

## Chapter 305

### Section

Sitting at a table in the bar lounge of his houseboat, Jason spent considerable time hammering out details with Keith and Annabeth. For loot distribution, Jason would keep a percentage for his own needs and trade the rest for more ordinary remuneration, such as money or use of the Network's wide-ranging influence. Legally it would all go through his status as a security crisis contractor to one of the Network's front companies.

Other stipulations involved agreements on services and tertiary benefits Jason could access through the Network, as well as restriction on Jason's behaviour regarding secrecy.

"We'll need the family members you've informed already to agree to formal non-disclosure agreements," Keith said. "We'll do that through the government's existing classified information frameworks."

"I still have more people to tell," Jason said. "My brother, my sister-in-law and my mother."

"We don't love that you decided to tell so many people," Annabeth said. "We can live with it, though, so long as that's the end."

Eventually they came to a general accord.

"I'm comfortable taking what we have to the committees," Keith said, slipping the computer tablet he was taking notes on tablet back into his briefcase. "Fair warning, though, Mr Asano: The committees are committees. They're going to want to change some details just to feel like they're in control."

"I think I've made my bottom line clear," Jason said. "If your committees want to make themselves feel like they're in control, I can probably accommodate a stipulation or two. If they want to make *me* feel that they're in control, you'll find me significantly less receptive."

"I'll do my best, Mr Asano," Keith said, standing up. "To be clear, my goal isn't to make them or you happy. It's to fulfil the Network's mandate of keeping people safe and maintaining secrecy."

"I can respect that," Jason said, standing to shake Keith's hand. As he did, Keith, Annabeth, Gladys and Nigel all received notifications on their phones, the same alarm-like sound for each. They glanced at each other as they took their phones out to check the messages.

"Is that notification of one of your incursion incidents?" Jason asked.

“It is,” Keith said. “We’ll have to skip the niceties and go, I’m afraid. Asya, I’ll have to leave Mr Truffett to you.”

“Of course,” Asya said.

“Can I tag along?” Jason asked. “I’d like to see one of these proto-astral spaces for myself.”

“I’m not sure that’s appropriate until we’ve finalised our arrangement, Mr Asano,” Keith said.

“Perhaps it’s fair if Mr Asano gets a look at what he’s agreeing to throw himself into,” Annabeth said.

“It might help if you can go to the committee with a sense of his true abilities,” Nigel added.

“Come on, Keith,” Jason said. “I’ll even give you all the loot. You want another big pile of spirit coins, right?”

“That’s certainly tempting, Mr Asano, but this wouldn’t be a sightseeing trip. It’s a category three incursion.”

“Oh, nice,” Jason said.

Keith turned to Annabeth.

“You are head of operations, Anna,” he said. “If you’re okay with it, I’ll defer to you.”

“Alright,” Annabeth said. “Don’t make me regret this, Asano.”

“Looks like the location isn’t too far,” Nigel said, looking at his phone. “Accessibility might be an issue and they’re sending a helicopter.”

“Where are we heading?” Jason asked.

“Dorrigo National Park.”

“Oh, nice,” Jason said. “I love it there.”

“You might like it less crawling with interdimensional monstrosities,” Keith said.

“Wow, you do not know me at all,” Jason said. “If we’re going to chopper out, I’ll go grab your car.”

“What do you mean, grab my car?”

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“I’ve never encountered a proto-astral space before,” Jason said. He was speaking through the headphones they were each wearing as their helicopter flew over mountains. “I’ve read about them, but that’s no substitute. What can I expect to walk into?”

“Incursion space can take a number of forms,” Nigel said. “Most common is some variant of the space it’s connected to, although those variants can be very extreme. The magic is usually very thick, although occasionally it’s very barren. Kind of like your town.”

“It wasn’t quite the same feeling,” Gladys said, “although the results were much of a muchness. Did I sense the solar panels of your houseboat sucking up all the magic?”

“Yep,” Jason said.

“When an astral space has low-magic conditions like that,” Nigel said, “the real challenge is environmental. We need to use spirit coins to keep our personal magic levels stable. In those cases, the ADE is usually the only monster that spawns, which is a blessing.”

“What did ADE stand for again?” Jason asked. “After dinner something?”

“Anchor Dimensional Entity,” Annabeth said. “If you’re going to join in our operations, Mr Asano, you’ll need to act with some professionalism.”

“When you see me get down to business, Anna, you may find you prefer this side of me. Nigel, what about the proto-spaces that aren’t magical deserts.”

“Then we tend to have the opposite problem,” Nigel said, “and the incursion space is swarming with DE activity.”

