

Chapter 267

A Better Pants Solution

Jason regained consciousness surrounded by a fiery, transcendent energy, which immediately vanished and dropped him to the floor. The feel of cold tile on his body told him that he was naked, which he quickly confirmed by pushing himself into a sitting position and doing a quick visual inspection.

There were a bunch of system windows but he minimised them for the moment as he looked himself over. There was no light in the windowless room but his perception power let him see perfectly in the dark. He seemed intact, but feeling the cool air on his head, he patted it and realised that his hair had once again callously abandoned him. He thought it might be because hair was dead material, but so were fingernails, as far as he knew, and those were still present.

“Weird. Still, you’re alive, unexpectedly. Take the win.”

His body still carried the scars of his previous encounters. The long scar across his abdomen from the elemental tyrant; the many small scars where shards of star seed had been forced out of his flesh. They were familiar, but there were new ones as well. His chest was marked by a series of roughly circular scars where the Builder’s spikes had impaled his body. All in all, his torso was a mess.

He got to his feet, memories swirling through his head. The last thing he remembered was charging through the window, the pain of the stone spikes spearing into his body. The mad whirl as he fell, then fading into darkness, only to wake up wherever he now was. His brain was telling him it had only been moments since he fell from the tower, but his soul was telling him otherwise.

Jason didn’t truly remember the original battle for his soul against the Builder. He had some mixed-up, hazy recollections as the star seed took over, then was forced out of his brain. The true battle had been in the spiritual realm, his soul a small ship rocked by the stormy seas of the Builder’s will. Only by outlasting the star seed and cutting off the Builder had he been able to survive, but there were no clear memories of the confrontation. What remained were the feelings imprinted on his soul.

He had a similar sense now, of his soul having experienced an encounter for which his mind had not been present. He felt a compelling sense of having been with someone else, someone who should be present, yet he was alone. He spread his aura out over the entire building, his aura strength more than up for the task. He sensed nothing but small animals, birds, rats and bugs.

Mentally shaking off the odd feeling, he examined his surroundings. He was in a dilapidated room that was tiled on the walls and floor, completely empty except for Jason himself. The air was stale and clammy, with a taste of unhealthy growth on the air, like fungus or mould. There was a set of swinging double doors with small windows set into them. There was a lingering magic that was definitely the force that had delivered him here. It was fading quickly but he sensed the transcendent strength of it. By contrast, the ambient magic around him was otherwise incredibly anaemic, even compared to Greenstone. That was the default, for as far as his magical senses extended.

He was trying to collect his thoughts when he felt something building within him that he had experienced enough to recognise as a skill evolution. Given what he had been through, it was hardly surprising, although one thing was new. Instead of the blue-grey light of iron rank, the radiance that shining from within his body was an amber colour.

➤ [Outworlder racial ability \[Inventory\] has evolved to \[Spirit Vault\]](#).

Jason only glanced at the notice before minimising it with the others. He had too much to deal with as it was, sending his mind reeling. His team, his death and revival, the strange discordance between his mind and his soul. 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. He was almost certain he had bought them enough time to complete their task, but how long they survived afterwards was up in the air. Had Clive been fast enough to open the portal before the Builder's wrath caught up with them? He had been confident enough in Clive's ability to knock out a speedy ritual that he threw away his life to give him the chance, but there were no certainties. Jason had no regrets, knowing the lives that failure would have cost if the world engineers were awakened.

"Okay," he told himself, rubbing his hands over his face to shake the lingering sopor. "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."

Jason had a better pants solution than the last time he'd unexpectedly arrived somewhere, naked and bald. With a thought, dark mist engulfed him before disappearing as quickly as it had come, leaving Jason garbed in one of his prepared outfits. He went with a smart casual suit in the Vitesse style that looked much like a casual suit from his own world.

It was one of many outfits supplied for his winter wardrobe by Gilbert, although he looked forward to replacing everything with bronze-rank apparel once he got back to Greenstone. The iron-rank clothes had basic self-cleaning and repair enchantments, along with some very light protection. At bronze-rank, not only would those enchantments be stronger but it was more cost-effective to incorporate other utility magic.

With his clothes sorted out, he moved onto hair, carefully applying Jory's hair-growth cream. He had no doubt that the result was 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.

Now, Jason was confident that he would better handle those larger questions the way he better handled the issue of pants. To figure out what happened, he started pulling up the system messages.

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

“Bugger me. 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.

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- 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. Coming back from the dead was a pleasant surprise. The World-Phoenix token had always been a mystery, but in hindsight he felt it should have been obvious. Knowledge had told him that he lacked the faith to use it. He finally understood, since killing yourself to trigger it would require a lot of faith in it working.

Jason stopped pacing as realisation passed through him like a bolt of lightning. He was focusing on the token bringing him back from death, the startling function momentarily

pushing the function he already knew about from his mind. The moment he remembered, his whole body tingled with anticipation and he couldn't open his map fast enough. His eyes immediately shot to the listing of his current location.

➤ **Zone: Casselton West Regional Hospital [abandoned] (maternity ward).**

He stared at the words like a deer in headlights. After a long, stunned moment he turned his eyes to the map itself and started zooming out. He expanded out from the hospital to the whole town, then the whole Casselton region. There was his home town, Casselton Beach. Large portions of the map were uncovered; most the of the region, as he had travelled through most of it at one time or another. He kept expanding out, through the mid north coast, all of New South Wales, then the whole of Australia. When he zoomed out to the whole 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 through what he now recognised as heavy hospital doors and started rushing through the abandoned hospital. He had been born there but it had been closed down some fifteen years ago, now mostly a place for High School kids to come and smoke. It had been emptied out, leaving nothing to obstruct him as he rushed to find 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 had been located. It was deep into the night and the sky beat down with rain. Clouds obscured the moon and stars, but street lights reflected off the wet asphalt street. On the other side of the road was a takeaway store he remembered, closed for almost as long as the hospital. Next to it was the main depot for the Casselton regional bus service.

"I'm home."

The words came out in a tremulous whisper, as if he were scared that to say them would somehow make them untrue. His mind was once again sent staggering.

