

## Chapter 303

### Otherwise Best Avoided

“I think we should start,” Keith said, “by getting everyone on the same page in terms of who we are and what we do.”

“I think that’s my cue to go,” Vermillion said. “Now that the meeting has been facilitated without anyone trying to kidnap anyone else, I’ll bow out to allow you to share secrets without concerning yourselves over a third party.”

“Thanks, Craig,” Jason said. “We’ll catch up later, yeah? Hang on; I’ll put your sandwich in some paper.”

Jason wrapped Vermillion a sandwich and Shade escorted the vampire away, leaving Jason with the Network contingent. Jason was standing behind the bar while the others had taken seats at Jason’s invitation.

“How about I get the ball rolling?” Jason said, continuing to assemble sandwiches. “We can go through my story, I can tell you what I’ve figured out about your little club and then we can do questions and corrections as you tell me about yourselves.”

“Before we begin,” Gladys said, “I’d like to ask about your scars. My understanding is that scars shouldn’t be possible for people like us.”

“Why is that?” Jason asked.

“Because we heal using the soul as a template,” Gladys said.

“Doesn’t that answer your question?” Jason asked.

“Wait,” Gladys said. “You’re saying that your soul is scarred?”

“I think marked might be a more accurate term,” Jason said. “Soul scars are usually what they call it in the other universe but I have more experience with this than most. The soul is a resilient thing and it can’t truly be harmed by external forces. Even the most extreme, which I have tested quite thoroughly.”

“Then what causes those marks?” Gladys asked.

“Your soul is who you are, at the core,” Jason said. “Some experiences change you, fundamentally. Standing against an enemy you didn’t think you could survive. Enduring a tribulation you though would annihilate you. The scars left behind might be from the wounds you suffered, but the reality is that you put them there yourself.”

“Psychological scars made manifest,” Gladys reasoned.

“Something like that,” Jason said. “I spent some time with a healer well-versed in soul trauma. I learned a lot from him.”

“What about that tattoo on your back?” Nigel asked. “We use magic tattoos ourselves, but nothing that elaborate.”

“I’ve used a regular magic tattoo in the past,” Jason said. “I lost it when I ranked up to bronze. From category one to two.”

“The same happens with ours,” Nigel said.

“This one on my back is different,” Jason said. “It’s called a personal crest and it’s a physical representation of my soul. It allows me to prove that I’m me, regardless of how much my aura might change. It’s impossible to replicate, as far as I’m aware, which stops some shape-shifter from assuming my identity. Of course, that’s only if someone checks it. If a dragon takes my shape to steal biscuits, for example, then people probably won’t go to the bother.”

The Network team shared uncertain looks.

“Dragon?” Annabeth asked.

“His name’s Stash. Adorable little fellow, but he does get up to mischief.”

“You expect us to believe in dragons?” Other Gordon asked.

“Mate, I got sucked through a dimensional flare into an alternate universe. If you’re going to balk at the first magical creature that comes along, then you might as well just sit there quietly and be grateful your name isn’t Other Colin.”

“What?”

“I think, Mr Truffett,” Keith said, “we might be best served by listening instead of talking.”

“Can I get a better look at your tattoo?” Asya asked.

“I’m not sure turning my back on you lot is the smartest choice,” Jason said, “but okay.”

He came out from behind the bar and turned around, giving them a clear view. The crest took up his entire back, depicting a starry night sky dominated by a disembodied cloak. It was not unlike Gordon in appearance, except that instead of an eye-shaped nebula there was a bright, daylight sky contained within it. The crest shimmered and moved slightly as they observed it. After a moment, Jason turned back around and retook his position behind the bar.

“That’s what your soul looks like?” Asya asked.

“From the outside,” Jason said. “From the inside it’s more like a garden.”

“You’ve seen the inside of your soul?” Gladys asked.

“I’ve had some experiences that have developed my capacity for self-reflection,” Jason said. “I’m sure we can talk about the specifics at a later date. What you need to

know now is that I went to a magical alternate universe, died a couple of times, obtained magical power and knowledge and came home.”

“What do you mean, died?” Annabeth said.

“Dead. Croaked. Shuffled off. Do I have to do the whole parrot sketch? The important thing is that I came back stronger every time, so I’d advise against killing me.”

“That’s quite a claim,” Keith said. “I don’t suppose you have any way of substantiating it?”

