

Chapter 275

I Suggest You Be Very Polite

Jason was standing on the edge of the roof, atop a tall building in the Sydney CBD. Shade was beside him as they looked toward an adjacent building. To normal sight it was unremarkable, but to magic senses the building was lit up like a giant candle. The top floor was a dancing flame of overlapped enchantments.

“I see what you mean,” Jason said. “It does seem like a lot of trouble to go to if it isn’t their headquarters.”

Shade had been watching the people who had investigated the hospital incident. Jason’s suspicions about the existence of native magic were confirmed when Shade spotted a pair of essence users. Their iron-rank senses had no chance of detecting him and he followed them to the building he and Jason were now looking at.

While Shade could evade even most bronze-rank senses, he didn’t risk approaching the enchantments in place on the Building’s upper floors. They weren’t very advanced, falling easily within Jason’s level of ritual magic expertise; just basic protection and detection enchantments, made permanent through artifice no greater than Jason’s skill-book derived skills.

What the magical protections lacked in individual sophistication, they made up in the complexity with which they were interwoven. Having so many effects integrated into one another without mutual interference was an impressive feat. Breaking through or sneaking past any individual effect would be a breeze for Jason, but with them pressed so snugly against one another, he could easily trigger one defence in the process of breaking through another.

Jason postulated that the simplicity of the rituals was not from lack of proficiency, but a need to work with the low density of ambient magic. Whoever devised the protections made the most of the restriction to low-rank formations and integrated them together, a feat not possible with more powerful effects. The low-rank magical array made it easier to avoid tricky magical interactions. Only something on the level of Jason’s cloud flask had the capacity to neatly amalgamate more powerful magic.

The more he examined the magical emplacements, the more impressed he became. The cumulative effect of such basic abilities would be surprisingly tricky to deal with, reminding Jason of Clive’s insistence on Jason gaining a deeper understanding of magic. Based on his early knowledge of ritual magic, coming from skill books alone, Jason would

have dismissed the danger of the simple enchantments. Only his study into the underlying principles of ritual magic allowed him to recognise the trap.

“What do they have in the way of numbers?” Jason asked. Shade had tasked one of his bodies with watching the comings and goings since finding the building.

“I have, thus far, noted eight different bronze-rankers, almost two dozen iron-rankers and one silver.”

“A silver,” Jason said, frowning.

“Their auras all show signs of heavy monster core use,” Shade said. “It seems to be the primary method for advancement.”

“Where are they getting monster cores?” Jason wondered aloud. “I can understand how I didn’t know about the secret society of magic people, but I don’t think I’d have missed monsters spawning all over the world.”

“It would appear that your world has mysteries we need to unravel,” Shade said.

“So it would,” Jason said, fishing his phone from his pocket to check the time.

He would have preferred to keep the phone in his inventory, but that would have cut it off from the networks. This was not just a factor of the dimensional displacement of his personal storage space, but also the state of stasis objects entered while in his inventory. He would like to experiment with the basic artifice technique that his magical watch used to keep time when stored away, but he didn’t have the materials.

It was almost time for the appointment Hiro had set up for Jason with the leader Hiro’s criminal organisation. Jason didn’t know how the local organised crime was structured but he didn’t much care. He had been surprised that, rather than some clandestine meeting spot, the meeting was in the heart of the city, in a building not far from the one he was standing on.

Jason leapt off the roof as his shadow cloak formed around him. He had, in his personal opinion, grossly underutilised the ability to glide that it acquired at bronze-rank. The only properly tall building he had encountered after obtaining the power was the tower in the astral space, which he’d been a bit busy to take advantage of. He’d only had one opportunity to jump off of it, and instead of being held aloft by his cloak, he was weighed down by the nest of stone spikes impaling his body.

His cloak spread out wide, like a pair of giant wings made of darkness and stars, with Shade gliding alongside. It was eerily quiet, with only the distant sounds of the street below.

“This a decidedly indiscreet practice in the middle of the day,” Shade pointed out.

“What’s that?” Jason asked. “I couldn’t hear you over the sound of how awesome this is.”

“Mr Asano, I’m not physically capable of giving a weary sigh, but if I were, I would be doing so quite pointedly in response.”