Jason's arrival in the magical world was a stark dividing line. What came before was so removed from what came after that the two seemed inimicable. Yet now he looked at his old world with his new eyes. The darkness did not obscure his sight, which was sharper than ever before. Colours had depth and nuance he had never realised, the air carried a complexity of scents he never realised. 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, with Jason's sister driving him 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 store seemed almost alien.

He took a long, deep breath. The ramifications of coming back were like a sudden storm 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 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 the dimensional barriers of both worlds and the astral void between. He was determined to do so, but had little idea of how.

Did they all survive? Did they know he had revived in his own world? While he had discussed the World-Phoenix token in broad terms with some of them, he 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 he 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 coming home. Did people think he was dead? How was he going to explain everything? What did he even need to explain? For all he knew, time moved at different paces between worlds. He may have been gone a week of subjective time or ten years.

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

"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 be

largely overlooked, but if he dropped an unmarked ten kilo bar at a booth in shopping centre, they would probably call the police.

The larger gold exchanges were watched more carefully. A retail employee who went missing for a year and a half, then showed up with a bunch of gold bars he couldn't explain the origins of 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 fraught with peril.

Jason could have used a sounding board but Shade was locked away within his soul. His familiars had retreated into his soul at the time he died, and he could still feel their spirits within his soul. Their vessels were no longer present in his body, however, which 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 familiar's 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 familiar's gave enhanced abilities when their vessels were subsumed, as they enhanced the capabilities of the aspect to which they were attached.

In Jason's current situation, that knowledge allowed him to make a deduction. 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, it hadn't changed his racial abilities the way it had the first time. His soul had already been affected by passing through the astral, unconsciously drawing on the astral's power to grant itself the tools it would need to survive. His racial gifts remained as they were, aside from the one that had just ranked up.

Jason pulled a chair out of his inventory and sat down. 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 interdimensional time-streams, 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, 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 happened regarding his status. 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.

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 in 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 involvement in 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 he just needed enough money to get by 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.

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 even before they were 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 and he resumed looking through the windows he had minimised.

➤ You have been reborn.

He wondered why had he appeared in the abandoned hospital. It had been closed for years, after the new big regional hospital opened in Castle Heads. 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?"

Chapter 268

Time to Front Up

Jason went back 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.

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- 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 would allow to seep in from the astral 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 most 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. The astral space had inverted the normal ratio of shops to monsters, leaving Jason with silver spirit coins numbered in the low thousands. He had enough bronze coins to use indefinitely, while his iron coin supply was enough to swim through like Scrooge McDuck.

“The Builder could learn a lot from Disney,” Jason muttered to himself, opening up 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 it was one of the effects of his inventory power evolving. It didn't free up a lot of slots, given that the amount of cores he could store per slot had expanded greatly when he reached bronze rank. He currently had a thousand bronze-rank cores and dozens of silver-rank cores. As for iron-rank cores, he had long ago ditched them, even if it only freed up the one inventory slot.

Spirit coins and monster cores were only the beginning of the treasures that had his inventory bursting at the seams. 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 carrying just a quarter of the team's haul, Jason had essences and awakening stones enough to produce a dozen essence users with full sets of abilities.

The essence users in question would be rather uniform, 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 already having claimed anything they wanted for themselves. There was even more in the cloud house, which could serve as a large, if less convenient dimensional space. 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. Basic bronze-rank weapons and armour weren't fancy, but there was always a market of newly-ranked-up adventurers looking for relatively inexpensive gear.

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 examined by an aura sensing power or when

projecting your aura. Allies within your aura have increased resistance to aura suppression.

More than just the new scars on his chest, Jason could feel 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 after what he had 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. It had shaken him to the core, leaving him a near-catatonic wreck. It was not the last, that first day, and Rufus had warned him that it would only be the beginning. He had been so self-righteous, looking down on Rufus, Farrah and Gary for their callous attitude, resolving to be different. Now he had killed as much as any of them, unsure if it was his naiveté or his decency that he 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 had been caught up in the wild rush of the adventuring life, not even considering the reality of what he was doing. That day he had just followed orders, killing wantonly and hadn't even felt bad. So much blood on his hands, yet he'd been excited about his first attribute advancement instead of horrified at the slaughter he'd participated in.

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, but was any real attempt made at a peaceful solution? He wasn't foolish enough to think he was done with killing, but he at least wanted to be confident in himself that it was the right thing, instead of just accepting the assurance of others.

He had made other mistakes on his search to find a balance within the violence. His callousness had grown and people had died at his hands that shouldn't 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, casual almost. He had told himself that it had

been necessary to send a message to the next people who came after him. He ultimately realised he was 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 simply necessity when monsters threatened innocent people and power turned the selfish into tyrants. What none of them had warned Jason about was going too far and become one of those tyrants himself. The god Dominion had seen it, and apparently approved.

He had tried to balance himself out. He hadn't wanted to go after the desert bandits that took over a town, because he knew it would be too easy to justify the killing to himself. Yet, he still let himself be talked into it. The final count of bandits he killed 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 the magic world was not the person that returned. Looking out at the dark, starless sky of his own Earth, he couldn't help but wonder if his old world had a place for him. 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. All he could do was move forward and continue trying to do his best. In the meantime, he brought up the next system window.

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- 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.
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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 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 the astral and whole realities, with little care for mortal affairs. When the World-Phoenix did act on that small 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 could find a way, would rather flip the board over entirely.

According to Clive, there was no way for a great astral being's blessing to be used as a means to control the recipient, beyond ordinary methods like gratitude and obligation. The ability, once granted, could not be revoked like that from a divine awakening stone. Some great astral beings were even known to give blessings to those that opposed their interests, when their ideologies meshed, nonetheless. Jason himself had already received a power evolution from a blessing, courtesy of a Reaper token. His system had not asked for confirmation at that time; apparently his use of the token counted 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.
- The nature of your new body will render you immune to resurrection effects, including those of high-rank healing magic. If your body is disincorporated, 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 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.
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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 into certain directions, for reasons that remained hidden from him. Whatever the World-Phoenix's agenda, Jason was certain this power was designed to serve it.

