and Emi, Farrah, Hiro and Taika rounded out the group.

"So," Jason said. "It looks like we have to save the world. It seemed hilarious a few drinks in, but all of a sudden, we're responsible for seven billion people."

"What do you mean by save the world?" Ian asked.

"What do you mean by we?" Erika asked. "Fighting evil seems like more of a you job. I might cater, but I'll leave confronting the forces of darkness to you."

“Just to be clear, are we seriously talking about saving the world?” Ian asked. “That’s not a metaphor or something, right?”

“Nope,” Jason said. “Literally save the world.”

“From what?” Ian asked. “Climate change?”

“Something like that,” Jason said. “It’s like an extra, additional climate change that will eventually wipe out the planet. Basically, some bad guys in an alternate universe are doing something that is slowly destroying our world as a knock-on effect.”

“Destroying the world is collateral damage?” Hiro asked.

“To these guys, yeah,” Jason said. “I’ve fought them before. They’ve killed thousands. They killed Farrah.”

All eyes turned to Farrah.

“What?” she asked. “If you’re going to come back from the dead, you have to die of something first. I’ll get mine back by stopping what they’re doing.”

“How long do we have before the world ends?” Hiro asked.

“Years,” Jason said. “Quite a lot of years, but the longer we take, the more damage we can’t take back.”

“So, what do we do?” Taika asked.

“It's a marathon, not a sprint,” Jason said. “It's going to take me years to learn the magic involved properly.”

“It seems crazy,” Ian said and Jason laughed.

“You should see it from my perspective. I mean, I have a healthy ego, but surely there has to be someone better, right?”

“Why is it you?” Hiro asked. “Why not someone else?”

“Because the full answer isn’t here,” Farrah said. “We were told that we would need to return to my world before the task was done.”

“We’re talking about decoupling worlds,” Jason said. “We’re the ones with the tools, the knowledge and the experience of walking both worlds.”

“Sounds like there isn’t someone better,” Hiro said.

“I think it’s awesome,” Emi said.

“Of course you do,” Jason said. “You’re twelve.”

“Let’s face it, Jason,” Erika said. “So are you.”

“I did think it was awesome,” Jason admitted. “Now that I’ve sobered up, I’m just terrified. I can’t get my head around the responsibility. Two years ago, before I went away, would any of you have wanted me to be the one responsible for every life on Earth? That’s the kind of thing they put

your face on the money for and I am not the guy whose face you put on money."

Farrah took a spirit coin from her pocket and slid it across the table, with the image of Jason on it, face up.

"Rufus would trust you with that responsibility," she said. "We met you almost two years ago and he knew immediately that you could be great."

"Immediately? You mean when the cannibals had us in those cages, and instead of escaping, I was hit upside the head with a shovel?" Jason asked.

"Maybe not immediately," Farrah conceded. "But from the first day. You saved all our lives."

"He did?" Erika asked. "Jason, you were always kind of vague about events before your recordings started."

Emi picked up the coin and peered at it.

"Uncle Jason, this has your old chin."

"He never told you the story of how we met?" Farrah asked.

"He said you all escaped some cannibal cult together."

"Yes," Farrah said. "I've seen some things in my career, but nothing like that kitchen."

"Maybe skip that particular detail at breakfast," Jason said with a shudder as he recalled the horrifying image of the Vane Estate kitchen.

"I think you're right," Farrah said. "I'll take you through events from the beginning, at least from my perspective. For me, it started when my team was hired to investigate this family of reclusive aristocrats, living out in the middle of the desert…"

Jason had fed enough magic quintessence into his cloud flask that the houseboat could produce a more-than-adequate ritual room. Combined with the vortex accumulator gathering magic, it made for a space of balanced ambient magic, ideal for conducting rituals.

It also had an adjacent room with enclosed shower stalls for post-ranking-up needs. Water infused with crystal wash sprayed not just from above but all around, making for a cleaning experience second only to an undiluted supply of crystal wash.

Jason drew out the diagram for the essence ritual with a stick of chalk, the room allowing him to do so with minimal adjustments for ambient magic. Once again, Jason appreciated how good it was to have Clive making the same thing possible in the middle of the wilderness using his abilities.

Hiro, Ian and Erika were all dressed like it was laundry day, wearing a selection of old and faded ultra-casual wear. Jason had made it clear that whatever they were wearing, they wouldn't want to wear it ever again. Emi was giggling at them as she stood out of the way with Farrah.

Mostly, though, Emi's attention was on the party interface Jason had given them all access to. Emi's status screen showed them that Jason's power would let them know when Emi could safely absorb essences, saving them from a periodic, if cheap and simple, testing ritual.

"So," Jason asked. "Who goes first?"

Hiro and Ian both turned to Erika.

"Oh, great," she said.

"It's fine," Jason said. "I've done this before, Farrah's done this before and it's a nice, safe ritual."

Jason picked up one of the nine essences on a table beside him and led his sister to the middle of the ritual circle, avoiding the lines and the small piles of spirit coins. He handed her the essence.

Item: [Feast Essence] (unranked, uncommon)

Manifested essence of bountiful consumption (consumable, essence).

- Requirements: Less than 4 absorbed essences.

- Effect: Imbues 1 awakened feast essence ability and 4 unawakened feast essence abilities.

- You have absorbed 0/4 essences. Once absorbed, an essence cannot be relinquished or replaced.

“We’re starting with the feast essence,” Jason told her, “because we’ve chosen the order to do the best job of setting your powers in the direction we want them to go.”

Jason and Farrah had debated the relative merits of the common feast essence versus the higher-rarity hunger essence. Hunger was the more popular of the two because it had a stronger combat role, often producing an arsenal of drain attacks. For this reason, they had gone with the more broadly aspected feast essence, given the goal was a power set built around cooking magic.

“In isolation, for example,” Jason explained, “the knife essence, which is next, could very easily give you some mundane special attack. With a feast essence under your belt, though, that next power is more likely to go in the direction we want.”

“There aren’t any guarantees, however,” Farrah said. “We can try and guide the direction for the powers you get, but being too rigid will only backfire.”

Although they had already seen Taika go through the process, Jason’s family watched with fascination as Jason conducted the ritual and the essence cube melted, sinking into Erika’s flesh.

- You have absorbed [Feast Essence]. You have absorbed 1 of 4 essences.
- Progress to iron rank: 25% (1/4 essences).

- [Feast Essence] has bonded to your [Recovery] attribute, changing your [Recovery] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all feast essence

abilities to increase your [Recovery] attribute.

- You have awakened the feast essence ability [Feeding the Multitudes]. You have awakened 1 of 5 feast essence abilities.

Ability: [Feeding the Multitude] (Feast)

- Conjuration (boon).
- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): You can replicate an amount of food up to a plate's worth. Mana cost increases with each replication of the same food, with the cost significantly reduced if the food was prepared by you personally. The taste of the food is identical to the original, but nourishment and magical effects can only be copied by expending a spirit coin for each perfect duplication. You can replicate food made with normal or iron-rank ingredients, with the appropriate rank of spirit coin required for true replication.

"Right in the sweet spot," Jason said. "That's exactly the kind of power we're looking for."

- Human racial ability [Essence Gift] has evolved to [Gourmet & Gourmand].

Ability: [Gourmet & Gourmand]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].

- Your senses of taste and smell are enhanced. You may have an additional enhancement effect from magical food without negative effect. You process the remnant magic from potions at an accelerated rate, allowing you to safely consume further potions of the same type after a shorter delay.

Jason and Farrah shared a glance. They immediately recognised that Erika's abilities were both heavy on resource consumption, a risk Farrah had warned of when they chose the feast essence. In the other world, it would not have been a problem. On Earth, she would be deeply reliant on Jason to supply her with what she would need. If her awakenings continued in this vein, it would add a new wrinkle to the discussion over Erika's family joining them on the return to Pallimustus.

The ritual room balanced out the magic as Jason cleared the ritual circle and drew a fresh one. Erika's remaining essences were absorbed one after another, with results in line with what they were hoping for.

"As long as we aren't too specific with our objectives," Farrah said, "organising a general direction for powers isn't that hard."

"Clive told me much the same thing," Jason said.

From the knife essence, Erika gained the power to conjure multiple knives of various types, from combative to culinary in purpose. From the dance essence, she gained the power to telekinetically control small objects and the ability to split her concentration over them. Her confluence essence, bounty, gave her the power to imbue ordinary food with magical effects.

“How do you feel?” Jason asked as her confluence essence appeared and was absorbed.

“Amazing,” Erika said. “I feel like I could run a marathon.”

As soon as she said it, her face was stricken with a startled and queasy expression. Jason and Farrah pointed at the shower room door, and she bolted for it. Ian moved to go after her and Jason stopped him.

“You may not want to see your wife like that.”

“She’s my wife and she probably needs me,” Ian said. “It doesn’t matter how I see her.”

They watched Ian follow her into the shower room and heard some very unpleasant sounds emerge during the short moment the door was open.

“He’s a good husband,” Farrah said.

“Yep,” Jason said. “He's one of the good ones, alright.”

Jason then turned to Hiro.

“Alright, Uncle,” he said. “Looks like you’re up.”

THE DANGERS OF WHAT I DO

"I HAVE SOME MIXED FEELINGS ABOUT THIS ESSENCE," JASON SAID, turning the translucent cube over in his hands.

They were still in the ritual room. Hiro's essences had been done and they had moved on to Ian. It was the third essence for Ian's combination after they had already imbued him with the first two.

Jason had kept the renewal essence that Taika declined, and given that Ian was a doctor, healing seemed the obvious power set to aim for. There were many potential healer combinations, each one fitting a specific niche. As Ian was not looking for the role of combat medic but a more traditional doctor role, Farrah had suggested a specific combination.

"There's a popular combination that is the first choice for a behind-the-lines healer for anyone who can get their hands on a renewal essence," she explained. "You don't see adventurers using it because it largely avoids combat powers unless you pick the right kind of awakening stones."

The renewal essence was first, then the life essence. The third was one that gave Jason pause.

"The pure essence," he said, continuing to stare at it as he turned it over again and again in his hands. "It has some specific connotations for me."

"I know," Farrah said. "I've seen your recordings. The Church of Purity turned out to be evil."