Jason laughed as he started testing out his control over the glide. As with most powers, he had an instinctive proficiency. While he would obviously improve with practice, basic control came to him quite naturally. He quickly got a handle on turning in a curving arc, descending to gain speed and even catching updrafts to regain a little altitude. After playing around for a while, he opened up his map ability and set a waypoint for his destination.

As he neared the ground, Jason projected his aura in a directed fashion that normal people could sense. He did so to two points, well to either side of his chosen landing point. He tried to be subtle yet attention-grabbing, so that all eyes turned away as he dismissed his cloak and dropped the last few metres into a silent landing. The momentary flash of aura passed, leaving the people on the street looking slightly disoriented.

“This is not a reliable method for avoiding attention,” Shade said quietly enough that only Jason could hear.

“You worry too much. If someone sees me, they won’t believe their eyes, especially if I gaslight them a little.”

“I am your shadow, Mr Asano, not your conscience.”

“Yet here you are chiding me,” Jason said merrily as he tugged his jacket into place. A suit generally wasn’t the best hang gliding outfit, but Gilbert’s suit, as always, was easily up to the task. The design had more flair than a design from his own world, but Jason didn’t hate being a little flashy.

He made his way into the nearby building entrance, across a large and pleasantly light-filled atrium to the reception desk.

“Jason Asano for Victor Tollman,” he said.

Victor Tollman was a large man. In his football days he’d been a decent ruckman. His gym work became a little harder and a took little longer with each passing year, but he maintained excellent health and physique well into his fifties. He had a friendly face and salt and pepper hair, with a neat beard to match.

He was sitting in his office, in a huge leather chair that seemed large even to his sizeable frame. If not for the swivel base, it would have made a halfway decent throne. His desk was a piece of oak the size of a single bed.

Victor was watching a live feed of the reception security cameras, but the image was distorted, centred on the man standing in front of the reception desk.

“Can you hide from cameras like that?” Victor asked the man standing beside him, likewise watching the screen.

“Yes,” Vermillion said.

Vermillion had pale skin, dark hair and narrow but sleekly-handsome features. He was tall and looked to be in his mid-twenties, although Victor suspected the man was older. He wore an impeccable black suit that cost more than Jason’s last car. Of course, Jason’s last car had been a rather dismal bomb, which he hadn’t given a thought to with Shade on hand.

“Is he one of you?” Victor asked.

“Perhaps,” Vermillion said, “but most likely not. I’ll know once he gets up here.”

“What else might he be?”

“I’ve warned you about fishing for information, Victor,” Vermillion gently admonished. “Too much knowledge and too little power is a volatile admixture.”

“Instead of withholding knowledge, you could just give me power,” Victor suggested.

Vermillion shook his head, a faint smile on his lips. “You’re relentless, Victor.”

“That’s the footy player in me,” Victor said. “You’ve got to be hungry if you’re going to win.”

Jason followed a blank-faced office worker from the elevator and down a corridor that terminated in a large set of wooden double doors. The functionary dramatically pushed them both open to grant access to the room beyond. It was more akin to one of Emir’s cloud palace lounges than an office, taking up a full third of the top floor, with two stellar corner views. It resembled the inside of a gentlemen’s club, with multiple sets of leather chairs and couches, a movie projector and two separate bars.

If it was a gentlemen’s club, though, the gentlemen in question were of the unrefined sort. The walls were covered in paraphernalia glorifying football. From the preponderance of Collingwood merchandise, Jason guessed that Victor Tollman was originally a Melbournian.

The only part that looked even remotely like an office had a leather throne behind what was either a very robust desk, or a somewhat rickety boat. Walking around from behind it were two men, who Jason turned his attention to as the office worker left, closing the doors behind her.

The larger of the two men was older, but vigorous, judging by sight and aura both. He reminded Jason of Hiro's thug, Growl, but with fewer steroids and more brains. The younger man looked like a sexy mortician. His aura was bronze-rank and rather disconcerting in its familiarity. It reminded Jason of the vampires he had fought in the past, but without the wild savagery of those turned by a monster. This man was clearly of a different breed, with a clean, controlled aura.