“Mate, it’s death; you don’t get a receipt. I don’t think. Shade...?”

“No,” Shade said.

“Shade’s dad is in charge of the afterlife,” Jason said. “He refuses to tell me what happens to souls when they die, though. My personal recollection is hazy at best.”

“That is not for the living to know,” Shade said.

“What do you mean, in charge of the afterlife?” Annabeth asked.

“Are you familiar with great astral beings? They’re kind of like super gods. Your regular gods, that you’ll find on any world with enough magic, are on a scale of your Zeus, Odin, etc. Great astral beings operate on more of a cosmic scale. That’s your ‘knocking out a universe in seven days’ crowd. Shade’s progenitor is the Reaper, who takes charge of the dead. We haven’t met, but he seems like a stand up guy. He might be a little cross with me because I keep dodging him, though.”

“These are some outrageous claims you’re making,” Annabeth said. “Even by our standards.”

“Which means you’re either telling us fibs,” Asya said, “or giving us insights into some of the most fundamental questions about reality.”

Jason flashed her a grin.

“Stick with me and I’ll show you the cosmos,” he said.

“I might just hold you to that,” Asya said.

“Do you have the means to travel between worlds?” Annabeth asked.

“No,” Jason said. “My journey was unexpected, in both directions. I am, however, going to find one.”

“You told one of my people that there was more than one other world,” Annabeth said.

“Yes,” Jason confirmed, “although I only visited the one. I don’t know much about the others. What’s relevant to our dealings here is what I brought back with me. I have a few material resources, but that’s a minor matter. More important to us all is the knowledge.”

“What kind of knowledge?” Keith asked.

“Before I go into that,” Jason said, “I’d like to explore your side of things for a moment, now that we’ve discussed mine. Let me begin by going over what I’ve been able to surmise about your Network.”

“Please do,” Keith said. “I’m curious as to what an outsider has been able to piece together.”

“Well, I think the seeds of your organisation were planted somewhere in the vicinity of half a millennium ago, probably by one or more outworlders who roamed around founding secret societies. These secret societies were most likely predicated on the existence of essences, although that’s a guess. At that time, I imagine there were few, if any opportunities to encounter monsters or other magical resources. Essences were probably hoarded and used by only a few, maybe even one person for each of the secret societies.”

“Did you get this information from Vermillion?” Annabeth asked.

“Some of it,” Jason said. “I filled in a lot of the blanks he didn’t know myself. Now, I’m guessing that when these secret societies were founded, they were each given access to something. Some means of detecting and interceding in certain magical events. Events that either began or started to significantly escalate somewhere around the turn of the twentieth century.”

“That’s not inaccurate,” Keith said.

“The incidents in question are, I’m assuming, the formation of short-lived, proto-astral spaces. I’m not sure what you call them locally, but I’m talking about unstable dimensional pockets attached to the world. I’ve only encountered the stable variant myself, although I have studied the theory.”

“We call them dimensional incursions,” Annabeth said. “The primary purpose of the Network is to find the incursions, enter them and prevent the entities there from making it into our world.”

“How does that work?” Jason asked.

“Each incursion contains a number of hostile entities,” Annabeth explained.

“Monsters,” Jason said.

“We use the term dimensional entity, or DE,” Annabeth said. “We send tactical teams to eliminate them. The secondary entities are inconsequential, but each incident has one or more of what we call an anchor dimensional entity, or ADE. If we take it or them out, then whatever is left disappears into the ether when the incursion space breaks down.”

“How long does that take?” Jason asked.

“Forty-three hours, as a baseline. Slightly longer with a more powerful ADE, but fifty-one is the record. That was with a category four ADE.”

“Gold rank?” Jason asked. “You have people strong enough for that?”

“There has only been one category four incursion to date,” Annabeth said. “It took a small army of category three tactical personnel plus a large amount of military firepower to handle it.”

“We’ve been working on magically enhanced heavy ordnance ever since,” Asya said. “We aren’t equipped to tackle an increase in incursions of that level, though.”

“When we fail to eliminate the ADE,” Nigel said, “any DEs still around when the incursion space breaks down are injected into our world.”

“We’ve prevented this in all but a few, isolated incidents,” Keith said. “Luckily, they were each in remote locations where there were minimal casualties and we were able to cover. Mostly.”