"There was something not in the recordings," Jason said. "It was right near the end and I didn't put it in. The others didn't see her because it was before I started recording, but you remember Anisa, of course."

"Yeah," Farrah said.

“Who’s Anisa?” Erika asked, looking up from where she was running her fingers over her skin. After recovering from ranking up to iron, she was revelling in the new sensations of being a magical being. Hiro was still in the shower room, while Erika, Ian, and Emi had been joined by Ken, who had arrived to watch for himself. He was still uncertain about getting in on the strange magic powers.

“Remember I told you about when my team first met Jason?” Farrah said. “The priestess guiding us was named Anisa and she was part of the Church of Purity.”

“You shouldn’t trust people who talk about purity too much,” Erika said. “Take your eyes off them, and suddenly, they’re rounding people up into camps.”

“That’s what I said,” Jason agreed.

“I didn’t care for Anisa,” Farrah said. “I’m not sure Rufus needed to kick her out, but she was not a good person to work with. Was she one of the bad ones when the Church of Purity turned out to be corrupt?”

“Yes,” Jason said, sparing a glance at Emi while deciding whether to continue. “She turned out to be a chief henchwoman and we fought her in the astral space.”

“What happened?” Farrah asked.

“We won,” Jason said. “She was with her boss at the time, who was a silver-rank essence user. We knew he’d be very hard to deal with, so we decided to… handle Anisa first.”

“Oh no,” Emi said. “I’m only twelve and have no idea what an obvious euphemism is.”

“Emi,” Jason said, “there’s a time for being serious.”

Everyone in the room turned to look at Jason.

“What?” he asked.

“You fought the silver-ranker after?” Farrah asked. “How was that?”

“Hard,” Jason said. “Nothing like the chump they sent after me here and even that guy beat me. This guy was a healer, so between his silver-rank toughness and his powers, he was damn near immortal. That did mean he didn’t have as much attack power to throw at us, but even then, our front liners had trouble holding on. We’re getting side-tracked, though. The point is this pure essence, not some dead archbishop of Purity.”

“It’s not a divine essence,” Farrah said. “It’s got nothing to do with the god, despite the name.”

“I know,” Jason said. “I can’t help but hesitate, though.”

“Okay, I’m starting to feel concerned,” Ian said. “If you were going to hesitate, I’d really prefer you’d have done it before we were halfway through.”

“I’m sorry,” Jason said. “This is completely the right choice; it’s just my hang-up. I don’t normally know the people I…”

He frowned.

“Enough of that. Let’s get you some more magic powers!”

Ian’s essences were soon complete, and he made a beeline for the shower room, Hiro already having left.

“How much crystal wash did you put into the flask?” Farrah asked.

“Enough to last a few years, so long as I’m careful,” Jason said. “Dad and Emi get to rank up here, but the others can use their own showers.”

“That gunk will be hard to clear off with regular soap and water.”

“That’s a fair point,” Jason said. “I’ll buy them some steel wool.”

Jason’s and Farrah’s phones simultaneously bleeped with messages. They both looked at their screens, then shared a glance.

“We’ll have to postpone the rest of the magic talk,” Jason said to Erika and Hiro. “I know that the timing isn’t great, but it’s a category three, which means all hands on deck. In the meantime, stay on the boat and take a rest. There’s a big lunch spread set up in the lounge.”

“First, though,” Farrah said, “you eat like an essence user.”

She handed Erika and Hiro a spirit coin each.

Monsters swarmed through the uneven bushland scrub. They crawled out from gullies, over ridges, and through dense patches of prickly vegetation. They took the form of bugs, from giant beetles to horrifying desert mantises to things with no Earthly counterpart. Millipede-like creatures, except that instead of a singular body, five bodies spread out from a central hub, like the limbs of a starfish. Each body-limb ended in an acid-spitting mouth with gnashing mandibles. They weren’t quick, but they were the size of trampolines and hard to approach without being intercepted by acid spit.

The silver-rank monsters were low, flat, and dark-shelled, like scorpions. They lacked pincers, each instead boasting a trio of over-long

scorpion tails that ended not in piercing barbs but raking claws. The tails could reach out twice the length of their bodies, which were roughly the size of a mattress.

They were not agile, but their raw speed was in the mid-range of silver rank, making them hard for Jason to pin down. Their hard shells made penetrating them difficult, so even if a hit landed, his special attacks only worked if damage got through. For this reason, he pulled his sword out rather than conjure his dagger.

The sword Gary made, Dread Salvation, was designed to help Jason in his most troubling fights. For every hit that landed, when the target was immune via impenetrable armour, the sword built up a charge of resonating-force. That damage type was ideally suited to getting through armour, doing extra damage and resonating through. Jason gave up the afflictions of his conjured dagger, but the numerous creatures were weak for silver-rank monsters.

Weak silver-rank fortitude was still silver-rank fortitude, however. It took every affliction he could lay on to deal with them, but his spells were fortunately much easier to land. With only a few ranged monsters spitting poison barbs or acidic bile, there was little to interrupt him.

Even with his sword, the trick was landing hits on the speeding swarms. Although their patterns were simple, their pace was a major threat to Jason. He faced them like a bullfighter. He took a number of brutal hits before he started to master the timing. The advantage of the burst attack nature of the creatures was that Jason had time to recover.

Now that he was solidly into the mid-range of bronze, his toughness was much improved. More effective was the increased power of Colin’s regeneration and the health drain of his Leech Bite special attack. His power to drain afflictions and convert them into stamina and mana kept him going when other parts of the Network’s forces were forced to bow out.

Jason was only part of the response team. Farrah’s peak bronze-rank speed attribute and sweeping attacks with her telescoping magma sword gave her the edge to sweep through whole clusters. Although her reflexes were up to the task, her mobility was lacking. The monsters were left trying to overwhelm her powerful armour. Like Jason, they were ill-suited to punching through a hard shell.

Jason and Farrah each had their own challenges to overcome in the fight. Farrah's challenge was to hold as much mana in reserve as she could

to last out the fight. This meant largely sticking to her sword, but her immobility would sometimes lead multiple groups of the silver-rank monsters to converge. At that stage, she was forced to spend as little mana as she could fending them off as efficiently as possible with her costly powers.

The outworlders were used to being the stars of the show, but in this instance, it was the Network teams that were truly stepping up. Their disciplined, focus-fire attacks surprised Jason and Farrah with their effectiveness against the silver-rankers. Against the hordes of lower-ranked monsters, the Network's tactics demonstrated why the organisation put so much stock in them. The hordes were swept away with an efficiency that neither Jason nor Farrah could have matched, even with their whole teams present.

Jason had his shredded combat armour pegged up on the rear deck of the houseboat, hosing off the blood. The monster blood was long gone, but Jason's remained. It would disappear itself into rainbow smoke after being away from his body for an hour or so, but he'd rather have it gone from his outfit by then.

Ian and Erika found him, no shirt, hosing off the ragged remains of the outfit. The crest tattoo covering his back was in full display, as were his torso scars.

"I know girls like scars, Jason," Erika said, her light tone not entirely masking her concern, "but that might be a bit much."

"I know, right?" Jason replied. "I finally get some ab definition and it looks like someone scribbled all over them."

"What's that thing?" Ian asked, indicating the armour. "Is it the hide of some monster?"

"It's made from monster hide," Jason said. "It's my armour. You've seen me wear it."

"Wait," Erika said. "That's your armour?"

"Yep."

"The armour you wear?"

"That's how armour works."

“It’s cut to ribbons,” she said.

“It was a rough one,” Jason acknowledged. “Farrah’s already meditating on it to consolidate her gains. I’ll join her once I’m done here.”

“Were you wearing the armour when that happened to it?” Ian asked.

“I'm fine,” Jason said. “Look at me; no new scars.”

“Isn’t armour meant to withstand attacks like that?”

“Yeah,” Jason said, “but so am I.”

Erika looked over her brother, who was, himself, dripping wet. The water at his bare feet was stained red.

“I’m not foolish enough to try and make you stop,” Erika said. “I don’t want Emi catching you all bloody and hurt, though.”

“Me either,” Jason said. “Not until she’s older, has essences of her own, and needs a lesson in the dangers of what I do. Shade is entertaining her at the other end of the boat.”

“Are you going to survive until Emi is that old?” Erika asked.

“This is the way I fight, Eri. It’s bloody and grim and you want no part of it.”

“But our daughter will,” Ian said.

“She won't fight like me,” Jason said. “I'll make sure her powers reward her attentiveness and quick-thinking. She'll be all about keeping herself and others safe.”

“I do like the sound of that,” Ian said. “The sound I like better is her finding a nice man to stay home and raise our grandkids while she’s a high-flying doctor, overpaid economic consultant or whatever else she wants.”

“You might find she’s better off in the other world,” Jason said. “All of you may be. The other world has its dangers, yes, but that danger is a known quantity. This world will soon be going through a period of upheaval and we don’t know what dangers we’ll be dealing with.

“Who knows,” Jason continued. “What I do may seem exciting, but maybe something else will capture her imagination.”

“More than being an interdimensional superhero,” Erika said. “Sure.”

“That’ll do,” Jason said, turning off the hose. “It took bit of a beating, so it probably won’t come right until tomorrow.”

“That thing self-repairs?” Ian asked.

“All good light armour fixes itself,” Jason said. “It costs more, but savings in avoided repairs more than pay it back. Heavy stuff is harder to

make self-repair, and mine does operate faster than normal because it's partly made from hydra skin."

"Like the twelve tasks of Heracles hydra?"

"Heracles fought a river hydra," Jason said. "My armour has marsh hydra skin, but they're very similar breeds. A river hydra was actually the first monster I fought after coming back to Earth."

"As I recall," Ian said, "even Heracles had some trouble with that. It was one of the tasks that were discounted because he had help."

"I don't know what to tell you," Jason said. "I did it solo, so I guess Heracles is a scrub."

"He was the son of Zeus."

"Well, I'm the son of Cheryl, and I know which one I'd bet on in a scrap. I mean, Zeus, obviously; the bloke chucks lightning. But still, Mum is quite stern."

"Zeus isn't real, is he?" Ian asked.

