

## Chapter 873

### Why He Hasn't

Jason thought he would never endure pain as comprehensive as the Builder's attack on his soul. The Cosmic Throne proved him to be profoundly mistaken. His true body was now an entire universe, and only an avatar had sat on the throne. Even so, the agony was mind-blanking. He awoke, face down on the throne room's grimy floor, having tumbled off the throne and down the stairs of the dais.

"Is it done?" he managed to croak out.

"It is done," Raythe said.

Jason rolled onto his back with a groan, then pushed himself to a sitting position. He looked around and saw that all the great astral beings were gone. Only Raythe remained, but her aura made clear that she was no longer possessed. The only other people in the room were Jason's familiars and the avatar of the tree city.

"How long was I out?" he asked.

"That is complicated," Raythe said. "We are at the boundary of reality and unreality, where time is subjective at best and arguably doesn't exist at all."

"Okay, that's the long answer. Is there a short one?"

"Approximately seven hours, if we leave this place soon," Shade said.

"Which I highly recommend," Raythe said. "The time here is synchronised with your universe while this castle is still connected to it, which it will only be for a short amount of subjective time. It would be best if you don't arrive back in your universe a year from now. Or a year before now. You don't have to rush out the door, but don't tarry longer than you need to recover."

"Yeah, I don't think I'll be doing any rushing," Jason said. "The great astral beings didn't gather dust, though, did they?"

"When it was done, it was done," Raythe said. "There was no purpose in lingering."

"They didn't draw anything on my face before they left, did they?"

"No."

Jason groaned again as he got unsteadily to his feet.

"That shook my soul like it was a snow globe. Did it have any impact on my domains? More importantly, the people in them?"

"No. It was your mortal aspect that was inadequate to endure the task. Your transcendent aspect is a universe and can soak up a few spiritual tremors."

"That's good."

He winced as he rubbed his temples with the heels of his hand.

“I don’t suppose you know a good hangover cure.”

“For the backlash of setting the new status quo for the cosmos while still mortal? I’m afraid you’ll need to ride that one out, Jason Asano.”

“How bad did I mess it up?”

“The great astral beings are satisfied. That is as much as any could ask from you, and more than we expected.”

“All of them are satisfied? Or a motion-passing plurality, with the rest looking to hunt me down for revenge.”

“The nameless are unhappy, as they would be with anything short of complete cosmic anarchy. They will not seek you out. The others are satisfied.”

“Even the World-Phoenix?”

“It would seem that the restoration of the throne set a new status quo based on things as they were at the moment of restoration. The World-Phoenix in its current state is now its new baseline.”

“Winners all around, then. Now, what did I get wrong?”

“Wrong is not the right word. There were changes, and not all from you. After sundering the throne, the great astral beings placed strictures on the cosmic order, to maintain stability. They are now releasing those strictures.”

“Any of them I need to know about right now?”

“Not from what they have done.”

“Meaning there’s something I did that I need to know about.”

“You will be able to sense it once your soul recovers from the shock. The throne could never be restored to what it was. Part of you was imprinted upon it. An echo of you, spread across the cosmos.”

“Did I just make Airwolf real in every universe?”

“No. You made your interface available to everyone with essences or the potential to get them.”

“Huh. Is that with all the special features?”

“Not as a default. It allows for people to view their own information and nothing more, but that has already started to change. Species gift evolutions and even essence abilities are expanding the base effects, just as yours did.”

“How did the cosmos spring this on people? Just windows popping up in front of them?”

“Yes.”

“Did everyone freak out?”

“Surprise was a common reaction, yes.”

“How many people died?”

“The interface, or the System, as it’s calling itself, appeared to wait for a moment of safety before revealing itself to individuals.”

“So, no traffic accidents because a window popped up in people’s faces?”

“I won’t say there weren’t mishaps, but most of the deaths came from reactions to the System, not the System itself. Religious furore, superstition. Mass killings to keep the new power from teaching things to oppressed members of society.”

Jason hung his head.

“I got people killed, then.”

“You may have reshaped the cosmos, Asano, but do not consider yourself so grand as to own tribalism, greed and prejudice. People are responsible for their own actions, and ignorance will take any excuse it can get. I shouldn’t need to tell you that.”

“I suppose not.”

Jason turned to look down the hallway out.

“We should probably head back to my universe, right? I can feel this place detaching itself.”

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Miles Cotezee, a senior Adventure Society official, hurried through the Vitesse campus of the Magic Research Association campus. The always busy grounds were even more so than normal in the wake of what had just happened. Fortunately, Vitesse had not fallen into chaos. It took more than an illusionary window that told you your essence advancement to upset the cart. In a major adventuring city, it was just the latest oddity in a world full of bizarre events. If anything, it was refreshing that the new magic thing wasn’t actively trying to kill them.