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 full well 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 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 had, thus 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 that 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 from his chair and waved a hand over the floor and in response, a line of darkness appeared. He gestured upwards and an obsidian arch rose up, filled with darkness.

"Aren't you familiar," he told it. He went to step through, then stopped, picked up his chair and carried it through with him.

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 had the blue and orange eye nebula that was Gordon's signature filling it.

The floor was a tile mosaic that looked just like the personal crest on Jason's back; a daylight sky inside a cloak, surrounded by the night sky. More arresting was the environment in which the gazebo was located. Untethered from the ground, it floated through a dark, rain-filled sky. 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 around it, 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 and it gained its own halo of light and it joined the other objects in orbit. Jason spied a stack of sandwiches, gathered together gently glowing. With a simple thought from Jason, one of the sandwiches separated itself 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 started flying 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 started streaming 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 form of Shade. As his shadow familiar appeared, Jason's own shadow vanished. Additional 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 regards to your safety."

"Wait," Jason said. "You knew?"

"Of course," Shade said, in his usual dignified tone. "I'm not a scrub."

Chapter 269

The Single Greatest Thing on This Planet

In the otherworldly floating gazebo, Jason was reunited with his familiars. 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.

“Millennia,” Jason 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. Your propensity to pick fights you can’t win was neatly demonstrated by your recent demise. If you realised you had a tool to bring you back from death, I have no doubt you would have been even more cavalier with your mortality.”

“Yeah, well, it is kind of hard to refute death,” Jason conceded.

“I hope that you will act with more caution in future. 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 suggest 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?”

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

“More secrets. Wonderful.”

“The power evolution 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. The Reaper rarely involves itself with the mortals that venerate it; the Builder is unusual amongst astral beings in this regard. The Reaper appreciates that without you, the souls of its followers would still be trapped inside the undying flesh abominations. So long as the ability assures that the next time you die you stay dead, the Reaper will see you compensated in kind.”

“This power would heal me up when I otherwise would have died,” Jason said.

“Doesn’t he have a problem with me cheating death?”

“The Reaper does not care if you cheat death,” Shade explained. “It only cares if you cheat being dead. There is a difference.”

“Then why prevent revival magic from working?” Jason asked. “That can only be issued right after you die, right?”

“There are more potent diamond-rank resurrection effects that are permitted to be less timely,” Shade said. “Such powers can return the soul after it has left the body, instead of merely restoring the body before the soul has departed. Such powers touch upon the domain of any local god of death, who may intercede for good or ill, as they choose.”

“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 artificial 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.”

“But I could become someone’s familiar?”

"I don't know," Shade said. "We have reached the limit of my knowledge on the topic. One more thing to mention, however, is that the ability description only briefly touches on the resistance to effects that impact the soul-body connection."

"That's important?"

"Much in the way your interface ability's description leaves out the rather important aspect of looting, this ability does not express the value of the inherent resistances that come from being a physical and spiritual gestalt. This particular aspect of the ability is something that would become increasingly valuable as you increase in rank, when dealing with astral affairs, high-rank astral entities and certain high-rank ability effects. Entities that are 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?" Jason asked.

"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 power evolutions to their favoured supporters that contain as much magic as they can stand without it destroying them."

"Makes sense, I guess. Checks and balances."

"This ability you have been offered is a product of a bargain struck between great astral beings. It operates outside of that balance. There is a price to taking it, but the power is far greater than you would normally receive."

"That much I figured out," Jason said.

"The ability seems to be an enhanced variant of an ability that the World-Phoenix frequently blesses those who serve its interests with. 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."

“So you think I should take the ability?” Jason asked.

“My inclination would be 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. On the other hand, the Reaper has become increasingly dissatisfied with the rising impermanence of death over the last few millennia. Its tolerance for cheating death has been waning and it informed me, while I was waiting to be resummoned, that the Reaper is finally taking steps. I suspect your multiple resurrections are at least part of the impetus.”

“Great, so I’m the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

“More precisely, the World-Phoenix. The Reaper doesn’t want the World-Phoenix to continually resurrect you or any of its other pawns. The World-Phoenix has always acted with decorum in regard to its right to do this, but the Reaper is concerned that the Builder’s actions may provoke an unwelcome response.”

“What kind of steps is the Reaper taking?” Jason asked.

“Pressuring death gods to make resurrection magic more difficult, more costly and less reliable.”

“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.”

“And the Reaper pushed this power onto the World-Phoenix to offer me?”

“The only requirement the Reaper made was that you stay dead next time. The rest of the power 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,” Shade said. “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 tried to give them to you.”

“I’m not going to reject the power out of hand,” Jason said. “I’m not ungrateful for the coming back from the dead thing. I’m not just going to go along with what it wants, no

questions asked, though. It is true that she couldn't use the power to unduly influence me, right?"

"Blessing powers to not offer control over their recipients," Shade confirmed.

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

"Prudent," Shade said approvingly.

"What's say we get out of this weird dimension and hit the road, then," Jason said. "Now 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 back 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?" Jason asked.

"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 have transformed into any animal that was suited to jungle travel. 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 home town 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 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.

"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 floating 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, 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 only a short half-hour to his home town 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 making very little noise, Jason could feeling the speed and

power waiting 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 at least 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.

His skill-book based crafting skills were certainly not up to the task of making a skill book, however. That required the skill not just to craft the book's enchantments but to integrate the proficiencies and knowledge of whatever expert was providing the contents.

The impressive functionality of Shade's car included projecting a head-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 definitely seem to be 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 not too late, being a little before nine. He still 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 said 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 have a say in the power offered to you.”

“So, it’s to help the World-Phoenix.”

“The Reaper does not like your continual return from death, but it is grateful for releasing the souls of the Reaper’s cultists trapped in the flesh monstrosities. As am I, by the way. My progenitor is not without a sense of reciprocity.”

“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 home town.

-
- 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 home town 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 and taking his umbrella back out.

The dark and quiet car had drawn no attention and Jason stood away from the street lights, 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 may 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 bed time.