"Nope," Jason said. "I was talking to this…"

He trailed off as he sensed a surge of magic from above, where Farrah was meditating. He chortled as he used his bronze-rank prowess and parkour skills to swiftly clamber up the outside of the houseboat. From the roof deck, silver light was already brightly shining.

"Congratulations," Jason said, tossing Farrah a bottle. As Farrah tipped the crystal wash over her head where it started methodically coating her body, the foul ichor splattered over the top deck was already being absorbed and cleansed by the houseboat.

"That is a foul smell, even by rank-up standards," Jason said. "I don't know if that's a higher-rank thing or a first rank-up after becoming an outworlder thing."

"You did pump out a lot of foul muck that first time," Farrah said. "How was bronze-rank for you?"

"Normal."

"I know we're meant to be teaching your family about aura senses and the rest of the things a new iron-ranker needs to know," Farrah said. "I need

to meditate and consolidate this rank, though, so I'll have to leave that to you."

Farrah was talking with a huge grin on her face. Despite saying she was going to rest and meditate, what she did was throw her hands up and in front of her, aimed out over the side of the roof deck.

"*Burning heart of the world, show your might.*"

A stream of lava spewed out of her hands and over the water, throwing up steam as it splashed down and cooled. She kept the stream going as she let out a victorious whoop.

"I'm not sure that's safe," Jason said. "Also, you just ranked-up. You're going to be short on…"

The stream of lava stopped and Farrah fell over, unconscious.

"…mana," he finished. "I hope no one saw that."

WE WERE ALL MONSTERS

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Farrah said as she and Jason drove to Kaito and Amy's house. Given the short distance, they didn't portal over, so Jason had that power ready in case of emergency.

"No," Jason said. "I still say we could go with the chimera confluence for Kaito."

"We've been over this," Farrah said. "That's an adventurer's confluence."

"We could put him in front of some monsters. He might thrive. Think about it. Venom attacks, gas cloud attacks. He'd be an affliction specialist, like me."

"Did you even get that third essence?"

"No," Jason said. "I have snake and rat essences. Maybe the Americans could get me a skunk essence."

"I think you should stick with the essences you've picked out, rather than try to make a petty point."

"Fine," Jason grumbled.

"The reason I asked if you were sure," Farrah said, "is that you've already been through two rank-ups and he's still better looking than you."

"Seriously?"

"I'm not going to apologise for having eyes. You must have noticed that your rank-ups are making you look more like him."

"That doesn't make it something I want to talk about," Jason said just as his phone rang. "Oh, good. Someone who wants to talk about something other than how handsome my brother is."

“If this world had gods,” Farrah said, “I’d be praying that they were calling to talk about your brother.”

Jason threw her a look of mock anger as he took out his phone and put it on speaker.

“Keti,” he greeted. “What can I do for you?”

“What’s this I’m hearing about a light show at the marina?”

“Sorry about that,” Jason said. “Farrah got a little over-excited after she hit silver.”

“Farrah is category three?”

“I am,” Farrah said. “Hello, Ketevan.”

“Congratulations,” Ketevan said. “Look, we’ve passed it off as a cashed-up bogan playing around with propane but try not to make too big a spectacle. You’re lucky we swapped out the police department with our people.”

“You can do that?”

“For a small town like Casselton Beach, yes,” Ketevan said.

“So that’s why Paul got transferred to Coffs,” Jason said. “I appreciate the effort you’ve put in.”

“You’ll need to discuss the changes in your capabilities with the tactical department, Farrah,” Ketevan said. “How powerful are you now?”

“Not sure,” Farrah said. “I’ll need a few fights to settle into my new levels.”

“We’ll let you know, as always,” Ketevan said.

“Alright, thanks, Keti,” Jason said.

Oddly, Jason had found that combinations were harder to devise for non-combatants than for adventurers. Farrah had advised him to focus on what the individual was already capable of, thus Erika’s cooking magic set and Ian’s healing combination were right out of the Magic Society common combinations list. Ian’s confluence, ministration, was one of the most healing-focused confluences on that list.

The living document couldn’t get updated from a universe away, but the existing archive was intact. Jason and Farrah had been parcelling out chunks of information on known essences in return for various concessions

from the Network. On Anna's advice, much of that had been with the Americans and the Chinese, helping to smooth some ruffled feathers.

Both factions were maintaining a presence in Sydney, as between them, they had finagled some forty percent of the spots in the International Committee's training program. Jason, but mostly Farrah, taught the Network's young new essence users to fight like adventurers. They also spent time helping existing teams adapt their tactics, giving them a stop-gap until the young ones came into their own.

Jason found preparing the rest of his family to be less straightforward. They wouldn't have the training, which made picking out essences all the more difficult. Jason found himself paying attention to the technology essence, which seemed to be analogous to the magic essence in that it was common but highly regarded.

Also like the magic essence, it often defined the nature of someone's powers. Where magic would often lead to a skill evolution towards spells, the technology essence promoted conjuration abilities.

Technology was an essence that the Magic Society records had no insight on. That left them relying on the Network's knowledge or experimenting with them on the parts of his family he was less enthused with. Farrah, thus far, had steered him away from that course.

The vehicle essence was known to Pallimustus, but there were not a large number of known combinations, despite it being common. For Kaito, they picked out a combination that was both known and comprised of common essences. The vehicle, wind and swift essences combined into the soaring confluence, which was a known non-combat combination focused on flight.

On Farrah's world, that combination meant exotic magical flight vehicles. On Earth, the results were somewhat different. Kaito demonstrated this once he recovered from taking in his essences and downing a spirit coin. He used his very first ability to conjure a helicopter in his backyard. He then immediately dropped onto the grass, having consumed almost his entire mana supply.

"What did you do to my fence?" Erika asked.

Ian was at work and Emi at school, but she had come to offer moral support to her brother. If that took the form of laughing at him while she hosed foul gunk off of him in the backyard, then so be it. She was less

amused when the tail of the helicopter toppled the fence between her and her brother's yards.

“That’s a big vehicle,” Jason said. “How can he manage something like this at iron rank?”

“There are some mitigating factors,” Farrah said. “Firstly, his essence combination is very flight-oriented. Something less specialised, like your ability to turn your familiar into a mount, is less effective when working with flight. He doesn't face that restriction. The other thing is that power sets don't balance individual abilities as much as the power set as a whole.”

“Clive explained that to me,” Jason said. “So, most of Kaito’s powers will be weaker?”

“I’ve seen power sets like this before,” Farrah said. “They have one very impressive power, while most of the others are minor powers that supplement the main one. Kaito, you can expect most of your abilities to affect your conjured helicopter in some way. Speed boosts, conjured weapons, that kind of thing.”

“Weapons?” Kaito said.

“Yes,” Farrah said. “I’ve never seen a power set with no combat abilities at all. Even Ian’s will have a few, and he has as pacifistic a power set as you’ll ever see.”

Kaito took another spirit coin from Jason, standing up after putting it in his mouth. He smacked his lips unhappily.

“It’s like licking a battery,” he said.

Kaito walked around the helicopter currently filling his backyard.

“It’s pretty sexy, I’ll give you that,” Jason said.

“It looks a lot like the FCX-001,” Kaito said absently as he moved around it.

“Oh, the old FCX-001,” Jason said. “I totally see it now.”

Kaito threw his brother a cranky glance.

“The FCX-001 is a concept helicopter by Bell,” Kaito said, at which Jason and Erika both perked up.

“Yes,” Kaito groaned. “The same company that made the Bell 222 that Airwolf was based on. The FCX-001 is much more impressive than that, though.”

“Than Airwolf?” Erika asked. “That doesn’t seem likely.”

“It does look like half-helicopter, half spaceship,” Jason conceded.

“It’s not just the looks,” Kaito said. “The real thing is just a concept. Morphing rotor blades, advanced anti-torque innovations, augmented reality piloting. This is literally a helicopter from the future.”

“Time for a ride, then, yeah?” Erika said.

“I can’t fly it,” Kaito said. “I don’t know how to start trying to register this thing.”

“Kai, it’s a magic helicopter,” Erika said. “You don’t register it. You fly it upside down while yelling ‘woo’ like you’re Nature Boy Ric Flair.”

“Who?” Kaito asked.

Kaito and Erika continued to argue while they looked over the helicopter before opening it up for a look inside. Amy had been quietly watching from the side without talking but didn't notice Jason when he slipped away or when he quietly approached her.

“You’re a problem,” he said.

She didn’t show it, but he felt the slight startlement in her aura. She turned to face him.

“What kind of a problem?”

“For the others, it was relatively obvious which way to go. Cooking, for Erika. There’s a bunch of druid-type choices for Dad. Farrah even managed to find a flying vehicle combination for your husband.”

“Your brother.”

“Brothers don’t do what Kaito did. My brothers are in another universe.”

“Do you even understand why he slept with me back then?”

“Because he’s a dick.”

“That’s why I did it,” she said. “I was selfish and cowardly and stupid enough to convince myself that the way to solve my problems was by blowing them up. He did it because you intimidate him. The insecurities floating around the back of his head told him that sleeping with me meant he was as good as you.”

“Are you high? Did this whole thing happen because you confused the two of us six years ago and you haven’t realised yet? On what planet is Kaito insecure about me?”

“You seriously never saw it?” she asked. “You were always insightful, but you were both blind spots to each other. Think about the way he was back in school. Always doing everything he could to fit in, to be accepted.

He never had the courage to be himself and live with people liking or hating it. You did. Aggressively. That always intimidated him."

"Why? Everybody loved him."

"Not everyone, Jason. Kaito could get any ordinary girl he wanted, but someone like Asya wouldn't spare him a second glance. She had handsome boys with the right clothes and the right opinions coming out of her ears. She was looking for someone who charted their own path. Why did you think she and I didn't get along? I had you on the shelf and she was trying to take you off before I was ready to."

"That doesn't sound like a positive thing."

"It was high school, Jason. We were all monsters. I know you think that people hated you in school and you were the misunderstood loner, getting by on cleverness and guile. I hate to break it to you, but that was just some teen angst crap. Most people didn't like you because you were a bit of a prick and thought you were too good for everyone."

"That seems harsh," Jason said.

"Too bad," Amy said. "Now that all this time has passed, have you and Asya…?"