“Which is definitely preferred,” Keith said. “The higher the magic, the more bountiful the harvest. Inert magical materials, essences, awakening stones. We have specialist harvest teams that work alongside the tactical teams to make the most of every incursion.”

“It may seem like we’re profiting off the danger to our world,” Annabeth said, “but those resources are critical to protecting it.”

“I believe you,” Jason said. “I know what it takes to fight monsters and Earth is a magical wasteland.”

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There were already multiple military helicopters on site when they arrived, descending into a valley. There was no single open space large enough for all of them, so multiple clearings were being used. It was a full scale military operation, one of the ‘terrorist readiness exercises’ that Jason had heard about.

Nigel and Gladys hurried ahead along a bushland trail toward the main area of operations. Anna, Keith and Jason made their way at a more measured pace.

“We’ve been working with a special military unit formed for exactly this purpose,” Annabeth explained. “We provide the military with category one enhanced firearms. The military’s primary role is to protect the harvest teams until the ADE is neutralised, at which point our tactical teams will cooperate in maximising harvest yields and any necessary mop up.”

“Are you going in?” Jason asked.

“No,” Annabeth said.

“We don’t have the training,” Keith explained. “We’d just get in the way of the people who know what they’re doing.”

“My job is administration and logistics,” Annabeth said. “As Operations Director, my job is to get the right people to the right place with the right resources and let them do their thing.”

As they drew closer to the centre of operations, the ambient magic grew stronger.

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- You have entered the vicinity of a proto-astral aperture. The ambient magical saturation has increased. Your recovery rates will remain at normal levels without spirit coin consumption.
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They arrived at a bustling military camp Jason was startled to realise was only about an hour old.

“These military guys sure set up fast.”

“They’ve had a good amount of practise.”

“So they all get magic guns?”

“All the ones who go in,” Anna said. “It’s why iron-rank spirit coins are important. That’s what we make magical ammunition from.”

As they reached the edge of the camp they were approached by a pair of armed military personnel. Jason could sense the low-level magic in their sidearms.

“Mrs Tilden,” one of the soldiers greeted with rigid politeness. “Is this Mr Asano?”

“It is,” she said.

“Come with me, please. Mr Asano, please follow private Cowell.”

The private led Jason through the camp to where Nigel was gearing up outside a tent while barking directives at a mixed group of people in military camo and paramilitary black. Nigel’s own gear was black; fatigues under magical tactical armour. Unlike the soldiers, he carried no firearms, just a magical, thigh-mounted knife.

Nigel’s gear was very basic magic. Humphrey’s power to conjure weapons for his summons produced items very much of the same kind. Even basic, though, they were still bronze-rank items and would do the job for which they were intended.

The private deposited Jason nearby as Nigel dismissed the squad leaders and marched off with Jason in tow. They arrived at a group dressed in the same black tactical gear as Nigel, although most were holding guns. Jason could sense they were all bronze-rank essence users and, except for Nigel, core users.

“You’ll be with my section for protection,” Nigel told Jason.

“What am I protecting you from, exactly?” Jason asked, which drew a chuckle from Nigel’s section.

“Mr Culpeper’s directive was to keep you safe,” Nigel said. “That’s what I intend to do.”

“No offence, Mr Thornberry,” Jason said, “but I’m safer alone.”

“It’s Thornton, not Thornberry,” Nigel.

“Who am I thinking of?” Jason wondered aloud. “Sorry, I’ll just stick with Nigel.”

“We carry out tactical operation in nine-man sections,” Nigel explained.

“Hey” the solitary female member complained.

“Sorry, Darce,” Nigel said. “We operate in an eight-man, one Darcy section, broken into three groups by broad power type. We’ve got heavies, who have the powers to give and take the big hits. That’s Darce, Jonno and Higgy.”

“Higgy?” Jason asked. Higgy was good-looking man of Indian descent.

“H.I.G.,” Nigel explained. “Handsome Indian Guy.”

“I’m not Indian, Thorny,” Higgy complained. “I’m from bloody Woolloongabba.”

“Then we’ve got our scouts,” Nigel continued, “who are what it says on the tin. They have powers that make them fast and – if they can keep their damn mouths shut – quiet.”

“That’s one of my things as well,” Jason said.

“One of?” Nigel asked.

“I have a lot of things,” Jason said.

“We prefer to get really good at one,” Nigel said. “Our scouts are Orange, Green and Woolzy.”

“Because I’m from Woolloongabba,” Woolzy said.

“Which is bullcrap,” Higgy said. “Why couldn’t I be Woolzy?”

“Me and Higgy were recruited together,” Woolzy confided. “He got the looks and I got the talent.”

“Talent for riding my coattails,” Higgy muttered.

“That’s enough out of you two,” Nigel said.

“Why Orange and Green?” Jason asked.