“We use the incursion space to harvest magical materials,” Asya explained. “Those materials are critical to maintaining our ability to resist incursion events. Essences and awakening stones are the most valuable materials, as you might imagine.”

“Over the last century,” Annabeth said, “both the number and strength of the incursions have been escalating, just as you said. We’ve managed to keep up thus far, given that more powerful incursion spaces mean better harvests. We’re reaching the point where we don’t have the resources to raise our people beyond category three. There’s been talk of pooling resources to try and get a small number of our most exceptional people worldwide to category four, but negotiations aren’t going well.”

“Trouble choosing which branch gets the category fours?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Keith said. “The obvious solution is to place them directly under the command of the International Committee and dispatch them globally at need. Unfortunately, the more powerful branches in the US, China and Russia are pushing back on that. Since they are the primary source of spirit coins, they can’t just be ignored.”

“You don’t have spirit coin farms,” Jason said. “That makes sense. Earth doesn’t have the magic and coin formation takes months, so you can’t do it in the proto-astral spaces. Are you getting your coins from loot powers?”

“Yes,” Keith said. “And the major powers make a point of trying to poach anyone who gets such a power to maintain their monopoly. They offer the kind of terms that are hard to turn down, although naturally many do. None of the Australian branches currently have anyone with a looting power.”

The others all turned an unfriendly glare on Other Gordon.

“The last two we had,” Keith said, “the government facilitated their exchange to the US, in return for political concessions.”

“Not even something that would help us do our job,” Anna said.

“Those deals were made in good faith,” Other Gordon defended.

“You’re not on TV, Truffett,” Annabeth said. “Don’t bother with the transparent lies.”

“Obviously, what we want from you,” Keith said, turning back to Jason, “is anything that will help us deal with the incursions. If you really do have a looting power, then supplying us with spirit coins is something we would be more than willing to demonstrate our appreciation of.”

“The real holy grail is the category three bottleneck, though,” Asya said. “If any of that knowledge you brought back can help our people reach category four, we’ll give you whatever you want. Enough hard currency to sink a container ship. Exemption from polygamy laws. Bora Bora.”

“Miss Karadeniz may be somewhat exaggerating,” Keith said, “but the magical deficit of our world creates choke points that significantly impact our operations. If you have any means to alleviate this, you will find us to be extremely generous.”

The Network contingent looked at Jason with anticipation, all but hanging off their seats as they awaited his response. He took a bite of his sandwich, paused to look at the sandwich appreciatively and then resumed thoroughly chewing it.

“Mr Asano...” Keith began as Jason swallowed, holding up a finger to indicate a pause as he slowly drained his glass of lemonade.

“Oh, that’s refreshing,” Jason said happily.

“Mr Asano...”

“Hold on a sec,” Jason said, retrieving the pitcher from the refrigerator and slowly pouring himself another glass. “Anyone else want a top up?”

“Please,” Asya said, eyes twinkling as she returned her glass to the bar. Annabeth flashed Keith a look of apology as she did the same.

“It’s really good,” she confessed.

“I can’t wave a magic wand and solve your problems,” Jason said as he finally emptied the pitcher. “Well, not all your problems.”

A wooden box appeared in his hands and he came around the bar to sit it on the table, where he slid off the lid.

“Two thousand iron rank spirit coins,” he said. “Category one, I guess.”

He took out a much smaller box and opened it as well.

“Two hundred category two.”

Next to the boxes he placed a pouch down with a clink. The crystal spirit coins had a different sound to ordinary metal coins. It distinctive and almost ethereal, like fine wind chimes in a delicate breeze.

“Twenty category threes,” Jason catalogued. “Call it a goodwill gesture for the trouble I’ve caused. I think you know what is spurring my goodwill in this instance.”

“The other outworlder,” Annabeth said as Keith goggled at the boxes, running his fingers over the neatly stacked rows of coins.

“That’s very generous,” Asya said.

“I’m not a middle of the road bloke,” Jason said. “I like to think I make a good friend and a bad enemy. I’m otherwise best avoided, since I tend to cause trouble.”

“We’ve noticed,” Annabeth said.

“Now there’s your big problem,” Jason said. “Getting your people over the line into category four. I can’t help you with that. I daresay you have a better understanding of core-based advancement than I do.”

“That’s disappointing, I won’t lie,” Keith said.

“What I can do,” Jason said, “is help you to sidestep that problem entirely.”