

## Chapter 288

### Agendas

“Finally,” Jason said. He was standing in front of Hiro’s apartment building with the cloud flask in his hand.

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- **Vortex accumulator (silver rank) complete.**
  - **Available forms (iron rank): Cloud house (grand), cloud house (adaptive).**
  - **Available forms (bronze rank): Carriage house (grand), carriage house (adaptive).**
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“Alright,” Jason said happily.

“Are you certain you should do this in front of the apartment building?” Shade asked from his shadow. “We are fully exposed to the street.”

“Yeah, I’d best take it around the side,” Jason said. “Flaunting it out in the open might not be the best.”

“What are you doing exactly?” Hiro asked.

“I told you,” Jason said. “Sorting out a ride.”

“Will it be like a magic carpet or something?” Taika asked. He had luggage for himself and Hiro piled outside the building entrance.

“Sadly, no,” Jason said. “It will be a bit more roomy, though.”

Jason made his way around the side of the building, between the apartment complex and the townhouse in which he had been staying. He pulled the stopper from the cloud flask and two wisps of cloud-stuff came snaked out to form two separate shapes, floating above the opening. One was a house and one was a long, multi-wheeled carriage. Jason waved his hand through the carriage and it changed shape into something more like a bus as he switched the carriage house form to the adaptive variant. He then sat the flask on the ground, where cloud stuff started streaming out in earnest.

“It’ll take about ten minutes,” Jason said to Hiro and Taika.

The three men watched as the stream of cloud-stuff slowly compressed itself into the form of a huge recreational vehicle. It was double-decked and generally enormous, at four metres high and fourteen metres long. The driving station was visible through a glass bubble sticking out from the top level of the vehicle’s front.

“Bro, that’s one of them super-expensive motorhomes. How’d you fit it in a bottle? Oh wait, magic. I’m still getting used to that.”

“These things are basically a luxury yacht on wheels,” Hiro said. “They normally go for upwards of three million, but I’m guessing this one cost a little more.”

“I’m not clear on the exchange rate,” Jason said. “I won this one in a competition and I’ve still been sinking money into it. Often literally.”

“What kind of competition?” Hiro asked.

“Retrieving the symbolic weapon of an ancient order of assassins from a pocket universe.”

“I have no idea how to respond to that,” Hiro said. “I no longer have any basis for what ridiculous is.”

“What’s with the license plate?” Taika asked, prompting Jason and Hiro to look. It read RPR-MAN.

“Are you a repair man?” Taika asked. “That seems odd to put on an expensive magical motor home.”

“Nope,” Jason said. “I’m not sure what that’s about.”

“It’s not repair man,” Shade said, emerging from Jason’s shadow. “It’s Reaper Man.”

“Shade, have you been messing with my cloud flask?”

“No,” Shade said. “I think it recognises that I’ll be the one driving.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “I’m starting to have some suspicions about the cloud flask, though. It seems awfully reactive for a magic item.”

“The cloud flask is a profoundly sophisticated item, bound to your soul. What you perceive as reactions to its environment are, in fact, effected by your unconscious control.”

“So, you’re saying that I’m the repair man,” Jason reasoned.

“It’s Reaper Man,” Shade insisted. “I am quite certain it refers to me.”

Hiro and Taika were watching the pair converse, their eyes glued warily on Shade. It was not the first time they had encountered him, but they were still unnerved by having the magical entity in their midst. Jason glanced in their direction.

“Blokes, I know this is all still fresh, but you’re in the shallow end of the pool. You haven’t even met Colin, yet.”

“Colin?”

“He’s my other mate. He’s still recovering after fighting with that prick who kidnapped me.”

“Is he going to try again?”

“I don’t think so,” Jason said. “The local authorities have him in custody. Of course, those local authorities might try and kidnap me themselves, but hopefully they decide to go in another direction.”

A sleek, black, two-door car pulled up in front of the apartment. Jason wasn't a car person and didn't recognise it, but it was clearly an old classic. Vermillion emerged, walking around the side of the building where the others were gathered. His attention was immediately drawn to Shade, while Jason eyed off Vermillion's car.

"Nice car," Jason asked.

"1967 Maserati Ghibli," Vermillion said proudly. "I've actually had it since '67, too."

"It's a little on the nose isn't it?" Jason asked. "I mean, if you asked me what kind of car a vampire drives, that's exactly what I'd think of."

"I do have an image to maintain," Vermillion said. "And I don't think you're the one to go throwing stones over ostentatious black cars. Hello Shade."

"Mr Vermillion," Shade returned the greeting.

Vermillion greeted Hiro and Taika, inquiring how they were handling the recent revelations they had experienced. Their still uneasy reaction to him, once an object of deep fear for both, told Vermillion more than their mumbled responses.

"Is this yours?" Vermillion asked Jason, looking over the huge, white motorhome.

"Yep."

"Is it that crazy expensive European model? I didn't pay you that much for the gold."