The nature of this new ‘System’ was not completely alien to members of the major organisations in Vitesse and around the world. No small amount of analysis had been dedicated to Jason Asano’s abilities and the System was swiftly linked to him. As such, the Adventure Society had deployed Miles to seek out Clive Standish.

Miles had worked with Clive, Belinda and Sophie when the three of them were tracing a portal magic network the Builder cult had used. That was at a time when Asano was believed dead and their team was scattered in various pursuits.

Standish had been silver rank when Miles worked with him, and was best known as a team member of Danielle Geller’s son. Things were very different now. From revealing the

impending messenger invasion to building a rival to the Magic Society, Standish was well and truly famous in his own right.

In just a handful of years since its inception, the Magical Research Association had exploded into prominence. While the Magic Society leveraged its research and secrets for political power, the MRA gave open access to records and research libraries. Many of the most prominent academics continued to side with the Magic Society for the greater personal gain. The MRA was, instead, a bastion for young, bold and innovative researchers.

The openness of the research association plundered patronage that once would have gone to the Magic Society. Compared the society hoarding their knowledge for political gain, organisations funded the MRA knowing the results would be freely available. Government authorities, the Adventure Society and a variety of Churches, especially that of Knowledge, all contributed. More than just funding, they were a shield against the Magic Society as it tried to crush its upstart rival.

The future of the MRA looked bright, despite the Magic Society's best efforts. They were already closely associated with the new sky communication network, and there were rumours of a transportation network being quietly researched. This was the result of years of study into the same network Clive had been tracking years earlier.

Miles and Clive had remained friendly over the years, making him the natural person to send when the Adventure Society wanted something from Clive and his association. The MRA campus was swarming with people in the wake of what had happened, but Miles was a known factor. He entered the administration building and managed fight his way to Clive's office through only a minimum of bureaucratic run around.

Miles counted nine people gathered in the spacious outer office. This included Clive's assistant, Jeff, at his desk. Miles recognised a few upper-echelon members of the association, plus members of various other societies, associations and institutes. They were standing in silence with uncomfortable expressions on their faces. Miles realised why when moans of pleasure emanated through the closed door of the inner office.

"Oh, yeah. That's the stuff," Clive's voice came through the door. "I've been waiting for this for so long. Knowing I could do this and having it denied to me was torturous. It's like something that's been pent up for years has started gushing out of me."

Miles moved up to Jeff.

"Who is he in there with?"

"I have no idea, Mr Cotezee," Jeff said. "No one came through this way, so they must have portalled in. His wife, maybe?"

“Have you ever seen her?” Miles said. “The Adventure Society has been trying to identify her for years.”

“No, I’ve just heard his friends talking about her, and he doesn’t like it when they do.”  
Jeff leaned in closer.

“I don’t think the marriage is in the best shape,” he said in a conspiratorial whisper. “They don’t seem to spend a lot of time together, and I’ve heard, she’s quite... free with her affections.”

An excited noise came from the inner office.

“Oh, wow! I didn’t think so much would come out just from rubbing the shaft!”

Miles and Clive shared a look until Clive’s door burst open and he emerged holding a magical staff. Sparks were streaming out from a metal cup set into the end.

“Jeff! Get someone from the Item Catalogue Department over here. They wildly miscategorised what this thing does. And see if you can find out where my party members are. I think we’ll be getting together soon.”

Clive finally seemed to notice all the people, panning his gaze over them unhappily.

“Yes, this was Jason,” he told them. “No, I don’t know how. Yes, I have guesses; no, I won’t tell you what they are. Now, all of you go away.”

“Archchancellor Standish, I need to talk to about — AARGH!”

The woman who spoke was sucked through a hole that appeared in the in the ceiling in a rush of air. Miles saw her hurtling skyward before the hole closed again. Clive swept back into his office and slammed the door as most of the others scrambled to leave. Only Miles and Jeff remained, looking up at the ceiling.

“She was silver rank,” Miles observed. “She’ll be fine, right?”

“The archchancellor has the landing zone fenced off so no one gets landed on. I can’t believe he had all this installed and hasn’t gotten around to an automated privacy screen.”

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Anna Tilden was in the home office of her New York apartment, looking out over Central Park. She was listening to her assistant, Michael Aram, as he summarised a report.

“...confirmed to be non-synchronous. That suggests there is an intelligence behind this ‘System,’ and that this intelligence is either benevolent or sees some benefit in minimising casualties from the event.”

“But there were casualties.”

“Most are related to reactions to the event, rather than the event itself. The death toll is surprisingly low, with stress-induced heart attacks being the main culprit.”

“Small mercies. No bonus points for guessing who the intelligence behind this is. Have you formally confirmed it?”

“We’ve reached out to multiple contacts who have experienced Jason Asano’s interface. The formatting of the interface matches their recall exactly. It’s him, Ma’am.”

Anna ran her hands over her tired face.