"No."

"Why not? I haven't seen her much since she came back, but she clearly still has a thing for you."

"I know, but it isn't fair."

"Why not?"

"I can read her emotions and she can't read mine. I've learned that successful relationships require a balanced power dynamic. Otherwise, one half will just get crushed when the other half bangs his brother like a drum."

"You're going to have to get past that someday," she said.

"No, I'm not," Jason said. "I just have to live with it until you die of old age. I'll give you magic enough that you should comfortably see a hundred, but not much more."

"And how long will you live?"

"Assuming I don't get killed too often, centuries. Forever, if I can swing it."

"Are you serious?"

"Amy, you've seen glimpses of a wider cosmos. I've had it crawl into my body and try to steal my soul. Language lacks the mechanism to represent the magnitude of it. Our minds are too limited to grasp the scope.

Only the soul can truly understand, but that’s not a viewpoint you want, believe me.”

“You’re right that I don’t understand. I want to, though. I want to see a wider world. If there really are all these magnificent things, I want to see them for myself.”

“No.”

“What?”

“I said no. You'll get more than most because you're family and I'll see you safe. You’ll see things, as the world starts to change, but you’ll see them on the news, with everyone else. I will never show you the true wonders that are out there. You’ll keep seeing only glimpses, knowing that amazing things are out there while you’re trapped in whatever’s left of this world’s mundanity.”

“You really have changed, Jason. You never used to have this vindictiveness inside you.”

“It was a parting gift from my closest friend,” he said, turning to look at the helicopter. “Looks like your husband is going to take us for a ride.”

Right after he spoke, the door of the helicopter slid open to reveal Kaito.

“Come on, honey,” he said. “Erika won’t leave me alone until I fly this thing. Jason, we can do her magic when we get back, right?”

“Sure,” Jason said. “No rush.”

OPTIONS

"I TOLD YOU BEFORE WE WENT ON OUR HELICOPTER RIDE THAT YOU were a tricky one to find a combination for," Jason told Amy. They were in her kitchen, along with Farrah, while Kaito watched the girls in the backyard.

"The issue is that you don't have the training to be a fighter," Farrah said. "With utility sets, the best bet is to leverage life skills, but you're a politician. I'm not saying that doesn't involve skills, but they're not the kinds that are as easy to leverage as being a cook or a sailor."

"We have a combination here that we think will work for you," Jason said.

"It's a combination that political leaders in my world often use," Farrah said. "It's centred around knowledge and perception."

"What if I don't want that?" Amy asked. "I'm comfortable with my political capabilities as they are. What if I want some proper magic powers? Fireballs and lightning bolts."

Jason and Farrah shared a glance, Farrah snorting a laugh.

"Jason said you might say something like that," Farrah said. "That's why we prepared another option for you to choose from. Just to be clear, I don't think this is the way you should go. This is a raw combat combination, and you have two little girls. It's not the time to go throwing yourself into danger with no training."

"Which is something we've also taken into account," Jason said. "We've picked out a combination based around what I call the Thadwick Principle. It's all about maximising damage output and minimising skill requirements."

“The idea,” Farrah said, “is that you pump out a lot of power very quickly. We’re envisaging a scenario where your family encounters some manner of unexpected threat and you can respond with extreme force. You won’t be up for an extended fight, but you’ll be able to finish a short one definitively. This is something like my approach, by the way.”

“The combination is built around the gun essence,” Jason said. “Guns are relatively easy to learn to at least a competent level. They also make a strong platform for humans, who are better at magical special attacks than full-blown magic spells.”

“The big thing you’ll need to learn is mana management, which I can teach you,” Farrah said. “As I said, the burst-of-power approach is how I operate.”

They waited for Amy to respond as she considered their proposal.

“Guns,” she said finally. “That isn’t exactly fireballs and lightning bolts.”

“You understand the basics of an essence combination,” Jason said. “Three essences, combining to make a fourth.”

He plucked three cubes out of the air to plonk on the table, one after another. The first was gunmetal grey.

“Gun essence,” he said.

The next cube looked like glass containing a swirling mix of red, orange, and yellow.

“Fire essence.”

The last was a dark blue cube with lightning arcing about on the inside from a central orb, like a plasma sphere.

“Lightning essence,” he said. “Your husband conjures up a helicopter. What we’re talking about here are flamethrowers and lightning guns.”

Amy trepidatiously reached out to pick up the lightning essence, then turned it over in her hands as she examined it.

“It’s tingling my fingers,” she said.

Jason and Farrah waited. Amy had seen essences before, but this was her first time holding one in her hands.

“Lightning gun?” she asked.

“Lightning gun,” Jason said.

Amy nodded to herself, a smile playing over her lips.

“Alrighty, then.”

As they rode back to Ken's property in Shade's car form, Jason bowed his head, rubbing his fingers into his temple.

"Part of me still wants to have nothing to do with them," Jason said. "I left and cut them out of my life for years and I'm not entirely convinced that wasn't better."

"It's a mess," Farrah said, "but if you start carving up your family, you can't do the things you want to do."

Jason, Farrah and Hiro had been going through long discussions about the future. Jason was no longer just hopeful of going back to the other world, but certain it would happen. He needed to know that the family left behind would be able to handle whatever came in the wake of magic going public.

Originally, that had been built around Erika and her family, but if they ended up joining him in the other world, that would obviously change. He was not fully convinced that was a good idea.

"It's coming up on time for you to put aside family concerns, at least for the moment," Farrah said. "We'll essence up your parents and then it's time to focus on our development. I need to get a handle of my new power levels and it's past time you did some more aura work. You've been putting it off."

Since accepting the World-Phoenix's blessing and the transfiguration it engendered, Jason's aura had become more powerful than ever. It had reached the point where his once-excellent control was no longer able to finesse his aura as well as it had in the past. Even before that point, he had occasionally lost control during moments of emotional distress.

Farrah had given Jason his original training, which he had supplemented with his own practise and occasional help from others. Danielle Geller, especially, had given him some useful guidance around the time she recruited him to teach aura control himself. She helped him come to grips with his enhanced soul power after his encounter with the Builder's star seed. It had reached the point where his aura strength was outstripping his ability to control it with precision, a situation he found himself in once again.

After discussing it with Farrah, they had decided that Jason needed a new aura control paradigm, stripping his old habits to the bone and retraining from scratch. The key to their approach would be him learning to

wield his aura on normal humans with art and finesse. If he could control fine applications of his aura with precision, his gross applications would become all the more refined.

For this reason, they had recruited Craig Vermillion. Jason had been impressed from the beginning with Vermillion's nuanced aura control and wished to learn from him. Vermillion, in turn, was interested in applying techniques from the other world. As Jason was impressed with his fine control, Vermillion wished to learn Jason and Farrah's methods of weaponising auras.

The first meeting between Farrah and Craig had not gone well, but Farrah had arrested her sword-swing when Jason interposed himself. It took some time to convince Farrah that Craig wasn't an irredeemable predator. Her feelings were so strong that Jason was left wondering about vampires in the other world.

He had not met any vampires before Craig other than the controlled minions of a blood weaver monster. Was there something about the higher magic of Pallimustus that affected vampire behaviour, or was it a matter of prejudice? He wondered if the troubles with essence-born vampires and monsters like the blood weaver had tainted public opinion on vampirism.

It was possible that the differences were societal in nature. In a world of forensic science and erotic vampire novels, had the vampires of Earth simply adapted to a more effective lifestyle?

Vermillion's new lifestyle of lazy days and his secluded mansion had grown on him quickly. He showed no signs of missing the stern agent of the Cabal Jason had first met and his laconic attitude had won Farrah over.

"Once we've done Mum and Dad's essences, I'd like to pull back from the family stuff," Jason said. "From time to time, I've found myself getting caught up in events and I've found it beneficial in those times to get back to basics. Put aside everything else for a while and focus on the fundamentals. I loved those early days, training with you and Rufus and Gary."

"I thought you'd crack immediately," Farrah said. "You were weirdly driven, though."

"Erika's going to be like that too," Jason said. "You've seen what her daughter is like. Erika won't like using cores."

"Emi is oddly intense, even in the early training we've given her," Farrah said. "Right now, I see her as the only one who should forgo cores,

and that's only because we have the time to train her properly. We don't have skill books to cover, the way we did for you."

"We'll give them some training, though," Jason said.

"Of course," Farrah agreed. "Erika will realise that she has enough to learn just mastering the utility uses of her powers. We'll help them with the combat aspects, but only enough to get by. Unless they're fighting monsters on a regular basis, it isn't worth the training time. Despite what Rufus will tell you, sometimes core advancement is the best choice."

"I still need to teach them all about the most basic stuff," Jason said. "They can sense auras now, which is going to weird them out. I don't think we told them they don't poop anymore."

"Didn't the Network offer to take all that off your hands?" Farrah asked.

"Hey, you're right," Jason said, brightening up. "I forgot after Erika dragged her feet, but they wanted to do a big 'welcome to magic' seminar."

He took out his phone and called Ketevan. Anna's former deputy had filled her spot as Director of Operations smoothly as Anna moved up into the Steering Committee.

"How bad is it?" Ketevan said by way of greeting. "Please tell me you didn't sink your town into the ocean like Atlantis or something."

"Nothing like that," Jason said. "Does that offer to run my family through the Network family induction program still stand?"

"As in, we tell them how to navigate the magic world instead of you?" Ketevan asked.

He heard her sitting up straighter in her chair, just from the change in her tone.

"I'll set it up immediately," she said. "When can they come in? We could send a bus. Or a helicopter. Actually, I'll send a team to you. What's the time? Right, I'll have them come in overnight and we can do it first thing. You won't be there, right?"

"I will not," Jason said.

"Great! I mean, that's fine. We'll rent a space. I'll send you all the details."

"Actually, can you just run it all through my sister?" Jason asked.

"No problem whatsoever. We have all her contact details."

"Alright, then," Jason said. "Just to let you know, I'm in the process of shoving a bunch of essences up in them. I'm mostly done now."

"We really would have liked you to consult with us on that."

“Well, we can do that for anyone else,” Jason said. “I’ll tell Erika to expect your people to get in contact.”