“Well,” Nigel said, “they have the same last name and one of them is from the town of Orange, so we call him Orange.”

“Are you from a town called Green?” Jason asked Green.

“Nope,” Green said, without further explanation.

“Do you have the same first name?” Jason asked them.

“Nah,” Orange said. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Okay then,” Jason said.

“Saving the best for last,” Nigel said, “due to me being one of them, is the hitter group. We’re the sweet, meaty chunks of this stew and we’re all about that damage.”

“Meaning they aren’t worth a damn without the rest of us,” Orange said.

“The other hitters are Cobbo and Digit,” Nigel introduced. “I recommend against asking about Digit’s moniker.”

“Suffice to say,” Digit said, “that there are certain services one might procure from a lady of negotiable chastity for which it behoves one to check the quality of said lady’s cuticle care.”

“Meaning don’t let a prozzy stick a finger up...” Orange said before Nigel cut him off with a sharp glare.

“I’m sure he gets the idea, Orange. Now, this time around, our goal is to introduce Mr Asano here to exactly what it is we do and bring him back very not dead. Mr Asano, we can get you suited up if you like, although I imagine you have your own gear.”

“I do,” Jason said as dark mist appeared to engulf him. A few seconds later it passed to reveal Jason in his combat robes and cloak. He pushed the hood back off of his head.

“That’s a neat trick,” Higgy said. “Ever tried it in a phone booth?”

“Oh, I totally should,” Jason said. “If I can find one.”

“Are you that bloke from the news?” Woolzy asked.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“What’d a bunch of bikers come after you for?” Orange asked.

“It was a huge bloody balls up,” Jason said. “I was hanging about with my mate Vermillion, who’s a vampire, but I don’t hold that against him. Some other prick vampire didn’t like it, so he sent some bikers to mess me up. Problem is, this other vampire’s thick in the head and doesn’t realise a very obvious problem. If you take a bunch of bikers addicted to vampire blood, cut off their supply and then tell them you’ll turn it back on if they do a thing, they get *really* worked up about doing that thing. The inevitable happens, the bikers go nuts and suddenly they’re firing guns from the back of motorcycles in the middle of the highway when every sod and his mum are out driving to bloody brunch. Now, I’ve got my uncle in the car and I’m not going to let a bunch of bikies shoot him full of holes, so I step out. Suddenly I’m all over the telly.”

Nigel was quietly observing as Jason’s mannerisms shifted more in line with those of his section, along with some subtle changes in his aura that brought it more into line with theirs.

“Is that the guy who runs Club Vermillion you’re talking about?” Woolzy asked. “I always wanted to check that out, but it’s a Cabal club. Normies and Cabal only.”

“I get in,” Higgy said.

“That’d be bloody right,” Woolzy complained.

“Is that a magic sword?” Jonno asked, looking at the hilt poking out from under Jason’s cloak.

“Yep,” Jason said. “A mate made it for me.”

“Nice,” Jonno said. “They won’t give us anything bigger than a knife.”

“Jonno,” Darce said, “you conjure an M61 Vulcan. That’s a Gatling gun from a jet fighter, yet you won’t shut up about getting a bigger knife.”

“Sometimes you don’t need a rotary cannon,” Jonno complained. “Sometimes you need a big knife. A sword would be even better.”

“Do you know how to use a sword?” Jason asked.

“Could you teach me?” Jonno asked.

“Don’t answer that,” Nigel said.

“Hey, Asano,” Orange said. “How come you sound like an Aussie but look like a Jap?”

“I dunno, Orange,” Jason said. “How come you sound like an arsehole but look like... actually, that checks out.”

The section all laughed.

“Yeah, fair enough,” Orange grumbled.

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The Network’s paramilitary nine-person sections were assembled, along with their actual military counterparts. The organisational structure seemed quite similar, with the Network appearing to have adapted much of theirs from the military. The sections formed by military personnel were based on weapons rather than essence abilities, with the heavies, scouts and hitter groups of the Network sections replaced with gunner, scout and rifle groups respectively.

“Once the boffins get the aperture opened up,” Nigel explained, “SOP is to secure a beachhead on the other side and assess local conditions. Once we have a stable landing point, we go hunting the ADE while the harvest sections get to work. Lucky for us, the ADE radiates a nice, detectable signal. That means we can go after it and the harvest teams stay out of its way. Green is our signals man, and he’s going to lead us right to it, aren’t you, Green?”

“Yep.”

“Asano, you need to do as I say, when I say it, no complaints,” Nigel said. “Your job is to do what you’re told and not die.”

“I won’t lie,” Jason said. “Those are both things I’ve struggled with in the past. Since I’m a self-invited guest, though, I’ll do my best.”