

## Chapter 289

### Hegemons

The magical motorhome made its way north long the coast. On the bottom floor, the windows had turned opaque as Taika, Hiro and Vermillion watched some of Jason's earliest recording on a hologram-like recording crystal projector. Jason's clean-shaven, iron-rank appearance was somewhat different to his currant 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 that was a nebula within a floating cloak. It's four disembodied eyes were affixed 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 could feel the magical surge coming from the next room and he 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 chuckled.

“What do you think of these paintings?” Jason asked, gesturing at the wall behind Vermillion.

Vermillion turned to examine them, 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’re know her work?” Jason asked.

“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 making him think 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 were 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."

"I can make some inquiries, although she's famously reclusive."

"I'd appreciate that."

Vermillion's gaze went back to the first image and the pillar that reminded him of Gordon. The 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 told my uncle, some secrets are dangerous to learn, and they learned one of mine."

"I see," vermillion said.

"What is it you're working up to?" Jason asked.

Vermillion nodded to himself.

"I watched to 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," Jason said.

"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 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 fight altogether. I know hitting back is your instinctive reaction, but you’re not at war anymore. You need to start acting like it.”

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.”

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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 the roof deck and looking 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, then he wanted his family to be ready for the changes to come.

In this regard, dealing with the magical hegemony 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. Annabeth 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 regards 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 and 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 made far from easy. That was a long way from the assassin who attacked him from ambush. Although ostensibly untied, 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 more even 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 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.

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- 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.
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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 was willing to 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.