After ending the call, Jason leaned back into the seat. The shadow-stuff seat Shade produced was akin to cloud furniture in comfort and he felt the tension melt out of him.

“Once we give Dad his essences,” he said, “we can do Mum last and we’re done.”

“Do you want to go over your father’s essences again?” Farrah asked.

“Not after what you were like with Uncle Hiro,” Jason said. “Every time we finalised the essences to give him, you started swapping them around.”

“I’ve always wanted to have an apprentice with the right essences for array magic,” Farrah said. “I didn’t expect it to be an old man, but your uncle’s a dedicated learner. I just want to make sure we had the best combination for him.”

“Do you realise what I had to trade away to get another renewal essence?”

“I’m guessing a pile of stuff you didn’t want anyway.”

“A big pile,” Jason said. “A really big pile.”

“Anyway, it left you the vast essence to give to your father.”

“What was the final combination we gave Hiro again? At this point, I don't even remember, and I conducted the ritual.”

“The final combination was renewal, rune, and balance to make the prosperity confluence.”

“Why did we pick balance over magic again?”

“It will help with getting formations to adapt to their environment. Since we now know that the magical density of your world is in flux, you’re going to want stability and flexibility in your permanent magical emplacements.”

“Okay,” Jason said wearily. “I know I should care. Uncle Hiro deserves that, but the tank is empty. I’ll care tomorrow. Next week at the outside.”

“Leave Hiro to me,” Farrah said.

“Okay.”

“We still have to do your parents, though. Are you sure about your mother’s combination?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “She’s such a Japanophile that she’ll take a lotus confluence over anything, even if it’s a terrible fit. Sword and water are

cheap essences, and even after trading so many away, I'm still thick with plant essences."

"What's a Japanophile?"

"I'm selling the land," Ken told Jason. "In the end, it was a project to help me get over the loss of my son, and my boy came back to me."

Ken caught Jason in a hug. Even when the family wearied him the most, his father's warm and undemanding support was a balm.

"I've decided to look towards the future, instead of the past," Ken said. "I'm going to help Hiro in his project. We're going to build something for the family."

"You were hesitant about taking essences," Jason said. "That's going to be a major magical endeavour."

Ken shook his head.

"I've been thinking about it a lot," he said. "There was a time that you needed me, and I wasn't there. That's not happening again. If this is your world now, then I'm in. All the way."

Jason's face broke into a smile, and he hugged his father again.

"You know," Jason said, "Kaito can conjure a helicopter out of thin air now."

"Is it Airwolf?" asked Ken, the original sinner of his children's obsession with eighties action-adventure shows.

"Kind of," Jason said. "It's the same company that made the Bell 222, except it's a concept helicopter. They haven't even made a working prototype yet, according to Kai. It kind of looks like a sci-fi submarine."

"Nice. Does that mean I could magic up a talking Trans-am?"

"I've already got a talking car, Dad. You don't want a *Team Knight Rider* situation."

"No, you don't," Ken said, shaking his head. "That boy Taika, what is in his head?"

"I know he got involved in some bad stuff when he was younger, back in New Zealand," Jason said. "His father got him out and brought the whole family to Australia. Probably because he heard about the *Team Knight Rider* thing and knew his son was on a bad path."

Farrah shook her head. “Can we just move on to the magic powers, please?”

“You know,” Ken said, “I saw those mirage chambers in your recordings. You could use them to make a show about a knight with a talking horse that solves crime.”

“A black horse with red eyes,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Ken agreed.

Farrah put an exasperated hand over her eyes.

“They picked the wrong guy to save the world,” she grumbled.

I NEED TIME

Jason heard Hiro, Ken and Farrah having a discussion as he trudged through his houseboat towards the bar lounge.

"…point of setting it up this way is so that it can be modified as magical conditions change," Farrah was explaining.

"Do you expect magical conditions to change?" Hiro asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Farrah looked up at Jason as he made his way through the door.

"For now," she said, "let's just say that I'm confident they will."

Jason slumped into a chair and Shade approached, placing on the table a tray bearing an immaculately plated omelette, a large glass of juice and a neatly folded cloth napkin.

"Thanks, Shade," Jason said with a tired smile. "You're getting pretty good at this."

"I have been watching the old episodes of Mrs Asano's first cooking show on the internet," Shade said. "It has many useful tips for people new to the methods and ingredients of this universe."

Farrah, Hiro and Ken shared a look and got up, the men greeting Jason on their way out. Farrah dropped down into the seat opposite Jason.

"You look tired for a man who slept this late," she said.

He didn't answer immediately, having a forkful of omelette in his mouth. He took his time, chewing slowly before putting down his fork and dabbing at his mouth with his napkin.

"I've been thinking about when you and I first met," Jason said. "Not the very first part, with the sacrificing and the shovel."

“I think that was mostly you.”

“I’m talking about the little village with the waterfall.”

“Didn’t I see that village getting destroyed in your recordings?”

“You did,” Jason said.

“You seem to have some fate with that village,” Farrah said. “Every time you go there, you’re protecting it from monsters.”

“Not protecting it well enough. At least the people got out, but their homes were razed to the ground. The Duke sent funds, so hopefully, they’re back and resettled by now. I was thinking about before all that, when the three of us were passing through. I was so lost, still half-convinced that I’d gone mad. I knew almost nothing of where I was and what was happening, and what I did know, I didn’t believe.”

“I remember,” Farrah said. “You were kind of a mess. Although you befriended that whole town in about a day.”

“Those people were the first thing that made sense to me,” Jason said. “They reminded me of Uncle Robbo. My mum’s whole side of the family, really, except Mum herself. I used to spend a lot of time with them because it annoyed her. She didn’t like to be reminded that she came from common stock.”

“I’ve met your Uncle Robbo I think twice,” Farrah said. “I still like him more than her.”

“That’s a common reaction. So, I was in this village, with no idea of what to do and caught up with strangers that, to me, were very strange indeed.”

“I’m not strange,” Farrah said.

“That depends on context.”

“Speak for yourself,” Farrah said. “I used to think everyone from your world was strange, but it’s really just you, your sister, and your sister’s kid. You’re all weird, irrespective of context.”

“Anyway,” Jason said. “The point is that I was feeling completely adrift. No direction, no purpose. That was when Rufus told me something that was really important to my time in your world. This one too, really.”

“If you say so,” Farrah said. “I mostly remember Rufus kicking Anisa off the contract.”

“He told me that your world was a chance to reinvent myself. To become the person I wanted to be, without the baggage of my old life. I didn’t always succeed, but I always tried.”

“Ah,” Farrah said. “Now you find yourself back here and weighed down with all that baggage you put aside.”

“Exactly. I don’t think reconnecting with who I used to be is intrinsically bad, though. Back then, I was a naïve idealist who had never had his principles put to the test. It felt like every time my ideals were put under strain, they crumbled. I think it’s good for me to take another look at those principles. Yes, they were foolish and innocent, but they also represented ideals that I think are worth striving for.”

“You want to be the best of both worlds.”

“Literally. The problem is, I feel like I’m becoming the worst of them. All the baggage from here bringing out the reactionary aggression that kept me alive over there.”

“The solution seems obvious. Ever since you returned to your world, you’ve been introducing your family to magic, dealing with a world you never realised was full of magic, working to rescue me. Usually, more than one of those at the same time.”

“You went through worse after getting here.”

“I did,” Farrah said, “but at least what I went through was simple. You’ve been fighting through a tangle and we both know you get caught up in your own head, while I can think in nice, clean lines. I see my direction and I walk it, while you can’t help diving into the weeds. You need to step away for a while and find your way back to a straight path.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Jason said. “I’m going to start by letting Erika take over the family stuff and pulling out of Network activity while I get my aura control in order. Then I might take off for a bit.”

“Some time to clear your head would do you well. You may wish to get away from home altogether.”

“I think I will. I’ve been to another world, yet there’s so much of this one I haven’t seen. It might just be time to remedy that. I’ll need you to watch over things while I’m gone. I’ll take most of the Shades with me, but I’ll leave one so you can always reach me and I can check in. One for Emi too. If something happens, Shade can get her to you.”

“How long will this sojourn of yours be?” Farrah asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “As long as it takes that I can come back without losing myself.”

“Really?” Erika said. “Everything that’s going on and you want to take a gap year to bum around backpacking?”

“This is new to you, Eri,” Jason said. “For me, everything has been going on for a while.”

They were on the roof deck of the houseboat as Jason explained his intentions.

“Jason, do you really think that now is the best time to be traipsing off?” Erika asked.

“I won’t go for a few weeks, but yes. I have responsibilities that I’m not ready to meet. I need time, Eri. Time away from monster armies and interdimensional invasions. From secret societies and from family so caught up in their own revelations that they don’t stop to think about what I’ve been through, even when I recorded THE ENTIRE BLOODY THING!”

He got out of his chair and paced to the edge of the deck, drawing a sharp breath he didn’t need and slowly letting it out. He leaned on the railing, looking out over the water. The day was overcast, painting the sea grey.

“I’m sorry,” he said, any emotion washed out of his voice. “That wasn’t for you.”

“Yes, it was,” she chuckled. “I want you to yell at me. You always box everything away and hide it behind a clown mask. I’m glad that you’re willing to open up.”

“I need time, Eri,” he said again, still staring out at the ocean. “I’m dangerously off balance and I can’t afford to be. My mistakes can really hurt people and my failures…”

He hung his head.

“How am I meant to save the world?” he asked, his voice cracking. “How can that be on me? Two years ago, I was selling staples and rubber bands. You know what a mess I was. How can anyone expect me to not bugger this up?”

Erika moved up to Jason and put an arm around his shoulder.

“I always knew you could do great things, Jason. I was more thinking state parliament than fighting evil, but still.”

He snorted a laugh, in spite of himself.

“This whole thing is absurd,” he said. “It has been from the beginning. I took a lot of stupid risks because in my head, it never felt quite real. Then Farrah died, and all of a sudden, it was, but I just kept taking risks because I

felt invincible. Then I was grabbed and someone tried to feed me to the Builder. That hit me for six, but eventually, I was back to risk-taking because that's what had to be done. And we did get it done."

Erika sighed.

