

## Chapter 312

### Visually Distinctive Henchman

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

"Uncle Jason," Emi scolded.

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

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

"Yep."

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

"Why?" Erika asked suspiciously.

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

"Back to the other universe?" Emi asked.

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

"What's in France?" Erika asked.

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

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

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

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

"Cloud bed! Cloud bed! Cloud bed!"

Erika groaned her reluctant capitulation.

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

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

Erika wrapped her brother in a hug.

"Are you doing something dangerous?" she asked

“Probably,” he admitted.

“Just come back to us faster this time, okay?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“I’d rather you get someone better to help you and have them do their best,” she said.

“You can be kind of hopeless.”

“Harsh,” Jason said with a chuckle. “As it turns out, though, that’s exactly the plan.”

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

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

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

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

Kylie nodded, although she still looked uncertain.

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

“What will you be doing?” Kylie asked.

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

“How?” Kylie asked. “He’s so powerful.”

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

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

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

“Why didn’t she arrive with me?” Jason asked Shade.

“You were delivered using the Word-Phoenix Token,” Shade said, “and subject to it’s specific properties.”

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

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

“I guess my return wasn’t a sufficiently impactful event to glom onto,” Jason said. “And here I thought I was special.”

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

“That’s a little more flashy than other vehicle conjurations that I’ve seen,” she said.

“My driver understands the most vital aspect of being an essence user,” Jason said. “Of all the things I learned in the other world, it stands above all the others.”

“And what’s that?” she asked.

“It’s not about being good,” Jason said. “It’s about looking good.”

“I’m going to regret having to deal with you, aren’t I?” she asked.

“Very frequently.”

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

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

“You’re coming to France?” Jason asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's alright," she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason was introduced to the remaining people and then they boarded the plane. Along with the Network’s contingent were the plane staff, made up of the pilots and a pair of flight attendants.

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

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

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

“That’s still pretty good,” Jason said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s pretty sweet,” Jason said.

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

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

“That’s right,” Asya said.

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

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

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

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

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

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Miranda’s satellite phone rang right on schedule.

“Well?” Adrien Barbou asked without a greeting.

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

“Just make sure you rendezvous with Sebastian first,” Adrien warned. “If he isn’t there, no portal.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And the waterfall just started up again?” Ketevan asked.

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

“But you were fine,” Asya said.

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

“And they were shark crabs?” Ketevan asked.

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

“What’s the biggest monster you ever saw?” Asya asked.

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

“A blood root vine,” Shade said.

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

“That big?” Ketevan asked.

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

“The trials were not a contest,” Shade said. “The contest was Mr Bahadir’s contribution to proceedings.”

“True,” Jason said. “I should explain from the start; it’s not like we’re going anywhere.”

Suddenly an explosion ripped through the plane.