

Chapter 433

Wash Them First

Jason didn't ask any more about Mr North's cryptic clues. Unless he was willing to try and torture the information out of him he wouldn't be forthcoming and Jason wasn't ready to take that step. In any case, Mr North seemed to know more about spirit domains than Jason himself and had entered Jason's anyway. To assume the North had not taken precautions would be foolish.

"Will you act on our behalf?" Anna asked.

"No," Jason said. "I'll act on my own."

"You will go to France, though," she clarified.

"Yes. But I want something in return."

"I can't force him to give up Adrien Barbou," Anna said. "We would if we could. We'd quite like to get our hands on him ourselves."

"Anna, don't you dare," Farrah said quietly. "Barbou belongs to me."

"Spicy," Mr North said. "Jason, I like her."

"I've paid the price for running my mouth when I shouldn't, Mr North. It's time for you to go before you learn that lesson for yourself."

"Do you regret it though?" Mr North asked.

"Sometimes the cost of staying silent is worse than the cost of speaking up, whatever that price may be," Jason admitted. "It doesn't make the cost any less real."

➤ You have designated [Rune Spider (variant)] as hostile.

Jason gestured at the window and the transparent cloud-stuff dissipated, letting in the breeze.

"You can show yourself out, Mr North; I'm sure you'll find your way. I have more to discuss with Mrs Tilden."

"Very well," Mr North said. "But since you and I are not likely to meet again before you return from the other world, a final piece of advice: don't build your bridge here. Put it somewhere that people aren't going to get hurt."

Mr North leapt out the window, which was restored at an absent gesture from Jason who was contemplating North's departing words. The implications of the insight he continued to demonstrate were troubling but Jason put them aside to concentrate on present issues.

“Anna,” Jason said, turning his inhuman eyes on her. “You want me to do this, and I will. But I want something in return.”

“I told you that Barbou is not within our power to give,” Anna said.

“That’s not what I’m talking about. We’ve been discussing opening this place up to the civilians affected by the transformation zones. A place where they can be safe and welcome.”

Anna looked out the window at the ruined streets.

“Safe?”

“Mr Spencer,” Jason said, turning to the vampire. “I hope that you find equanimity with this world you have come back to after so long. Thank you for coming. I’ll see to the return of the others, so you may take the car if you wish.”

“I’ve been buried under a church since the rule of George the Second,” Spencer pointed out. “I do not know how to drive an automobile. As I am faster than a car, however, I shall make do and walk. Like a peasant. You aren’t going to make me jump out the window as well, are you?”

“Certainly not,” Jason said. “Shade, please escort the gentleman out.”

After Spencer was guided away by Shade, Jason turned his attention back to Anna.

“I have something to show you.”

“How big is this?” Anna asked as she looked out over the city from Shade’s zeppelin form. As with the world outside the astral space, it was deep into the night and the empty city was a sea of lights. The rest of the group were in the main passenger cabin while Jason and Anna spoke alone in a small observation room.

“The city is large enough that we can take in as many transformed as choose to come,” Jason said. “For the foreseeable future, at least.”

“I don’t have anything like the authority to make something like that happen,” Anna said. “Every country, every magical faction has their own policies and even laws regarding the transformed.”

“I know. It will be a lengthy and complicated process to even begin.”

“You don’t have time for that.”

“Nor the patience. I’m better at spotting politics at work than wading in myself, I’ve discovered. I’m too enamoured of bold moves and more than a little imperious, at times. That’s why I will give my Grandmother the authority to act on my behalf when it comes to administering this place.”

“Then shouldn’t she be in here with us?”

“I haven’t told her yet,” Jason said.

“Are you certain she’ll agree to do that?”

“She will if I threaten to do it myself.”

“The most I can do is start putting you in contact with people. Governments, the UN.”

“I’m not looking for you to get it done. What I want from you is to make sure that this is taken seriously.”

“People take you seriously.”

“This is a different thing.”

“Yes,” Anna agreed. “I’ll do what I can.”

“That’s all anyone can ask,” Jason said.

After a quick sky tour, the group returned to the pagoda for a social gathering in the mezzanine lounge with Jason and his family. Refreshments were set out, mostly magical fruit collected from the astral space. The forested areas had wild fruits and berries while the pastoral regions featured orchards.

“I’m sorry I never had the chance to introduce your wife to Dawn,” Jason told Anna. “She’s gone off to the other universe.”

“And you will follow?” Anna asked.

“In time. I’m close to securing the stability of Earth, at least in the short term. I need to go to the other side to finish the job. To be honest, I’m more than ready to go. I’m tired, Anna. Tired of nothing but going from one fight to the next. Of always watching my back in case some gold-ranker finds me or the Network betrays me again. You know that I’ll have to check out France to make sure it isn’t some kind of ambush.”

“You really think I would do that?”

“Do you remember the night we met in person?”

“In my kitchen.”

“I’d just escaped a Network kidnap and extraction team, which was not the last time I was kidnapped by the Network.”

“That was the French and American branches.”

“If you hang the Network shingle, you’re responsible for the Network’s actions, Anna. Are you asserting that you’ve never done something you disagreed with because one of your bosses told you to?”

“Of course not.”

“So, yes, Anna. I really think you would do that.”

“I’m sorry that it’s come to that, Jason.”