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. His wife'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 being 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 Ami had brought hers? Erika certainly had the money for it, but what about her TV series?

"Will you go in?" Shade asked.

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

"You won't tell them the truth?"

"Eventually," Jason said, "but I'm not just going to rock up and say '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.'"

“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.”

Chapter 270

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.

They did not know Jason's complicated family history, and he doubted Colin and possibly Gordon could even understand if they did. What they did understand was the feeling it engendered. 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 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 was floating along behind him.

The Stone Wall was a bar in Sydney's King's 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, in the form of 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."

"Sweet. You coming inside?"

"I'm looking for Hiro Asano," Jason said. "Last I heard, he was running this place."

"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 a phone from his pocket and made a call.

“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?” Taika asked

“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’s says Jason is dead, bro. He sounded pretty angry that someone was claiming to be his dead nephew. Said he’s sending Growl down here. 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 clump of muscle that gained sentience, bought a tank top and started getting tattoos.

“Is this the guy?” Growl asked in a voice that 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 that suggests either he has no idea what he’s in for or that he knows something we don’t.”

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 well hidden under the excellent drape of his suit.

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

“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 in a hidden mountain temple or something.”

Jason watched the exchange with a bemused 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 his face took on a malevolent cant. “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 as he sprinted out of the alley. 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 what turned out to be a loud and crowded bar. There was enough people that 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, where he heard an angry voice.

“No, no one has come in through the back. With the security door back there, 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.

“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 hug before letting him go, putting his hands on Jason's shoulders.

"You can go, Growl."

"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 and waved Jason into a seat. Hiro's office was decorated quite differently to the grimy aesthetic of the downstairs bar. It had exposed brick, stained wood and subdued art. His chair was old school leather, practically a throne. 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 keep in touch at least a little, now. 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 am sorry about that, but you handled Growl well enough. He's not sharp, but that's acceptable in a blunt instrument."

"But he's a giant tool either way," Jason said.

"Still a smart-arse, I see."

"Yeah," Jason said. "I took a look at 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."

"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?”

“There was a gas explosion in your building. It wiped out your apartment entirely and a good chunk of the one around yours, but you were the only death.”

“My building didn’t have gas service,” Jason said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

“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 ones, actually.”

“What terrorist response exercises?”

“You really were out of contact weren’t you?” Hiro asked. “It’s been going on for more than a year, now. The army has been deploying forces all over the country for what they’re calling terrorist response exercises. It’s been happening in other countries, too, all over the world. There’s all this speculation going around that there’s some kind of anticipated attack, but more than a year later and nothing. But since one of them 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? Was there someone 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 face took on 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 Heads.”

“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 placed a gold bar on Hiro’s desk.

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

“Jesus, Jason. What have you gotten caught up in? I’m meant to be the dodgy one.”

“I haven’t been doing anything criminal,” Jason said. “Except secretly leaving the country, I guess, but that wasn’t really my choice. I’ve been doing security work. In Africa.”

Hiro reached forward, using both hands to heft the ten kilo bar that Jason had lightly rested on the table with one.

“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. It isn’t that I want to hide anything from you, but that the reality 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. 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 to before I start telling anyone anything.”

“Alright,” Hiro said. He took a money clip from a drawer and tossed it over the desk 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.”

Hiro looked at his nephew. There had always been an insecurity buried under the layers of lunatic wit, but no trace of that remained. There was an almost domineering confidence in the way he carried himself. In his line of work, Hiro had developed a good instinct for dangerous people. Those instincts were screaming 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. If you need anything else, Taika will sort you out.”

“Thank you, Uncle.”

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

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

Chapter 271

It Would Be Weirder If Magic Wasn't Responsible

Annabeth Tilden was woken by her phone.

"Damn it, Anna."

So was her wife. Annabeth snatched the phone off the night stand and stumbled into the bathroom, closing the door before turning on the light and answering.

"What?" she answered grumpily.

"Boss, 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 and I think it warrants investigation."

Annabeth groaned but nodded to herself.

"Alright. Run me through it, Ketì."

Ketevan wasn't in the habit of making unfounded leaps, with Annabeth placing 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 to 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."

"No, ma'am."

"There's only been the one category four and the Poms needed a Brimstone missile to deal with it."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Actually, they needed several."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Alright," Annabeth 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 a hand out 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 realised 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. Unlike Shade's previous sports car form, he was now in the shape of a sleek but roomy four-door sedan, although it still maintained 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. "I didn't know you could buy them yet."

"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. Now I do security 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 a rich white kid takes some dodgy eccies and has a seizure, that’s as bad for the cops as for us. 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. On the sound system, some kind of meditative music was playing.

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 over to the lounge area and placed the phone and laptop boxes he was carrying onto the coffee table. He glanced over 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."

"No, I just fake it for the ladies," Jason said, flashing a grin.

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 from a piece of paper.

"All done," Taika said. "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 longer 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,” Jason said. “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?” Taika asked.

“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. 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, 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’re known to be domineering. 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. You nephew isn’t exactly a huge bloke.”

“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. “That drug cocktail they put them on messes up their heads.”

“Like brain damage?” Taika asked.

“Exactly like that. Did Jason seem brain damaged 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.

Annabeth didn’t bother asking questions over the noise of the winding down helicopter, instead letting Ketevan lead her inside, guiding the way by torchlight. They went downstairs and set off down a corridor.

“What do you have, Keti?” Annabeth asked. “I’ve got the Engineers of Ascension pushing into Sydney that I have to keep an eye on, now the Children’s Hospital miracle debacle and whatever this thing here is.”

“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 that’s Aram’s mess to sort through. 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, Ma’am. 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?” Annabeth asked.

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

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

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

Chapter 272

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,” Jason said.

“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.

While Shade couldn’t prevent direct observation, observation through a secondary medium was another matter entirely. How effective the obfuscation was depended on the medium in question. A magical telescope, for example was something that Shade could hide Jason from entirely, 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, but he could still interfere with the complex process of data translation involved in electronic devices. The result was Jason appearing 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 made preparations for the first of several rituals. First, he took out 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, with his quick-fire ritual drawing and power to balance out ambient magic. He 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 using the magically-charged silver.