The younger man stayed back while the older one came forward to boisterously shake Jason's hand. The physical contact brought up the man's information.

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- Victor Tollman
 - Human (normal rank)
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"G'day, mate," Victor greeted.

"G'day," Jason said. "If I'd known you were a Collingwood supporter, I might not have come."

Victor snorted derision.

"Go the mighty pies," he said with a grin, then moved aside, a clear invitation for the other man. The tall, pale man stepped forward and Jason offered his hand. After a brief pause, the man shook it.

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- Craig Vermillion
 - Greater Vampire (Human, araneid bloodline, bronze rank)
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"Jason Asano," Jason introduced himself. "Just call me Jason. Mind if I call you Craig?"

The tall man's lips pressed thinly together but he otherwise didn't react as he let go of Jason's hand.

"I go by Vermillion, professionally."

"No worries, mate," Jason said with a grin. Jason had grown a few centimetres taller with the ascension to bronze rank, but he was still towered over by the two men.

"You can just call me Vic," Victor said. "Let's park it, yeah? One of the good things about being rich as buggery is owning good chairs."

They sat down in a trio of lounge chairs around a low table.

"Would you like some refreshments?" Victor asked. "There's nothing really worth drinking at noon on a Tuesday, but I can have someone bring in water, coffee, tea..."

"I'm fine, thank you," Jason said. "You asked to see me, presumably because you heard about what happened with Ari."

"Yep," Victor acknowledged.

Jason then turned to Vermillion.

"How much does he know?" Jason asked.

"He's had a glimpse," Vermillion said. "He knows what I am and that there are other things out there. Enough to see that there are dangers he is unequipped to combat."

"Dangers you are equipped to meet," Jason chuckled. "In return for certain accommodations."

"Yes," Vermillion said unashamedly. "What have you told your uncle?"

"That if I tell him anymore, he may find himself involved with those dangers you mentioned."

Victor didn't show it on his face, but Jason could see the frustration in Victor's aura. He guessed that Victor was unaware that his emotions could be read through his aura. Vermillion presumably kept quiet about it for his own advantage. As for Vermillion, his controlled aura revealed none of his emotions, at least to Jason's aura senses. It was an unusual level of control for a someone not an essence user.

"Those dangers may not be something you can keep from your uncle's door," Victor said. "The EOA have seized control in Perth and Melbourne, and now they're making no secret of their overtures into Sydney."

Jason had already guessed that the EOA to be more than ordinary criminals, although it was postulation based on very little information. It was starting to look like his world had an entire ecosystem of hidden magic, which Jason needed to learn about before he stumbled into trouble.

"What is it that you want from me?" Jason asked Victor.

"I have a level of cooperation with Vermillion's organisation," Victor said. "They are unwilling to expand the scope of that when the EOA come knocking at my door. When I heard that someone else from his general circle was affiliated with one of my employees, I wanted to see if we could come to an arrangement."

"We cannot," Jason said flatly. "I'm not going to step into your fight."

Victor could not provide Jason with the kind of information he needed. Further, he wanted Jason to jump into a fight without understanding the sides, which was the opposite of Jason's own intentions. It was Vermillion who had something to offer Jason.

"What about your uncle?" Victor asked.

“He is under my protection,” Jason said. “That protection does not extend to you or your interests.”

“I can offer you substantial benefits,” Victor said. “You would be surprised at what I can accomplish, when sufficiently motivated.”

“You would be surprised at what I can accomplished, when sufficiently motivated,” Jason said in turn. He didn’t reinforce his words with his aura, but it wasn’t necessary. Although it didn’t show in his body language, a ripple of fear passed through Victor’s aura.

Jason had once fought a team in a mirage chamber, using movie-monster theatrics to stir fear and disorient them. It only worked because they were as naïve as he was, and he cringed when thinking back to what he now considered a buffoonish display.

While it had barely been a year since then, it had been a year in which Jason had walked through blood and death. He no longer had to make a foolish imitation of being dangerous; his experiences, attitude, training and transformed body had brought about a transfiguration.

