

Chapter 309

Letting Him Run Rampant

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Because that never ends badly," Annabeth muttered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Explain,” Keith said.

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

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

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

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

The recording had shaken Asya quite badly. The fear seeping out of it unnerving her and didn’t overlay cleanly with the boy she remembered. The flirty, confident man she had reconnected with didn’t seem to fit either with the terrifying presence in the recording.

The man she met on the houseboat was a natural progression from the boy she had known. The sexy, impish grin and intelligent eyes full of insolence and promise. Treating conversations like prize fights, constantly streaming nonsense to throw off the opposition. It was wholly incongruous with the chilling voice chanting a sinister incantation to finish a monster already on the precipice of death.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Keith let out a sigh.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She stood up.

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

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

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

"I did no such thing!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"One week."

Paul grumbled through the phone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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