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, which 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, he didn't hurry. He knew that 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 ritual circle like an orchestra conductor as he chanted out the ritual. When he uttered the final syllable, the magically-charged silver power 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 it up 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 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 amongst them who seem 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. Send the bodies over now.”

Two shadow 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, thanks for helping me test it.”

Jason made his way to the apartment building next to his town house, where Hiro’s penthouse apartment turned out to occupy 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-off the white chocolate liqueur. He made himself a cocktail that was milky, smooth and sweet.

“So, I’ve been looking into moving 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. I’m useful to the people I answer to, at least in part, because I stay more or less clean. This guy 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.”

“Alright,” Hiro said, not trying to argue further. “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, but not a lot of hard information. 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 eyeing us off here, in Sydney.”

“They just move in and take over?”

“Word is that they’re strange. 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 might tell you about it, someday,” Jason said.

“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 know 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.

“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 when you’ll let 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.”

Chapter 273

Boogie Man

Taika was driving 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 not influential and powerful. 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," 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 was expecting that."

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

"They care more about you than you think, Jason."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. They had many regrets after you were gone. They even softened their stance on me. Not a lot, but they'll at least talk to me. 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."

"Oh, I only touched on criminal affairs peripherally in the course of my other 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.”

“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.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that, Uncle Hiro.”

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 street lights 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 open 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 disregard clearly held for lawn maintenance, the enclosure and the kennel within was 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 went up to the door, Taika stepping forward to knock. A man opened it up, looking past them with a confused expression at the dog enclosure. Jason noticed the man was wearing 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 look 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 room large enough to occupy the bulk of the house, where Jason could see into kitchen and dining rooms, plus doors that presumably led into bedrooms. The room was a large lounge area, with a giant television, bar and multiple, 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. The table cellar had an elaborate board game laid out on it, with four 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; the last he heard, Greg was studying law.

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 as the man turned to give the entrants an assessing gaze, before getting up. He was lean, around forty five, with thinning hair. He was wearing 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 and his own tremble on hearing the name Vermillion. Even the stalwart Taika radiated trepidation.

“Is that so?” Ari mused. Unlike Petros, there was no trace of accent, although Jason knew from Hiro that he was an old school Armenian gangster. Ari turned his gaze back to the 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; a man I do business with from time to time. 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. Ari’s gaze remained on him and he met it with casual relaxation.

“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 but 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 had the gold assayed and were satisfied.”

“I did. You’re certain no one is going to come looking for it?”

“Yes. Where I got it from, it wasn’t valued very highly. That’s how I picked up so much for a relatively small cost.”

“You have more?” Ari asked.

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“Enough that I’m not willing to pull it 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. Being near this man is like being a mouse under the gaze of an owl.”

He once again turned to focus on Jason.

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

Ari stepped right into Jason’s personal space, staring him in the eye.

“You don’t scare me, Jason Asano.”

Jason gave Ari a slight smile.

“Would you like me to?”

Ari took a step back and started laughing.

“Would you like me to?” he repeated back, 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?” Jason asked.

“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 to reveal naked threat. “You’ll need to assuage my curiosity.”

“Ari,” Hiro said. “This isn’t what we agreed.”

“We’ve got EOA pushing in and your boy turning up, all but waving a banner that reads ‘very suspicious man.’ 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 aura, unless it was projected in a specific way. It was a simple use of basic projection control, one of the first things Farrah had taught to him. It was a tool that essences user used to intimidate normals, which, is exactly what Jason was doing.

With the progression of his aura manipulation skills, Jason could expertly express his aura slowly and deliberately, allowing the same domineering force that intimidated the dogs to press down on the normal rank auras the men in the room didn't realise they even possessed. Only Taika and his uncle were exempted, but they couldn't miss the growing dread shown 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 his aura, feeling like a shout to the beleaguered criminals. He was the smallest person in the room, yet he felt larger than Taika. Everyone in the room was 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.

"That's what I thought. You can 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.

Chapter 274

More Plausible Than the Reality

Hiro returned home to the apartment building he owned. His penthouse floor was only accessible by his private elevator or through the regular elevator by using an access key. He walked straight to the bar and poured himself a stiff drink. It had been a strange night.

The entertainment lounge had one wall made up of windows looking out onto the balcony. Just as he was about to sit, Hiro spotted a silhouette out there, easy to miss on a moonless night. His first thought was to shout for Taika but he recognised Jason's figure, leaning on the railing as he looked out over the city. Hiro opened the sliding door and stepped outside.

"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 stepped up next to Jason at the railing, resting his drink on it.

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

Jason turned giving 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."

"Seriously? I'm going to be honest, Jason; I never liked your mother."

"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've seen the pictures."

"She really was," Hiro agreed with a reminiscent smile.

"How did things go after I left you with those hoodlums?" Jason asked.

"Hoodlums?" Hiro asked. "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.”

“Why?” Jason asked. “That’s highly suspect.”

“After you left, Ari called our boss. He told Ari 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 a bunch of shady rich people who occasionally need some dirty work done. They’re way above the likes of my boss, though, let alone me. Vermillion is someone from that group the boss calls on for favours, from time to time. 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 secrets open doors that 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. “More likely, they’re only 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.”

He let out a frustrated sigh.

“You’ve been unreserved in helping me,” Jason 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 strongly war 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. We’ve all felt it, like something in the air. 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 I can’t see and the rules are changing. Then you show up and you seem to understand what the new rules are.”

Hiro flashed Jason a self-deprecating grin. “This probably sounds like nonsense to you.”

“No,” Jason said. “I know exactly what you’re talking about. It just worries me that this was happening before I ever left and I didn’t know. I need answers, but for now, you were promised yours.”

Hiro rubbed a hand over his face, unsure of where to start. With Vermillion, he felt like he had brushed up against a dangerous truth long before Jason returned. He couldn’t help but think of the similarities Ari saw between the mysterious man and Hiro’s now mysterious nephew. Ari certainly seemed to be scared of Jason in the same way, if not more. Unlike Vermillion, however, Jason had not scared Hiro himself or Taika. He had also not unleashed that strange effect until he needed it. In the presence of Vermillion, by contrast, Hiro felt like a prey under the gaze of a predator every moment in his presence.