"I'm past sorry. If I didn't have to stop the world from breaking down like a biscuit in milk, I'd be long gone already. I thought I'd stay and help with the vampires but once I'm done in France, that's as far as I go. I probably wouldn't even go that far if it weren't for the man behind the Makassar undead. I won't let him do that again."

"That's exactly what he wants to do with these ghouls."

"Which is why I'm doing this. Then I'm finishing my task and leaving."

"Will you ever come back?"

"Yes, but not for a long time. You should hope that it's long enough that I'm no longer looking to settle old scores because it will be long enough that I can."

"Speaking of old scores, I have news on Jack Gerling. He's gone rogue."

"Rogue?"

"Since the magic changed, gold-rankers can get by on silver-rank spirit coins now. Thirty a day isn't cheap but it's enough that they no longer need gold coins, let alone reality cores."

"What's he up to?"

"No one knows. From what I've heard, he'd been quietly suborning people for a while and took off with his assistant, a cluster of silver-rankers and a couple of the best ritualists the US had."

"Great," Jason said. "He'll be coming after me, if he isn't already."

"Why?"

"Because, unlike the Network, he hasn't been distracted by vampires and reality cores. Remember why you were kidnapping me in the first place? Before the world blew up, you all wanted my secrets. He still does."

While the others were meeting and talking, Akari and Jason quietly took a walk outside. They discussed the combat trance that Jason had recently been able to touch on but was as-yet unable to fully use.

"We call it the sword Zen, in my family," Akari said. "Obviously, people not dedicated to the sword call it other things. My father is the expert; I only managed to reach that state at Asano village. After Gerling killed Asya, Kaito and Greg, I went into intensive training with my father and finally managed to achieve it. I'm surprised you were able to, given that mastery of technique is not your central focus."

"I recently had the opportunity for some quite intensive experience with the sword," Jason told her.

"Oh?"

"When this place was still covered in a dome, it sealed the powers of whoever was in here. My sword was all I had, at first, and even as more options became available to me, it remained critical until the end."

"And how much fighting was there?"

"Quite a bit. I only achieved the combat trance at the end, when I was pushed to the absolute limit. I've managed to touch on it since, but only sporadically. Farrah has helped but her combat style is, in many ways, the opposite of mine. It's almost like there's a translation issue."

"I don't have much more experience at this than you," she said. "My father is the expert. If you spent some time with him, it may help you."

"I don't have that time, and I may not go back home for a while. Probably not until right before I leave this world."

"I used to want to go with you," Akari said. "An alien world full of strangeness and adventure."

"But not anymore?"

"My fight is here, now. The vampires are coming sooner, rather than later. You're not the only one standing up to save the world."

"I really would like to thank you again," Jason said to Cosgrove. They were still in the mezzanine lounge and dawn was starting to poke its head over the horizon. "You may as well all stay for the day. Craig will need to stay inside until it's dark again at least."

"Damn right," the vampiric Vermillion said. "The magic here does bad stuff to the light. I can feel the dawn coming like a chill climbing up my back."

"It's strange meeting you like this, Mr Asano," Cosgrove said. "Your disappearance set me on a strange path. It seems odd, now thinking back on how the cover-up of one little magic event involved so many people. Police, federal police, government. It seems like a lot of effort given that it's all out in the open, now."

"It used to be a lot easier," Vermillion said. "In a world before mass communication and people carrying cameras around in their pockets. The Network's balancing act of keeping everything secret had been close to toppling for a long time."

Vermillion sat a hand on Jason's shoulder.

"Then this guy came along. I won't say he's the one who made them tip over but he definitely added some wobble."

“I’d like to give you something, Mr Cosgrove. Your partner, too, as a gesture of my gratitude. Of course, the concern is that anything I gave you would be confiscated the moment you leave, so it needs to be something you can use here.”

Jason gestured and a portal arch appeared. Two of Shade’s bodies stepped out, each carrying a large duffel bag.

“We’ll have to do it all at once, which isn’t ideal,” Jason said. “It also means that I’ll be picking everything out for you.”

“What are you talking about?” Cosgrove asked.

Shade set the bags on the floor and Jason crouched down to open one. He reached in and took out a cube shining brightly enough that it was hard to look at.

“I’ve picked out two sets,” Jason said. “You can choose between them for yourselves. One is the sun essence, the blood essence and the life essence. It combines into the avatar confluence and is about as perfect an anti-vampire set as you’ll find. The other set are all cheap essences; gun, hand and adept, combining into the master essence.”

“The John Wick special,” Anna said.

Jason put the sun essence back in the bag and closed it.

“If you’re willing, I’ll essence you both up before you go. There’s enough awakening stones in there that we can send you off with a full set of powers. Rushing things like that isn’t ideal, but I’m guessing you former EOA guys are pretty far down the list when it comes to getting resources from the Global Defence Network.”

“No kidding,” Dashiell said. “They say we’re all one big family, but I haven’t seen anyone that didn’t come from the Network originally getting magicked up.”

“It’s not that bad,” Anna said.

“Sure, it’s not,” Dashiell said. “If Adam didn’t know Mrs Asano, do you think we’d be doing anything but scut work?”

“Are you sure about this?” Cosgrove asked Jason. “These are valuable resources.”

“Mate, I’ve got them coming out my arse. Not literally; you won’t have to wash them first.”