"We've been so caught up in all the strangeness you brought home that we never thought about the fact that you went through all of that and more. And you had to do it when you were lost, alone, and in danger. We see the way you are now, and don't think about how you must have been then. Now I can't help thinking about how much you didn't put in those recordings."

"There was some crazy stuff," Jason said. "Me and this guy, Hiram, got shot off the side of a mountain by a magic waterfall. It stopped all of a sudden, and we were trying to figure out why when it started up again. We were fine, because magic powers. That was my third day."

"I can't imagine."

"That's nothing," he said. "I met gods, Eri. Actual, honest-to-goodness gods. Standing in their presence, you can feel the divine power blasting over you. It's like a tsunami with a superiority complex. If they want it to be anyway. They can tone it down, but they generally don't. Reap the wonder of the masses and whatnot."

"I'm not sure how to respond to that," Erika said.

"You said you want to come with," Jason said. "If you do, you'll see them for yourself. Gods aren't shy."

She sighed again.

"I want to be here for you, little brother. But you talk about these things, and I don't know how to empathise, as much as I want to. You're describing things so far removed from anything I know. I guess that's the problem, isn't it? Farrah is the only one who really understands what you've been through."

"In so many ways," Jason said. "We both know what it is to wake up in a strange world. What it is to die. I died, Eri. I know you've all been ignoring it because here I am alive and I've been known to say some outlandish things, but it happened. I died. It was violent and painful and I wasn't expecting to come back. I felt that certainty that my life was over."

"I can't imagine. I keep saying that, but it keeps being true."

"It's not just the things that were done to me either. It was the things I did. I killed people. I saved people. I've been a hero saving lives and a

monster reaping them. I found companions who mean everything to me; only you and Emi mean as much."

"I want to see that world," Erika said. "I want to share your experiences. See those wonders and understand those horrors."

"If that's still what you want when the time to go back comes," he said, "then I'll take you. There's still plenty of time to decide, one way or the other. I can't make promises about the other side, though. It's a world where my power is insignificant."

"I can't not go," Erika said. "Not now that I know what's out there. Ian's the same. I know he plays the straight man to his wife and daughter, but he has a beautiful passion in his soul. I married him for a reason. And as for our daughter… Well. At this stage, if we tried to keep her from the other world, she'd never forgive us."

"Farrah and I have been talking," Jason said. "If you're really serious about coming with us, you need to start making some big choices now."

"Such as?"

"Taking Emi out of school. She already knows more than most kids do by the time they leave high school. What they have left to teach her won't matter in the other world. She needs proper, intensive training."

"Only if she's going to fight monsters," Erika said. "I don't want that for her."

"Mum had specific ideas about what she did and didn't want for me," Jason pointed out. "It didn't work out so well for her, but I suppose it won't be like that for you and Emi. She's nothing like me."

"Point taken," Erika said. "I just want her to be safe. I know you said that safe may not be an option, though, even if we stay here."

"Just start giving the idea of home schooling some thought," Jason said. "I know how big a change that is. It's deciding the future of your family in a single moment."

"Home schooling," Erika said. "You can't train her if you're off who knows where."

"Farrah can train her better than I can. And I won't be gone forever. While I am, I'll need you to step up and take the family in hand. Did Ketevan call you yet?"

"Yesterday afternoon. I had to dampen her enthusiasm. She would have had us all in a room at six in the morning, given her way."

"I think she wants to steer you away from my influence."

“That’s a sound approach to most things,” Erika said, squeezing her brother’s shoulder warmly. “I really am glad you’re opening up, Jase. I want to be there for you; you just have to let me. Tell me that you aren’t leaving just to run away.”

“I’m not running,” he said. “I know who I was here and who I was there. I need the time and the space to figure out who I am in both. Who I want to be, and how to find my way to that.”

“Alright,” Erika said. “You’ll have to take a lot of Uncle Jason time before you go, you realise.”

“There are worse burdens,” he said.

Sitting in a meditative pose, Jason opened one eye to watch Farrah floating in the air.

“You’re not concentrating,” she scolded, her eyes remaining closed.

Levitation, Jason had discovered, was a perk of reaching silver-rank. It was an intrinsic property of a silver-rank soul, allowing the aura it projected to physically affect the environment. Jason’s aura, despite being stronger than Farrah’s, could not equal the feat. It was a quality versus quantity issue; Jason lacked not the aura power but the inherent properties of a silver-rank soul. Which hadn’t stopped him from wasting a good amount of time trying to replicate it anyway.

“You need to get back to aura training,” Farrah admonished. “This levitation isn’t even a practical ability. It requires intense concentration, has minimal effect, and is easy to disrupt with just some basic aura suppression.”

“Yeah, but floating as you meditate looks super cool.”

When rebuilding his suite of aura control techniques from scratch, Jason drew on various sources of knowledge, experience and inspiration. Farrah’s instruction was the bedrock, as her mastery of orthodox aura control technique made the perfect foundation onto which he could build more exotic approaches.

That began with his own experiences. He had seen a lot and frequently used his aura in combat. His soul had been savaged to the limit of tolerance

and, with help, come back stronger than ever. All of that gave him a wealth of personal experience to incorporate into his new aura control praxis.

Vermillion also had contributions to make. While the vampire's aura operated somewhat dissimilarly to an essence user's, he had numerous insights into fine aura control, having spent decades using it on normals without them ever being the wiser.

A source of inspiration was the sole diamond-ranker Jason had met, the Mirror King. His aura had felt like a part of the world around it, as if his very nature was in perfect symbiosis with the world. Jason had only been an iron-ranker at the time, with only the beginnings of the aura strength he now possessed. He didn't know if the Mirror King's aura truly did merge into the world around it or if it was some manner of exquisite technique. Either way, he kept the Mirror King in mind as he established not only a new baseline for his aura techniques but set a path for further growth.

The final pillar on which Jason supported his new techniques was Shade. The elusive shadow entity had a natural proclivity for stealth and years of practise that put the Mirror King to shame. He had an extensive knowledge of Order of the Reaper stealth techniques and the accumulated knowledge of previous essence users he had also served as a familiar.

Jason had never been able to emulate Shade's own aura-masking prowess. Shade's method of producing an aura was more alien than Vermillion's, or at least, it had been. With the World-Phoenix's blessing, Jason's spiritual nature had grown much closer to that of an astral being. The methodologies didn't directly translate, but Jason was able to glean at least some insights from Shade's bounty of knowledge and experience.

Over the course of a month, Jason spent almost every moment either in seclusion on the houseboat or discussing aura techniques with Farrah, Shade or Vermillion. Whenever he took a break, he sought out his niece, not for training but simply for family time. He had already passed Emi's nascent training program fully into Farrah's hands. The only other exception to his dedicated training was a weekly gathering of friends and his closest family.

WALKABOUT

JASON HAD SATISFIED HIMSELF THAT HIS NEWLY REFINED AURA control techniques were adequate. It was now time for a test, which Vermillion had devised for him. That had brought Jason, Vermillion and Farrah to a large shopping centre in Sydney, where they were sitting on a bench not far inside the entrance.

"I'm not sure this is the best idea," Jason said. "If I don't get this right, the Network won't be happy."

"There has to be a failure condition," Vermillion said. "If there's no pressure, it isn't a proper test of your abilities."

"A gold-ranker can use their aura to pass through a crowd unnoticed," Farrah said. "A high-end silver can do the same, and you're approaching that level of aura strength."

"Strength aside," Jason countered, "I don't actually have a silver-rank aura. Otherwise, I'd be able to levitate."

"Levitation is a capability inherent to silver-rank auras," Farrah said. "What you're attempting here is a matter of strength correctly applied. You're used to masking your aura when you're sneaking around. This is a more sophisticated version of that."

"That's an understatement to the point of being a lie," Jason said.

Farrah had originally trained Jason in the three basic functions of aura control: projecting his aura, retracting his aura and suppressing the auras of others. All aura control techniques were variations or extensions of those three. After Farrah's death, Jason had mostly developed his skills through experience, with only occasional external guidance.

With the experience he had under his belt, plus the assistance of his companions, he had rebuilt his skill set from the ground up, learning to express the three basic functions in more sophisticated ways.

What he was about to attempt was a technique that required the precise and nuanced application of all three functions at once. Firstly, he needed to blend projection and retraction, seemingly contrary effects, to merge his aura into the ambient magic. He had no illusions of matching the Mirror King's achievements in this area, but that had been the inspiration for what he was attempting.

The other—and trickiest—aspect of what he was doing was an application of aura suppression. It needed to be delicate, complex and painstakingly precise, as it directly impacted the aura senses of others.

A person's aura senses were largely a function of their aura itself. Even normals could sense auras on some level if the auras were strong and directed enough. For most practical purposes, they were aura blind unless someone with aura control didn't want them to be.

After a lengthy discussion with Vermillion on how vampires manipulated auras, Jason had been working on variations of aura suppression that manipulated the aura senses of others, rather than suppressing their whole aura. Vampires naturally excelled in this area, while Jason had not realised it was even possible. Farrah had never introduced him to it because essence users could usually only match what a vampire could manage at much higher rank. Jason's absurdly ramped-up aura strength changed that.

He could not directly mimic the techniques of vampires or high-end essence users. Shade had techniques that outstripped both, to the point of being able to confuse digital recordings, but Jason could not match that either. Instead, he blended aspects from all three to develop a bespoke technique tailored to the unusual properties of his unique aura. This was the theme of all his new aura-control skills.

The goal of his current activity was to pass through a crowd of normals unnoticed. It was not, strictly speaking, invisibility. Rather, the idea was to prevent the perceptions of others from registering his presence. The crux of the process was enacting the technique while keeping the people he was enacting it upon from noticing. If they sensed his manipulations, the effect would be the exact opposite of the desired outcome.

With his current prowess, Jason was only willing to attempt it with normal people, who were effectively aura blind and had the least chance of sensing what he was doing. Even then, he was far from certain it would work. It would take considerably more practice before he could use it on even freshly minted iron-rankers like his family.

"Do I have to use the cloak?" he asked. "That seems like asking for trouble."

"We'll only know it's working if you use the cloak," Vermillion said. "Otherwise, they won't know you anyway because you'll just be some guy."

