

Chapter 304

Terms

Jason looked over at Other Gordon.

“Are you sure that this guy should be hearing all this?” he asked.

“Participation in formal negotiations with outside parties is part of our agreement with the government,” Keith said.

“You know that when word about magic goes public, that’s where it’s coming from, right?” Jason asked.

“Oh, we know,” Keith said. “But that decision is settled, regardless of our personal viewpoints.”

“I resent the implication that...” Other Gordon started, only to trail off as a room full of hostile eyes turned on him. “The Prime Minister will hear about my treatment here!”

“And do what?” Jason asked. “Crap his pants in McDonalds again?”

“That’s an urban myth,” Other Gordon said.

“Sure it is,” Jason said, turning back to the others. “So, your real problem with the capabilities of your higher-rank members isn’t a matter of enough cores to break through to category four. My understanding is that monster core use is your primary means of advancement?”

“We call them magic cores, but yes,” Gladys said.

“I can tell from your auras that only some of you have been using cores. Just looking at the group of you, I’m assuming that essences are a privilege of rank. Anna and Asya, you are clearly sitting at baseline, with no advancement at all. Do you even have all your abilities awakened?”

“No,” Asya said. “And you’re right. Anna and I are executive level, while Keith is committee level. Nigel and Gladys are in the tactical and medical tracks respectively, which have their own standards, although Nigel is out of the ordinary.”

“I heard you had one guy doing things differently,” Jason said, looking at Nigel. “So, you’re him, yeah? What’s stopped you from sucking up cores? I’ve heard it’s been slow going.”

“It has,” Nigel admitted. “When I was first brought into the Network, I did all the research I could on magical combat. I found a number of references to non-core advancement in the oldest records, but it was like someone had gone through and excised them.”

“Nigel...” Keith said warningly.

“I’m sorry, Mr Culpeper,” Nigel said, “but I’m not letting this opportunity pass by, even if it is a controversial position. Mr Asano, I believe that core-based advancement was originally introduced as a method to control members through the magic core supply, only for that truth to be lost somewhere across the centuries and leave us with core-based advancement as the only path.”

“Well, I can’t speak to the history of your organisation beyond the broad guesses I’ve already made,” Jason said. “All I can do is to tell you is that there’s another way. It isn’t faster and it doesn’t make your abilities any more powerful, but the end results are individuals that are much more capable.”

Jason took a sip of lemonade before continuing.

“That man who attacked me, who you currently have in your possession. He’s silver rank. Category three. He should have had no problems handling me. Yes, he was trying to take me alive rather than take me out, which meant he couldn’t use a kill move with his opening attack, but he had me in one of the worst circumstances I could be in for a fight. He should have trounced me, but he didn’t.”

“You’re saying he was weak?” Nigel asked.

“Profoundly weak,” Jason said. “Same for his minions who tried to drag me off to France.”

“Where are those individuals?” Other Gordon asked.

“Last time I saw them they were heading up to Hanging Rock,” Jason said.

“Hanging Rock?” Other Gordon asked.

“I’m not offering a quick solution,” Jason said, ignoring Other Gordon. “I can’t really help your people who already use cores. What I am offering is a thorough solution. I can help you to bring up a new wave of people who are stronger than the last, using their powers to the fullest. I was taught using some of the best methodology for creating powerful essence users there is. I can’t train them as well as the people who trained me could, but I can still pass along the lessons I learned. I also have some tricks of my own that should prove useful.”

“You’re willing to train our people up to the standards of the other world?” Nigel asked.

“As best I can,” Jason said. “I’ll start with you, since you’ve been trying to reverse engineer the process yourself. I suspect that with some supplemental techniques, you’ll start leaping forward in advancement.”

“Can’t you just teach the people already using cores?” Annabeth asked.

“No,” Jason said. “Cores impede other forms of advancement. Once you go cores, you don’t go back, which is why professional adventurers on the other world don’t use them. They sell them or save them for their families so they can get the benefits of being essence users without putting themselves in danger. Basically, cores are what you give your Mum so she doesn’t have to fight monsters.”

“None of this changes the issue of not reaching category four,” Keith said. “You said you have a means to sidestep that problem.”

“If you have sufficiently capable people,” Jason said, “then you don’t need category fours. As I am right now, I could handle most silver-rank monsters alone. Category three, sorry. Don’t you find the number system less evocative and harder to remember? Sorry, I’m digressing. So, I can handle most category threes, and so long as it isn’t out on an open salt flat, I’d be willing to at least try any of them.”

“You’re that confident?” Nigel asked.

“I am,” Jason said. “That doesn’t hold true if you jump it up a rank, though. I don’t expect to do solo takedowns of category four monsters unless they happen to be very and specifically susceptible to my particular powers set. A team of well-trained, silver-rank essence users should be able to handle almost any gold-rank monster, though. It’ll take probably more than half a decade to get there, but if I teach your people the foundational approach, then it should just be a matter of time before they get there themselves. I’m talking just about power use, here; I’m sure you have plenty of capable people to instruct them on combat skills.”

“That we have covered, yes,” Nigel said.

“So, that’s what I’m offering,” Jason said. “Everything you need to transform your roster of essence users over the next decade. There are other things, but they’re all secondary. I’m offering you the chance to transform the magical world.”

“You talk about big results,” Other Gordon said. “But you only promise them years in the future. This all sounds like a con.”

“You’re such a politician, Other Gordon. The Network doesn’t need a sound bite solution they can sell to people who aren’t paying that much attention. They need a fundamental change in the underlying infrastructure of how they operate. If they can’t see the value in that, I’m not the one losing out.”

Jason shook his head.