"No, it's custom," Jason said. "Very custom. I brought it back with me."

"You brought a motorhome back from an alternate reality?"

"I brought the power to teleport back from an alternate reality and this is what surprises you?"

"It's a matter of perspective," Vermillion said. "Teleport powers I can see in a magical alternate universe. RV dealerships seem like they'd be less prominent."

"They had all kinds of magic vehicles," Jason said. "There were magical carriages that were kind of like old-timey cars. I had a friend who used to drive us around a river delta on an airboat to do jobs. It was great."

"An airboat? Like an Everglades-style airboat?"

"Yep. There was kind of a hover version for travelling through the desert, too. Oh, and giant sand barges. It was very Jabba the Hutt. Oh, and an underwater subway. That was awesome."

"I'd love to see all that," Vermillion said.

"I have recordings of a lot of it," Jason said. "I'll show you some time. So what brings you by? Is it about the Network, or are you just sending us off?"

"Annabeth Tilden did contact me."

"What do you think of her?" Jason asked.

“She’s one of the good ones,” Vermillion said. “Be aware that she has people she answers to, however. She may be in charge of direct operations for her branch, but the people above her have the ultimate oversight.”

“Is that why she wanted you to play go between?” Jason asked. “Someone outside her chain of command?”

“I think she’s sensitive to what happens if you get pushed too far. She was very happy that you didn’t lay your kidnapping at the feet of the entire Network.”

“I’m not ruling anything out, at this stage,” Jason said.

“How are you holding up?” Vermillion asked.

“It’s not like I’ve never been kidnapped before.”

“It’s not?”

“I’ll tell you about it sometime.”

“We might have that chance sooner rather than later,” Vermillion said. “I actually came to tell you about my demotion. After everything that happened, it’s been decided to give someone else oversight of the Cabal’s Sydney operations. I’m being moved to somewhere more modest.”

“They’re banishing you to the middle of nowhere?”

“It shouldn’t be too bad,” Vermillion said. “It’s a little tourist town up the coast. We’re anticipating a rise in magical activity in the near future, so they’ve decided to assign someone to keep an eye on things. Namely, me.”

Jason laughed.

“I see. Well, would you like to travel with us, then?”

“I have my car,” Vermillion said.

“Oh, I can sort that out,” Jason said.

The size and weight limit of Jason’s inventory slots had increased with his rank and he successfully managed to fit Vermillion’s car. He lifted up the front end with his formidable strength and pushed it into the inventory window, causing the car to vanish.

“What did you do to my car?” Vermillion asked as Taika and Hiro goggled at the space it had been in. They were still far from inured to Jason’s casual use of magic.

“I just stored it,” Jason said. “It’s fine. Probably.”

“Probably?”

“I’ll pull it back out when we get there. Come on, let’s check out the new wheels. I haven’t had a chance to test this thing out, yet.”

“I’m certainly curious,” Vermillion said. “Why does the license plate say repair man?”

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Annabeth stood at the end of the table addressing the Steering Committee.

“Asano knows his value to us,” she said. “Or at least he’s made some good guesses. Look at the coins I just handed out. He left those for me on my kitchen counter. We’ve had them checked and they’re authentic, iron-rank spirit coins. Note the personalised design.”

Keith peered at the coin between his fingers, depicting a man giving a thumbs up. On the other side was embossed text.

PRODUCT OF JASON

G'DAY MATE!

“He didn’t just leave these on a whim,” Annabeth said. “He wanted us to see them. These are personalised, which means he not only has however many coins he brought back with him, but a looting power. If he’s figured out that looting powers are the only source we have for spirit coins in our world, and that our branch doesn’t have one, he knows that his value to us is immense. Even if he doesn’t, the actions of Lyon branch highlight how valuable he is. If we get Asano on board, our reliance on the international committee for spirit coins is ameliorated, if not eliminated entirely.”

“That’s attractive, certainly,” a committee member said. “But in return he wants to put us at odds with the Lyon branch. The European branches are just as strong as the Asian branches. I’m not willing to accept that kind of risk.”

The committee member, Miranda, had once been Annabeth’s counterpart at the Melbourne branch. Her overly-aggressive methodology was viewed as a problem but her political connections made getting rid of her less than easy. Instead, she was promoted to Sydney’s steering committee. This was an increase in authority, but removed her from direct operational control, as well as having the rest of the committee to balance out her inclination for direct action. Since her arrival, she had been at constant loggerheads with Annabeth, to the point of resisting anything she proposed as a default position.

“We have leverage to push the Lyon branch,” Keith said. “They massively violated protocol in sending operatives here. Especially a category three assassin. Who we have in custody, for even more leverage.”

“But we have to answer for the other operatives,” Miranda said. “We have to assume they’re dead.”

“I’m sure they are,” Annabeth said, “but we aren’t responsible for that. They made a move on a politically independent entity, outside of our knowledge and in violation of our territory. If anything, their death in our backyard is another mess the Lyon branch has to answer for.”