Jason frowned but didn't argue further as he got to his feet. He closed his eyes and extended his senses through his aura, feeling the people around him. Relaxing his body and soul, he let himself become one with his surroundings, his aura blending into the ambient magic. He could feel how inexpert he still was, but he sensed at least a basic level of success.

Next, he started oh-so-delicately affecting the auras around him. Like all applications of aura stealth, it was a deeply inefficient process that took a disproportional level of strength for his aura to operate unnoticed. With such precise work, even Jason's powerhouse aura was barely able to effectively impact the normal auras around him without it going awry. A month of practise was not enough to act with greater efficiency.

Jason's starlight cloak appeared around him, and he started walking through the shopping centre. Despite the Starlight Rider making his first public appearance in months, not a single person looked his way. On the contrary, their eyes seemed to slide off him, looking elsewhere without registering anything strange.

Shade, for his part, made sure that Jason showed up as no more than a blur on the shopping centre's security cameras. Jason was not sure if he would ever be able to replicate such an ability.

Jason walked the full length of the shopping centre, then went up a level and came back the other way. As a final test, he dropped off the mezzanine and floated down to Farrah and Vermillion, still undetected. His cloak vanished as he sat back on the bench with the others.

"That was good," Vermillion said. "A little too good, in fact."

"Too good?"

Vermillion handed a wad of cash over to Farrah.

"I told you that aura control was his strongest skill," she said.

“You bet on me getting in huge trouble with the Network?” Jason asked Vermillion.

“You don’t need to worry,” Vermillion said. “The Cabal will be happy to step in and cover for you.”

Erika and Ian were hosting the farewell barbecue for Jason’s departure. Emi, who normally clung to him like a limpet, was still angry about his leaving again. He could sense her watching him from her bedroom window. The backyard was packed full of friends and family, which made it a mixed bag both in terms of who knew about magic and who Jason wanted to avoid. It had been made very clear that there was to be no talk of magic, although Jason was not confident that would hold up. Once a few more beer kegs were emptied, he expected some slips, but everyone would be blotto by that point anyway.

As Greg and Jason waited their turn to get sausages from one of the grills, Greg leaned close and spoke in a low, conspiratorial voice.

“What’s going on with Farrah?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” Jason asked.

“I’m pretty sure she got hotter. Like, getting some work done hotter, but didn’t disappear long enough to have work done, the way you did.”

“I didn’t have any work done,” Jason said.

“I’ve known you since we were fourteen, Jase. Hormones don’t shave half your chin off.”

Jason gave up trying to respond. After getting his sausage, he left Greg peering suspiciously in Farrah’s direction and made some more rounds of family members.

“G’day, Nanna,” he said to his paternal grandmother, grinning at the glare it earned him. “Sorry, Grandmother.”

“Save your common colloquialisms for your other grandmother,” she said. “She’s classless enough to like them.”

“She’s not a yob, Grandmother. She had Alzheimer’s.”

Yumi Asano raised her eyebrows at Jason, then glanced over at his other grandmother, chugging a beer.

“Okay,” he acknowledged. “She might be bit of a yob.”

“I don’t suppose you know anything about her miraculous recovery?” Yumi asked. “Medically, it doesn’t make any kind of sense.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s a miracle,” Jason said. “Didn’t you hear what Great Aunt Marjory said?”

“I’d rather listen to the whine of the drill about to lobotomise me than that woman. The results would be essentially the same.”

Jason snorted a laugh, the corners of his grandmother’s lips turning up on her otherwise stern face.

“I don’t suppose you took the time to finally learn Japanese during your mysterious absence?” she asked.

“I might have picked up a few things.”

“Is that so?”

“I wanted to read manga in the original language. Are you a proper *One-Punch Man* fan, Grandmother, or do you only watch the anime like a prole?”

“You make me wish I’d taken worse care of myself,” she said. “Then I’d have a walking stick to hit you with.”

Jason chuckled as he leaned in to kiss her on the cheek.

“Don’t be too hard on Hiro while I’m away,” he told her.

“I’ll deal with my reprobate son by whatever means I deem appropriate.”

“Okay, but just remember that he’s doing better,” Jason said. “Don’t be so eager to punish him for his old ways that you push him back into them.”

“And how did you become so wise all of a sudden?”

“The usual way,” he said. “I made a lot of mistakes.”

Over the course of the afternoon and into the evening, Jason endured a cavalcade of awkward conversations with distant relatives and old acquaintances. Asya was a late arrival and took him aside for some magic-related chat.

“I’ve been working some bureaucratic wheels,” she said. “It took me longer than I liked, but I finally got approval.”

“Oh?” Jason prompted.

“I know it’s hard to maintain a friendship when you have to keep almost all of what you do secret,” she said. “I had Greg vetted and approved for essences.”

“Seriously? How did you get them to swallow that?”

“You going on walkabout has them worried,” she said. “They haven’t liked not having your looting services during your month of seclusion. If it wasn’t for the strike teams Farrah set up doing so well, the Sydney Steering Committee would be getting downright obstreperous. You’re lucky you have Anna on the committee now. She may not love the way you do things, but she understands how valuable you are and trusts that you’ll be loyal.”

“Where does that trust come from?”

“Me,” Asya said.

Jason chuckled.

“I’m guessing the fact that I never really asked much from them is a factor.”

“Yes. One they’ve come to regret, in fact. If you’d gotten more out of them, there’d be more of an obligation to not wander off.”

“Funny, that,” Jason said. “It’s almost like I didn’t want to be pinned down.”

“I'd appreciate it if you threw the International Committee the occasional bone while you're out and about,” Asya said. “There are branches all around the world that would love for you to drop in on their incursions.”

“You mean they’d like my looting power to drop in.”

“It’s a good way to spread some goodwill,” Asya said. “If we’re extra lucky, having a branch-agnostic running around like Santa Claus might even foster some inter-branch unity.”

“No pressure, then. I think I can manage something like that.”

He glanced over at Greg, who spotted him and nodded a greeting.

“You’ll need to run Greg through your Network program,” he said. “I doubt your bosses want me teaching anyone from scratch.”

“That’s the idea,” Asya said. “He’s approved for essences, but he won’t be cleared to actually get them until he’s been through our welcome-to-magic induction. We’ll have him ready by the time you get back. You’ll need to supply the essences yourself, by the way.”

He gave her a warm smile.

“Thanks, Asya. You keep going to bat for me, time and again. Don’t think I haven’t noticed. How about you and I do something fun together after I get back?”

“I’d really like that,” she said.

“I still need to do a few hellos and goodbyes,” he said. “I’m going to break the news to Greg, by the way.”

“We’d prefer to do that,” she said.

“I reckon you would,” Jason said.

She snorted a laugh.

“You can be incredibly obnoxious, you know that?”

He responded only with a flashing grin as he wandered off. Greg meandered over and took his place.

“Asked him out yet?” Greg asked her.

“How is that your business?”

“I started watching you moon over that guy ten years ago,” he said. “He was missing, presumed dead, but then he mysteriously reappears. Now he’s going to vanish again for who knows how long. What does it take for you to make a move, lady?”

“It's a lot more complicated than you realise. And I don’t exactly see you with a full dance card, Greg.”

“Yeah,” he said, “but I'm the stand-by-himself-in-the-corner guy. You’re not meant to be here with me.”

“You shouldn’t put yourself down like that,” she said.

“Didn’t you just put me down?”

“That’s why you shouldn’t pile it on yourself.”

“Just give it a few more years of standing in the corner,” Greg said. “Piling onto yourself will be what passes for date night.”

“Ew.”

After making sure he spoke to everyone, Jason made a discreet exit. Most of the people there were less interested in Jason than they were a booze-up anyway, so he was able to grab Greg and slip away unnoticed.

“What’s going on?” Greg asked.

“We’re going for a ride,” Jason said.

“Oh, you need a designated driver.”

“Actually, we don’t need any driver.”

“Oh, do I finally get to see the famous self-driving car? Where do you store that thing? It's never parked at the marina.”

Jason let out a chuckle.

“Are you ready for your life to be changed forever?”

“Only since I was fourteen,” Greg said. “What’s going on?”

“Greg, I know you’ve picked up on a strange vibe around me and the people I know.”

“You faked your death and came back under circumstances I’m still not exactly clear on,” Greg said. “I could be in a coma and pick up vibes that strange.”

“Well, tonight’s the night you learn what’s going on.”

“Yeah? Alright, then. What’ve you got?”

“Well,” Jason said. “Let’s start with the fact that magic is real and Asya is part of a secret society that hides it from the world, but she got permission to let me tell you all about it.”

“Okay,” Greg said. “That’s a bit odd. Did someone slip you a baked good of dubious provenance?”

“It wouldn’t do anything,” Jason said. “I’m immune to ordinary drugs.”

“What does that mean?”

“I have vast magic powers,” Jason said. “I’m kind of a warlock ninja. I’ll explain everything, but we start by getting in my car.”

“What car? Seriously, are you on some kind of hallucin…”

Greg trailed off as a cloud of darkness erupted from Jason’s shadow and took the form of a large supercar.

“What the…?”

“This is your yacht?” Greg asked.

“Yep. I was flying to France with Asya because Farrah was being held by some bad guys—”

“What?”

“Don’t sweat the details; you can ask Asya later. Anyway, someone put a bomb on the plane, and it blew up in the air, so—”

“WHAT?”

“If you keep interrupting, I’ll never get through this,” Jason said happily, relishing his friend’s flabbergasted state.

“You were in a plane that blew up?”

“Yeah, it was pretty rough, and they had guys waiting for survivors in the water. On this very boat, in fact. So, I dropped down onto the boat and took care of business.”

“You skydived out of an exploding plane?”

“The others skydived; I just dropped down. Magic powers, remember? Anyway, long story short, I beat the guys so badly that when I told them I was taking the boat, they apparently thought I meant literally. They signed it over to me and drove it here after I’d gone off to get Farrah.”

“Jason, every single thing you’ve told me tonight is utter madness.”

“I know, believe me. And we’ve only just scratched the surface. You remember the Starlight Rider?”

“Of course I do,” Greg said. “It was all over the television for weeks. Wait, are you saying…?”

“What’s got two thumbs and killed a bunch of bikers hungry for vampire blood? This guy.”