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

“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?” Hiro asked.

“I can’t be certain,” Jason said. “It’s highly likely, though.”

“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 for them.”

“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.”

Jason took in a cleansing breath of winter night air, only to find it not so cleansing. The city was far from what he was used to, be it the rich, pleasant scents of the astral space jungle, or the waters of Greenstone. Whether the waters of the delta or the ocean, the magic carried down the Mistrun River left even bog water smelling oddly fresh and clean.

Making things worse was Jason’s enhanced senses of smell and taste. 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. They might think I’m dead.”

“Why would they think that?”

“Because I died.”

“What?”

“Let’s put that aside for the moment,” Jason said.

“Put it aside? You just told me that you died!”

“I got better, obviously. Uncle, it might be best if I try and give you some kind of overview. While I was away – in fact, the reason I left – was that I became part of... lets 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 what you just told me seems to.”

“Well, if you’re going to brush off the whole faking your death thing, I want to go back to 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. “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, 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 time-frame. All I can do is protect you if someone comes after you.”

“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?” Hiro asked.

“I’ve made a move already, to try and draw people out. For the moment, I’m keeping an eye on you. 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.

“And 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 should draw out some of the players to where I can get a look at them. That will hopefully give me some inroads to what is happening here.”

Annabeth 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. Annabeth took the position at the head of the table.

The lead investigator of the Sydney incident was a rugged-looking man named Aram, with 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 started detailing their progress to Annabeth.

“We’ve looked into the families and other connections of the people in the hospital,” he explained. “There were a couple of hits, but we looked into them and ruled them out as potential instigators of the event.”

“But that is only our Network personnel, right?” Annabeth 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?” Annabeth prompted.

“Yes, Ma’am. 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?” Annabeth asked him.

“My instincts are telling 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,” Annabeth approved, glancing 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,” Aram said. “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. I haven’t found in what records we do have anything to contradict what we’ve seen.”

Annabeth 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. Annabeth panned a gaze over them.

“We’re talking about outworlders,” she said.

Chapter 275

I Suggest You Be Very Polite

Jason was standing on the edge of the roof, atop a tall building in the Sydney CBD. Shade was beside him as they looked toward an adjacent building. To normal sight it was unremarkable, but to magic senses the building was lit up like a giant candle. The top floor was a dancing flame of overlapped 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 him and he followed them to the building he and Jason were 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; just 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 integrated into one another without mutual interference was an impressive feat. Breaking through or sneaking past any individual effect would be a breeze for Jason, but with them pressed so snugly against one another, he could easily trigger one defence in the process of breaking through another.

Jason postulated that the simplicity of the rituals was not from lack of proficiency, but a need to work with the low density of ambient magic. Whoever devised the protections made the most of the restriction to low-rank formations and integrated them together, a feat not possible with more powerful effects. The low-rank magical array made it easier to avoid tricky magical interactions. Only something on the level of Jason’s cloud flask had the capacity to neatly amalgamate more powerful magic.

The more he 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 on Jason gaining 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. Only his study into the underlying principles of ritual magic allowed him to recognise the 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.”

“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,” Shade said.

“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. He would like to experiment with the basic artifice technique that his magical watch used to keep time when stored away, 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 was standing 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 of 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, with Shade gliding alongside. It was eerily quiet, with only the distant sounds of the street below.

“This 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 started testing out his control over the glide. As with most powers, he had an instinctive proficiency. While he would obviously 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 up 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 away 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 was sitting 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, but the image was distorted, centred on the man standing in front of the reception desk.

“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 the man 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 most likely not. 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, with two stellar corner views. It 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 had a leather throne behind what was either a very robust desk, or a somewhat rickety boat. Walking around from behind it were two men, who Jason turned his attention to 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 younger man looked like a sexy mortician. His aura was bronze-rank and rather disconcerting in its familiarity. It reminded Jason of the vampires he had fought in the past, but without the wild savagery of those turned by a monster. This man was clearly of 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.

-
- 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 anymore, he may find himself involved with those dangers you mentioned."

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 through his aura. Vermillion presumably kept quiet about it for his own advantage. As for Vermillion, his controlled aura revealed none of his emotions, at least to Jason's aura 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 that 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.

"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 unwilling to expand the scope of that when the EOA come knocking at my door. When I heard that someone else from his 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 accomplished, 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 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 his body language. It was in the way he moved and 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 in rejecting it. I know this isn’t what you want to hear and I want this to be an amicable relationship, but I’ve just got back from further 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 pool I’m paddling 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 walked behind his desk and fell into the big chair.

“That bloke feels 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 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 frequently the front man for the Cabal’s dealings with the other groups, 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 an 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. “It’s why I bought it. 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 that alone is a futile gesture. Overcoming the locals would only bring greater threats down on him.”

“Are you telling me to roll over for the EOA?”

“Sometimes the harder path runs right off a cliff, Victor.”

“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.”

Chapter 276

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 had found. That left the last 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 forms 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 monster fights any time soon, he did anticipate his abilities advancing at least one small stage in the short term, maybe even two for the lower ones that were close to advancing already.

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. The results were striking, bringing him all the way into the lower-mid range of bronze rank.

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 onto 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 after his year and a half absence, their escalating rate and continued lack of explanation from world governments

was drawing more and more media attention, despite obvious attempts to downplay their importance. Given that one of these incidents was taking 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, as 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 Jason went outside, Taika with him.

“You need a ride, 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 bike,” 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 was looking the other way. When Taika looked 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 isn’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 alright 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, seeing 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.”

“Really?”

“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,” Vermillion said. “They were created by a giant spider? This also happened during your time away?”

“Yep,” Jason said. “It was a rough day, but vampire monster army? That was some epic stuff.

“And where was that?”

“Would you believe an abandoned jungle city in a pocket universe?”

“Not really” Vermillion said.