“We’d still be making a political enemy of a powerful branch,” Miranda said. “All for someone you admit won’t join our ranks and capitulate to our authority.”

“We wouldn’t be unleashing him on the world,” Annabeth said. “He’s already out there. Check the news. Every behavioural concession we get from him is a win.”

“We can take him in hand forcibly,” Miranda said.

“Go to the holding cells and ask our guest how well that went for him,” Annabeth said. “He came crawling to us just to survive.”

“We know he cares about family,” Miranda said. “We can leverage them.”

“And he can leverage magic itself,” Annabeth countered. “What happens when he starts a national tour of children’s hospitals and talk shows? Are you going to threaten the family of the guy curing adorable kids of leukaemia?”

“Then we act directly,” Miranda said. “If we take him alive, we can extract his resources. The Lyon branch clearly think he’s valuable enough, even unwilling, to take the risks they took.”

“Are you suggesting we kidnap and torture him?”

“Of course not. He’s already threatened the secrecy of magic and left a trail of bodies behind him,” Miranda said. “Bringing him in is our responsibility.”

“Miranda,” Keith said. “No one at this table believes you want to bring him in out of duty. Let’s at least be honest with one another.”

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While Jason had added enough extra materials to the cloud flask to have the interior of the adaptive form mask itself as thoroughly as the exterior, he declined to have it do so. One thing he had missed since reviving was the luxurious comfort of cloud furniture. As they boarded, the sides of the vehicle extended out to create interior space, like an ordinary, high-end motorhome.

Vermillion frowned oddly as he stepped inside. Jason realised why as he followed, immediately feeling better about the exorbitant resource cost of the vortex accumulator.

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- You have entered a region of normalised magic. Your recovery rates will remain at normal levels without spirit coin consumption.
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The interior of the motorhome was a mansion on wheels; two levels of opulence plus a roof deck on top. There weren’t stairs, but an elevating platform moving between the three levels.

“Bro, your magic RV has an elevator.”

On the lower floor was a luxurious lounge, bar and kitchen and dining area, all surprisingly roomy once the walls were extended. The level above had a main bedroom with a sprawling bed, plus a second one with single beds and a bathroom. It also had the driving station at the front, which felt more like the cockpit of a spaceship, looking out through the curved glass oval. The roof deck had comfortable seating and another bar.

Jason had a large amount of control over the interior, able to reconfigure entire rooms. The four explored the vehicle, Jason relishing the chance to introduce the others to the luxuriant joys of cloud furniture. The interior was mostly cloud white but with embellishments in glorious sunset colours of orange, gold, blue, red and purple.

“It feels like I’m in the womb,” Taika said happily from his cloud chair. “Except there’s a bar. It’s not easy finding chairs that are comfy for someone my size.”

“Don’t drink anything from the bar,” Jason warned him. “It’s magic-infused alcohol. It’ll probably kill you.”

“Even your booze is magic?” Taika asked. “That’s hardcore.”

Once the cloud flask had been ranked up to bronze, Jason had been able to store things in the cloud constructs even when it was in the flask. He didn’t have the chance to stock up of amenities, since he had ranked it up in the astral space. It had some drinks his team had used to celebrate their rank ups, but mostly just lower-value loot that was stored in the motorhome’s discreet storage spaces. They themselves were dimensional spaces that could be contained within a dimensional space when the cloud construct was stored in the flask, which had excited Clive immensely. It was a feature only something as sophisticated as the cloud flask was capable of.

“This is nice,” Vermillion said. “Really nice, but why aren’t you just teleporting?”

“A few reasons,” Jason said. “For one, I’ve been hankering to test this thing out for a while. For another, things have been chaos over the last few days.”

“That’s a severe understatement,” Hiro said.

“Exactly, Uncle Hiro,” Jason said. “Some luxurious, uninterrupted hours on the road is a chance to give you a proper explanation of what happened to me and how we ended up where we are. So, let’s get going, yeah? Shade, get behind the wheel. You can drive this thing right?”

“I am certain I can manage, Mr Asano.”

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Despite what the other organisations believed, there was a peak leadership structure that existed within the Engineers of Ascension. It had been quietly making preparations for years and a group of the top leadership were meeting in an office in New York City. There

were four of them, two men and two women, each in an immaculate suit. They were sitting at a conference table, watching footage of the Sydney tollway shoot out, intercut with images from phone footage of the Starlight Rider and coverage of the hospital miracle.

“This man threatens our agenda,” Mr North said. “We cannot allow him to beat us to the punch.”

“Do we kill him?” Mrs West asked.

“He’s an unknown factor,” Mr East said. “Too much could go wrong. The better response is to accelerate the timetable.”

“That will still take months,” Mrs West said. “What about a more immediate response?”

“The Network will not allow these public displays to continue,” Mrs South said. “We keep our hands clean and allow them to deal with it.”

“Agreed,” Mr East said. “I formally propose we move up the timetable. All in favour?”