Greg shook his head.

“You’ve shown me some crazy things tonight, Jason, but this all sounds like crazy fanfic drivel.”

“I know. I probably should have let Asya and her secret society bring you in easy, but I kind of love just throwing all the madness out there and watching people—in this case, you—slowly realise it’s all true. Come on; I'll pass you off to Asya and she can help you break it all down.”

Jason opened a portal arch.

“After you, my friend.”

“After me what?” Greg asked.

“I’m taking you back to my sister’s house,” Jason said. “You left your car there and I want to say goodbye. I told everyone I’m leaving tomorrow, but I’m heading out tonight. Oh, sorry. I forgot to tell you that’s a teleportation gate.”

After Greg managed to stop himself from throwing up on Erika's bedroom floor from portal sickness, Jason fobbed him off on Asya. Jason brought Erika and Emi through the portal to his yacht. Emi stood apart from Jason, glaring at him. He gave her an awkward smile.

"There will come a day, Moppet, when you and I will have grand adventures."

"Why not now?" she pouted. "You could take me with you."

"This is something I need to do for myself," he said. "Only you and Farrah will have Shades with you, so only you two can talk to me whenever you want."

"You say that like you don't have a phone," Emi said.

Jason didn't make any further progress before Erika said it was time to go and led her daughter back through the portal, leaving Jason alone. He was about to close the portal when Emi barrelled out of it to clasp him in vice-clamp hug.

"I love you, Uncle Jason. You have to come back, okay?"

He ruffled her hair.

"I love you too, Moppet."

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BOOK FIVE

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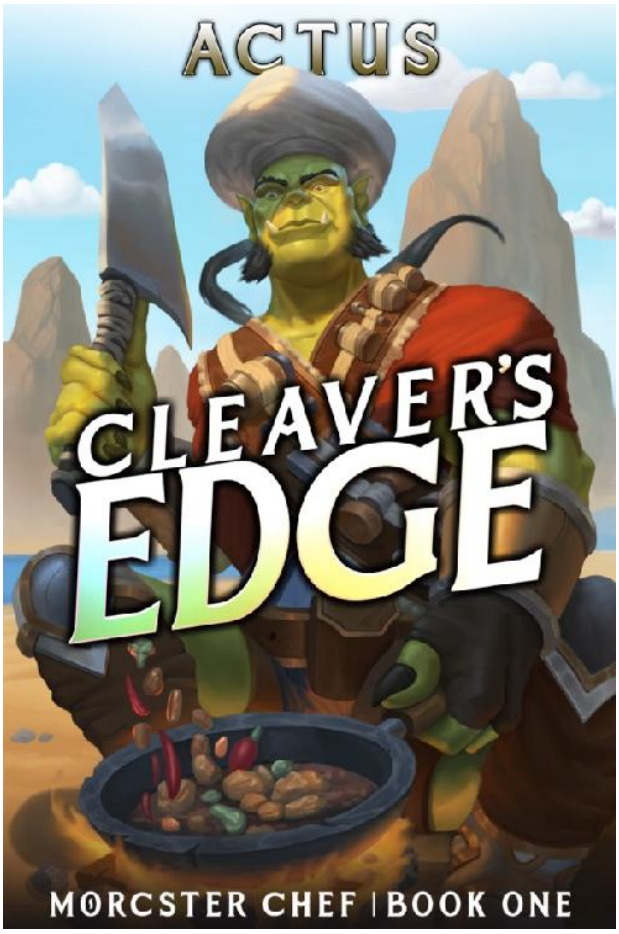
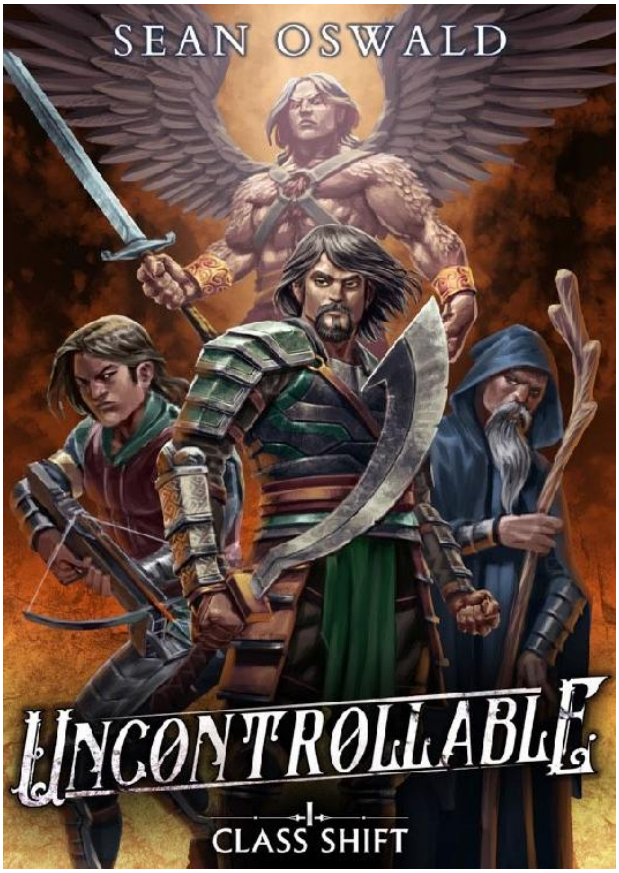


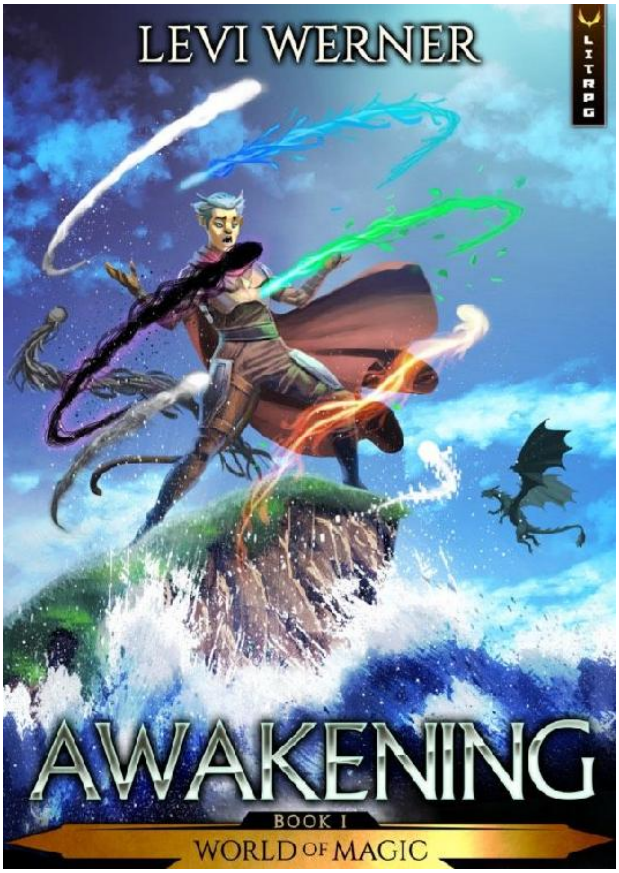
Cleaver's Edge is the first book in a Fantasy / LitRPG lite series with a cooking element that's perfect for the Holiday Season. It contains status windows and other RPG elements, but it is not set within a videogame. It will appeal to anyone that enjoys reading a slice-of-life fantasy about a group of adventurers as well as fans of *Food Wars!*.

Get Cleaver's Edge Now!



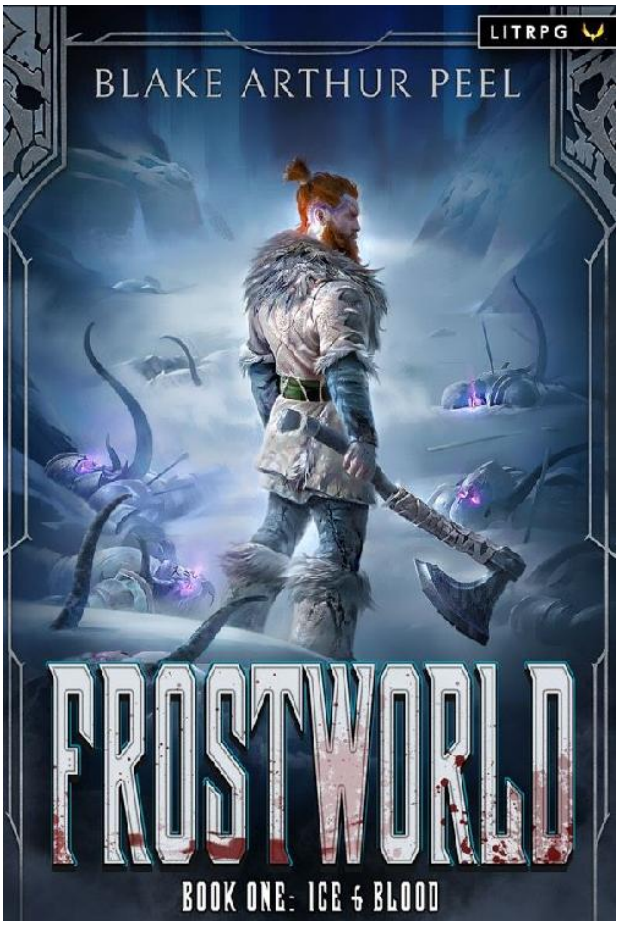
Whether it be the hero of legends or the character in a game, few things are more defining than Class.

Get Uncontrollable Now!



Paralyzed in a workplace accident, Lox's life is looking bleak. He can't even use the cutting-edge hardware that would allow him to play in the full-immersion-games that have become so popular. This all changes when he hears from New Universal Frontiers, the company with the best game out there: World of Magic.

GET AWAKENING TODAY!



On Frostworld, only the strong survive... Jarl Beckström dreams of one day becoming a great warrior. Sadly, he had the misfortune of being lowborn—classless, unable to level up. He lives the mundane life of a poor mud-farmer, subjected to the whims of the infamous battleborn and the magical fireborn. But legend says that deeds of great courage can change a person's class...

GET FROSTWORLD NOW!

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