“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, looking smug. "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 where it came from 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."

"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 magic 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 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, 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. People have tried to kill and eat me before and I didn’t care for it.”

“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?"

"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 diseases 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, and I've heard of stronger vampires being affected by it in unusual situations where the magic around them is more powerful."

"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?" Jason asked.

"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.”

“That is what we call the new magic.”

Chapter 277

A Knife in Its Sheath

Vermillion and Jason paused their conversation as the waitress brought their food, along with wine.

“Magic has always been a difficult and esoteric thing,” Vermillion explained after the waitress left, while Jason nibbled appreciatively at the food. “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, they seemed to have a limit on their power. While it can take 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 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 infusions of vampire blood, that power fades.”

“That can’t be good,” Jason said. “As far as I’m aware, backsliding in rank has extremely deleterious effects.”

Jason had heard about the side effects of ex-clergy who had offended their gods and been stripped of divinely-gifted essences. This caused frequently debilitating imbalance in the body and soul.

“Very much so,” Vermillion said. “There is also a strongly addictive aspect to vampire blood, which is why the cultivation of blood servants is a widely 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?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Vermillion said. “That puts you and I at tier two of five.”

“Not six?” Jason asked.

“Six? I know there is a small handful of category four creatures within the cabal, but they spend decades at a time in magical sleep, slowly accumulating the magic required to operate for even a short time. The fifth tier is a myth itself, let alone beyond. From everything I’ve ever heard, category five is the limit.”

“The mortal limit,” Jason said.

“I’d be very interested in hearing more about that,” Vermillion said.

“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 very interested. In the meantime, I’ll continue my explanation of new magic.”

“Please do.”

“For centuries, the power of this new magic was trapped at the lowest tier.”

“That changed, though, didn’t it?”

“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 more potent than anything seen since. Someone who could change their face and speak any language. We believe this person seeded these secret societies of new magic. Providing what we now know to be the essences that facilitate new magic. For centuries, though, new 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.

“We aren’t certain, but the change appears to have been a fundamental one to the very nature of the world. Somewhere around the turn of the nineteenth century, some manner of global threat began to manifest. It was at this point that 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 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, these secret societies 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. With their growth in number and power over the last century, they have become the strongest of the three 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 is escalating faster than the network’s power 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 organisation, covering up magic is not in alignment with their principles.”

“And who are this third organisation?”

“The Engineers of Ascension,” Vermillion said.

“The Engineers of... are you talking about the EOA?”

“The very same,” 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 as a whole, but they’re much less protective of their individual members. They seem to like the freedom, but it makes dealing with them inconsistent, although with fewer repercussions. If you take out some Cabal or Network members, those organisations will come down on you like the fist of god.”

“To make an example,” Jason said.

“Exactly. The EOA is more likely to cut their losses, write them off as having overestimated their abilities. While they work toward broad goals, they are, by their nature, self-serving.”

“And what is that nature, exactly?”

“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 old magic of the Cabal and the new magic of the Network. The EOA were formed by the strongest of those groups. Their magic is cobbled together from what they’ve managed to 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 with your Cabal brethren?” Jason asked.

“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.”

“Magical performance enhancing drugs,” Jason said.

“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 people kidnap our people to use as research materials.”

“They’re willing to take that risk?” Jason asked.

“The EOA has been behind the pack from the beginning,” Vermillion said. “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.”

“Engineers of Ascension,” Jason said. “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 know 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.

“Wouldn’t that put them in direct competition with the other organisations, who are trying to hide it?”

“It would, if the EOA ever made attempts to reveal it, but they don’t. They believe that the wider revelation about magic is 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.

“Probably,” 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 moved past 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 yet. In my opinion, these terrorist readiness exercises are the last gasp of the secret world before it comes out into the open.”

“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, magic will be on par with money and political power,” 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 and the Network had already insinuated themselves with political powers, so the EOA are working on private powers. Organised crime is really a second-tier priority, to which they’ve relegated their lesser members. The real game is the uber-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. “At least, as far as I know. They seem focused on their mission, but they may be making plans behind the scenes. As for the Cabal, we’ve had a tight grip on old money since literally the invention of money.”

“And religion, too, I’m guessing.”

“I can neither confirm, nor deny,” Vermillion said with a smile, leading Jason to chuckle.

“The pie is large enough that no one is willing to go to war over a larger slice,” Vermillion said. “So long as nothing comes along to change that balance, the revelation should be fairly smooth, for the magical community. As for the normals, that’s a whole other issue. Who knows what kinds of chaos will happen, not to mention the dangers we’ve always been wary of. Magical power and ideology have traditionally 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, although you are different than they are, for the most part.”

“How so?” Jason asked.

“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?” Jason asked.

“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’m pretty sure 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. Thank you for all this information.”

“I haven’t revealed anything that you couldn’t easily learn elsewhere,” Vermillion said. “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. 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, reaching across the table to shake Vermillion’s hand. He stood up, then paused, his face taking on a fierce expression.

“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. He could almost see the cogs turning behind his eyes, giving him the impression that for every one thing he said, Asano took away three.

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 Asano genuinely didn't know even the most basic aspects of what he was being told. He was clearly no stranger to magic, however.

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. Went to the University of Melbourne, dropped out after one semester and got a menial job in retail.

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, but 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 still rankled. Most likely, it was related to whatever threat the network was facing off, given that it seemed to be the source of their power. Given that 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 tier three essence magician stationed in Sydney, Asano was a different breed. His aura was clearly discernible as tier two, but far too powerful for that. It was closer to the strength of a tier three, but with more control than he

had seen from any tier. The control of other essence magicians he'd seen were lumps of iron ore next to Asano's expertly forged sword.

Over the course of their conversation, Vermilion came to believe that despite the danger behind his eyes, Asano might actually be as friendly as what he initially assumed to be his artificial persona. 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 place. I'd also bring a lot more people, if I was ambushing you."

"There are a lot more people."

"What are you talking about..."

Vermillion trailed off as a number of magical auras came into range of his 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.

"I think things are about to go very poorly," he said.