Jason’s old, frivolous self had increasingly become a mask he had to put on, and with months of constant fighting, he hadn’t put it on in a while. Wading through a sea of monsters, the only people around him had been his trusted friends and most reviled enemies. After all that, the mask didn’t fit as neatly as it used to.

To the kind of people who recognised it, Jason unconsciously radiated danger. Even with his aura hidden, it was in his body language. It was in the way he moved and the way he watched everything around him. It was in his confidence, an unassailable self-assurance. Ari had picked up on it even before Jason unleashed his aura, and Victor was a lot sharper than Ari.

“I’d like to go over some of the things I could do for you,” Victor said. “And your uncle, as well.”

“No,” Jason said firmly. “I suspected that you might have some kind of offer along those lines, but I want to be unambiguous in rejecting it. I know this isn’t what you want to hear and I want this to be an amicable relationship, but I’ve just got back from further away than you know there is distance to go. I don’t know the local situation or the local players and I’m not even going to consider intervening until I have a better understanding of the pool I’m paddling in.”

Jason gave Victor a genuine smile, to cut the tension.

“To be honest, Mr Tollman – Vic – I came here for two reasons. One was to give you some face, so as to not cause trouble for my uncle. The other was to meet Vermillion.”

Jason turned to the pale man, who had been largely content to sit back, eyes never leaving Jason.

“I’d like to meet privately for a more frank discussion, Mr Vermillion.”

“An information exchange?” Vermillion asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “If Vic, here, can convince you to make another pitch on his behalf once I have a better lay of the land, I’ll listen. I don’t see myself agreeing, but you’ve approached me with courtesy. It’s only fair that I reciprocate.”

Jason stood up. Victor and Vermillion did the same and Jason shook hands with Victor again.

“It was good to meet you, Vic. I’m sorry I can’t give you what you want, but I’ve learned some hard lessons about carelessly picking my fights before.”

“I understand,” Victor said congenially.

“If you’re willing to have a further meeting,” Jason said, shaking Vermillion’s hand, “I’m sure you can find my number.”

After having one of his staff escort Asano away, Victor walked behind his desk and fell into the big chair.

“That bloke feels unnerving,” Victor said. “That doesn’t mean he’s the real thing, though. Are you sure he’s not just bluffing about being from your circle? It seemed like he was fishing for information.”

“I’m certain,” Vermillion said. He had never encountered an aura as strong and rigidly controlled as Asano’s. It was like an impenetrable sphere, perfectly formed and revealing only what it wanted you to see. It was also stronger than any bronze-rank aura he had encountered by an order of magnitude.

He had almost mistaken it for a silver-rank aura, and had no doubt that if Asano wanted to hide it from him, he could have. Asano clearly wanted Vermillion to see that he was an essence magician, and not one to trifled with. Vermillion was frequently the front man for the Cabal’s dealings with the other groups, and Asano was wholly unlike the essence magicians he had encountered from the Network. While he was still an essence magician, Vermillion had no doubt that Asano was a different breed entirely.

“Are you going to meet with him?” Victor asked.

“Yes,” Vermillion said.

“Will you try an convince him for me?”

“No,” Vermillion said. “If he were to pit himself against the EOA, it would cause dangerous ripple effects. I don’t think he’s part of the local ecology. If it weren’t for the family connection, I doubt we would ever have heard of him.”

“So, why is he trying to sell gold?” Victor wondered.

“That is a curiosity,” Vermillion said. “It’s why I bought it. My people are analysing it, chemically and otherwise. This man may be operating independently, although I’m not sure how it’s even possible for someone of his nature to get that strong without support.”

“How strong?” Victor asked. “If he’s alone, would he even be of use against the EOA? How dangerous can one man be?”

“Very, I suspect,” Vermillion said. “But you’re right that taking on an organisation like that alone is a futile gesture. Overcoming the locals would only bring greater threats down on him.”

“Are you telling me to roll over for the EOA?”

“Sometimes the harder path runs right off a cliff, Victor.”

“How would he stack up compared to you, if it came to a fight?”

“I don’t know what he’s capable of,” Vermillion said. “I would avoid one, if possible. My instincts tell me that if I couldn’t... I suggest you be very polite with his uncle.”