“Your friends here had me kidnapped, Other Gordon, so they don’t get to claim the moral high ground on this one. I’m not making any concessions for the purpose of proving that I’m on the level. You can accept it or not. If you can’t give me what I want, I’m happy

to walk away. I'm pretty sure I can get everything I need on my own, just with a little more effort."

"You won't find retrieving the other outworlder so easy without us getting them released," Annabeth said.

"You're right," Jason said. "But the hard way is kind of my thing. You haven't seen the list of who bet against me and lost, Anna. If I have to make a whole new list in this world, then so be it."

"Let's not go making any hasty decisions," Keith said. "You're saying you'll help us rebuild our entire tactical program if we get the other outworlder released?"

"No," Jason said. "Getting the other outworlder released is what brings me to the table. You don't get to ransom them to me."

"We don't have them," Keith said.

"The man responsible for kidnapping me is sheltering in your headquarters at this very moment. The person who kept him alive is in this room. You've got the same letterhead on the official stationary, so don't try selling me on their part of the Network not being your part of the Network. I had the crap kicked out of me, got collared and shoved into the boot of a car. You should be grateful that I'm not holding you responsible for that."

"We have wide-ranging concerns that go beyond just you," Annabeth said. "We can't just drop everything and work towards your agenda."

"I don't care about you, your problems or your perspective," Jason said. "This negotiation isn't about trading football cards. Your Network is holding a person against their will for no more crime than having something you want. The only reason I'm here to negotiate instead of in some shady rendition site is because the people you sent after me were pathetically weak."

Jason took a floral shirt from behind the bar and slipped it on, buttoning it up as he continued to talk.

"I know I come across as a light-hearted guy, with the lemonade and the sandwiches and the jokes."

Although his voice remained jovial, there was an undercurrent to it that tickled the hairs on the back of his guests' necks.

"I recognise that this may have led to the gravity of my concern on this matter being undercut. Allow me to rectify that. I am going to get that outworlder, whoever they are, out. That's just a fact. Maybe I die trying, but I've died before and it hasn't stopped me yet. If you help me, then we can put any unpleasantness behind us. If you won't, but you don't turn yourselves into obstacles, then okay. It's your organisation and I can't expect you to

go against your own team. But when I say gods help anyone who gets in my way, I'm being very specific. I know exactly what it means and that truly is what it's going to take."

As Jason talked, his aura ramped up until it was bearing down on the Network contingent like a weight. Only Gladys was able to truly hold up and even she was feeling pressured. The normal-ranked government official panicked and ran out the doors, sprinting around the outside deck towards the dock. The incongruent menace pouring off the barefoot man in a Hawaiian shirt and board shorts somehow made it all the more eerie.

The pressure receded, leaving the iron-rank Asya and Annabeth taking deep breaths, as if they'd just breached the surface of the water. Keith wasn't looking much better, while Gladys looked at Jason warily. Nigel was staring at him with wide eyes.

"Can you teach me to do that?" Nigel asked.

"To a degree," Jason said. "I can't replicate all the conditions that led to the current condition of my aura and you don't want me to. Some things aren't worth the price."

"And what is it that you want in return?" Gladys asked, taking over while the others were still recovering. "You haven't told us, yet."

"Nothing onerous," Jason said. "Mostly I want monsters."

"You want us to catch monsters alive?" Keith asked.

"No," Jason said. "I want dibs on killing any category three monsters in Australia. Further afield, if you can swing it. I want right of refusal on category twos as well."

"You want in fighting the dimensional entities?" Nigel asked.

"Yes. I'm open to negotiation on dividing the loot, but I have no issue handing off most of the cores and spirit coins. I just need enough to meet my own needs. Aside from that, I have a few other requirements."

Gladys turned and looked at the wall.

"What is your shadow creature doing to Truffett?" she asked.

"He just mana drained him until he passed out," Jason said. "Can't have him causing trouble. He'll recover quickly on the houseboat."

"Asya, go check on him," Gladys said. "Upper deck."

"There's an elevator just through there," Jason said, pointing to the inner door. "Show her, please Shade."

"How many of those shadow creatures do you have?" Gladys asked as Asya followed Shade deeper into the houseboat.

"Just one."

"I sensed another one outside," Gladys said.

“Shade is an excellent multitasker.”

“What are your other requirements?” Keith asked, getting the negotiation back on topic.”

“Small things,” Jason said. “I have some gold I’d like the Royal Mint to take off my hands without my getting audited or accused of arms smuggling.”

“Gold from the other world?” Annabeth asked.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“I don’t see that being a problem,” Keith said. “What else?”

“I’m going to get my family ready for when magic goes public,” Jason said. “The Network’s support isn’t strictly necessary, but it would be useful. You would also get to keep an eye on things, to head off any potential information breaches.”

“Again, not a deal-breaker,” Keith said. “It seems like what we need to hammer out are the specifics regarding your participation in our incursion response program.”

“How much are you allowed to decide now?” Jason asked.

“I’m empowered to make a preliminary agreement that I can put before the Steering Committee of our Branch and the International Committee. We aren’t looking to monopolise everything or we’ll just get more branches following Lyon’s lead.”

“You know that all this is predicated on the other outworlder,” Jason said. “I need to see some movement on that or we don’t have any kind of deal at all.”

“I can make that plain to the committees in question,” Keith said. “For now, I’d like to get some specific terms down that I can take back with me.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Let’s get down to it, then.”

As he and Keith moved to a table, Asya returned.

“How is he?” Gladys asked.

“Snoring,” Asya said. “Loudly.”

“You realise that he will be the one responsible for getting your gold organised,” Annabeth told Jason.

“What gold?” Asya asked.