Chapter 278

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 was wearing a tight, white t-shirt and dark green cargo pants. They looked like someone was 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 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 though the ramifications of denying us, Mr Vermillion. I know that your group is remaining hands-off in regards 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 over to the table, where they sat down 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, from intervening in Engineer of Ascension affairs. 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 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 assuming control of.”

“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.

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- [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.

These were clearly altered through methodology wholly unlike the modified clockwork cores the Builder cult employed. It would appear that the Engineers of Ascension had developed some alternate means to affect people in a similar way. As to how harmful that process was and if people were volunteering 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 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. “Anne Rice, Twilight. Bram Stoker was a debacle for us, and the less said about Bela Lugosi the better.”

“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. Victor likes to amplify his larrikin persona to make others underestimate him, but 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 Victor lacks the knowledge of EOA members.”

“Then who?” Jason asked. “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 eyeing you off 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 complimented without being ostentatious. “I’m surprised Kissling even tried at all.”

“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 must be 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.”

Chapter 279

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 it 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?” Hiro asked.

“Engineers of Ascension,” Jason said.

“Sounds like a cult.”

“Not quite, but I sense a little bit of cult flavour,” Jason said. “I’ve had some experience with cults.”

“You’ve had experience with cults?”

“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. The marks that experience left on his soul were now scars on his body. Mostly it was his chest, but he had a small scar on the side of his chin where his beard no longer grew in and one that bifurcated one eyebrow. They weren’t glaring blemishes, but they weren’t hidden, either.

"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 unusual, knowing he 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. Turns out the henchman tried to kill me once, but I let him live. He was apparently a 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 him some. It's a better chance than most get."

"I knew you'd been through some things," Hiro said.

"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.”

“You’ll have a lot of capital and a lot of business experience,” Jason said. “I’m sure 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 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,” Jason said.

“I don’t want to leave without settling things properly with Victor though,” Hiro said. “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 out of the backroom of a basement club he owned, with two pretty young women and one pretty young man. He made sure that they had biscuits and juice before arranging them all rides home. His aftercare was quite similar to the Red Cross following a blood donation. He was changing into clothes that he was willing to be seen in out on the street when something unusual appeared in front of him.

➤ You have received a voice chat request from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

He glanced over at his phone, sitting on a dresser.

“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.

“Jason?”

“G’day. I’m going to bring my uncle 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 was wearing a dark suit, his hair expertly groomed. Taika and Hiro did not notice his arrival until Jason opened the balcony door.

“Do you need an invitation, out of curiosity?” Jason asked.

“Only as a matter of manners.”

“Then, by all means, come in.”

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 had an expression of 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 if 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 some 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 drank 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 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 discrete, 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.”

“Ah, my ride is here,” Jason said, then let out a gleeful laugh. “This is going to be wild.”

“Your ride?” Hiro asked, then goggled as Jason was shrouded in dark mist. At the same time, bullets started hitting the car.

Chapter 280

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 and more bullets hit random vehicles or nothing at all than 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 hand guns. 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 hand 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 that, 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 last being Jason’s own shadow. It rose up and engulfed him, Jason immediately emerging 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. Racing 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 the farm of an uncle on his mother’s side. 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, broadly guiding his familiar by shifting his weight and leaving his hands free.

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 both to flip immediately and Shade deftly slalomed 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 outfit custom-designed for him by Gilbert 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, which 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, so they would likely survive a motorcycle crash. A motorcycle explosion, maybe not. He had not returned to his home world the same as he left and had no qualms about killing these men. If someone came after him, that was the life of an interdimensional man of mystery. Endangering others to get to him, though, 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 results, 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 his sawn-off shotgun. The disrupted bike crashed while Jason moved the shotgun into a firing grip in his hand.

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 bokie then another, causing a pair of crashes before stowing the shotgun in his inventory.

After that, Jason started testing his abilities. He started with blood magic, which he knew to be effective at least against lesser vampires. He reasoned that blood servants should, if anything, have even less resistance.

"Bleed for me."

Jason's guess was borne out as a bokie 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 started bright red, with a dark red taint that was almost black that drained out and over into Jason's outstretched hand. Jason sensed the biker's aura drop from the low end of bronze, though iron and down to normal as it did.

The holy afflictions Jason's power left behind started inflicting 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 and Jason extended his shadow arms down 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. Momentarily clear of other bikers, he glanced forward to see how well he had distracted the bikers from his uncle's car. Most of them were now focused on him, although some 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, at which point Jason sensed threads of magic emerging from the window, originating at the tips of Vermillion's fingers. They were invisible to the naked eye, but the magic imbued into the silken threads was clear to Jason, although clearly not the biker. They invisibly drifted around him with no reaction before going taught, slicing through flesh like a knife through vegetables. The bloody wreck that was the biker lost control of his bike, which toppled over to gruesome effect at the speed he was going.

Jason was forced to drive the ordinary motorcycle himself, recklessly pushing toward the closest surviving biker. He jumped up, standing on the bike in a dangerous balancing act briefly before leaping to the next biker, powerfully pushing off as he used the bike as a stepping stone before landing on another of Shade's bike forms. The disrupted biker wobbled dangerously and 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.

“I guess I should tone down the magic,” Jason said, dimming his cloak down 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 the office.

“At least it isn’t two in the morning, this time,” Susan said.

“Keti, what is it?” Annabeth answered, her eyes going wide at the response. “What channel?”

She turned on the television. Soon she was 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 were firing hand guns. Most eye catching was a man in black whose hooded cloak trailed through the air behind him, in constant threat of being dragged into the back wheel of his huge, black street cycle. There were flashes of gunfire, none of which phased 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 a biker, the biker crashed spectacularly.

“Dear gods,” Susan said as the footage cross cut to the trail of crashed cars and bikes left in the rolling battle’s wake.

Annabeth 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, instead opening up a voice chat with Vermillion.

“How are you?” Jason asked.

“These clothes are done for,” Vermillion said wearily. “The one I took to the head rang my bell pretty good. 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?” Jason asked.

“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 towards me be?" Jason asked.

"I have no idea," Vermillion said. "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.