“Remore was right,” she said. “If anything, he was understating it. When Asano comes back — and we have to assume he will now, this world is going to change. I want the transcripts of every word Remore is known to have uttered since arriving on this planet, along with the latest analysis on Boris Ketland and the Taika Williams debrief files.”

“Yes, Ma’am. And, if I may say, the world already has changed.”

“I suppose so. Everyone on Earth who’s hit puberty just got a taste of magic.”

“It’s more fundamental than that, Ma’am. This System will change the way whole sections of societies operate. As an example, the ability to accurately assess one’s own condition will change the face of medicine. A number of online diagnostic websites and alternative health organisations are assembling a class action suit against the Asano Clan.”

“It hasn’t even been a day.”

“No, Ma’am.”

“Who do they even intend to serve? The Asano Clan have been buried under vampire territory for half a decade. We don’t know if they’re alive or dead.”

“I believe they intend to serve the Japanese Asano clan, residing in Asano Village in Australia.”

“I thought they and Jason had some kind of feud.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Speaking of vampires, do we know if this affected them?”

“Not confirmed, Ma’am, although early reports suggest no. It seems that the vampires are learning that something happened to the humans from their feeding stock.”

“They’re people, Aram. Not feeding stock.”

“Sorry, Ma’am.”

“What do you think will happen with the vampires when Asano returns?”

“Analysts have produced a number of potential scenarios, Ma’am, but they are all wildly speculative due to lack of information. They’re basically saying it’s anyone’s guess.”

“Then what’s your guess? You’ve met him.”

“Ma’am, I once watched a bronze-rank Jason Asano fight a silver ranker to a no-score draw. That was two ranks ago, minimum, and before he changed how the world

works. If I were a vampire living on top of the land Asano gave his family, I'd be looking into the viability of colonising Mars."

"But Asano's power hasn't reclaimed his former territory?"

"Not as of the last report I saw, Ma'am. That came in around two hours ago."

"Alright. Go get me those materials."

"Yes, ma'am."

He turned to leave, but stopped at the door and turned around.

"Ma'am, if Asano has the power to do this to everyone in the world, why can't he restore his domains?"

"I suspect that he can. That leads me to the question of why he hasn't."

## Chapter 884

### If We Can't Change For the Better

Jason slowly recovered as he hobbled along the path of light that stretched from his universe to the castle. The pathway was growing unstable, with parts blurring, dimming or falling away entirely. Jason, his familiars and Arbour were still in the company of Raythe who walked alongside them.

"Why did you stay?" Jason asked her.

"To check on you. Dawn will want to know how you are doing. And to remind you that you and I still have business, beyond that of the cosmic throne."

"What kind of business?"

"That can wait. You've been kept from friends and family long enough, and have plenty to deal with in the aftermath of what just happened. You need to form a prime avatar, and restore the bridge between worlds. That may seem like a small thing after restoring the cosmic throne, but—"

"No," Jason said. "It's not small."

Raythe smiled and nodded.

"You shall see me again when it is done," she told him.

Jason looked around as they drew closer to the end of the path. It terminated in a doorway, floating in the void.

"How are you getting out of here?" he asked. "You can't just float around the astral, right? I know it's borderline for you, but you're still a mortal. Just."

"This space belongs to the throne, and once this path is gone, the avatars of doom will resume their ancient charge. I have a vessel I left at the gateway to your universe."

"It has a gate? My head is still an angry beehive, so I don't have a proper sense of things, yet."

"Yes, it has gateways, although you are the impassable gatekeeper. Your soul is a universe, now. An actual pocket of reality in the astral, so it can be visited. But your universe is also a soul, so it cannot be penetrated without your allowance. Your astral kingdom will never have the vastness of a universe seeded by the Builder, but for all their grandeur, ordinary universes have their time. They die. Yours never will."

"Yeah," Jason said. "I still haven't gotten my head around true immortality. Maybe I should do something that will help me comprehend the vastness of eternity."

"Such as?"



“Well, I could binge-watch one of those soaps that’s been running since the sixties. If that doesn’t feel like eternity, I don’t know what would.”

“You want to watch soap?” Raythe asked.

“Lady Raythe,” Shade interjected. “Mr Asano is immortal, now. I believe that his deeds today will be the start of his life as a cosmic figure of note.”

“Agreed.”

“Allow me to share some wisdom in advance that, with time, will doubtlessly spread across the cosmos: do not ask Mr Asano questions when he says things you do not understand.”

“Wouldn’t that mean you sometimes miss information which is important to know?”

“That price, Lady Raythe, is entirely worth paying.”

They reached the end of the path and entered the doorway in space. The pathway collapsed behind them and a heavy iron door slid across the doorway. They were standing on a catwalk over the magma pit in Jason’s private fortress.

“I guess it’s time to go and see what my universe is like,” he said. “If nothing else, we need to find the exit where our guest parked her car.”

“It is not a car,” Raythe said. “And surely you have recovered enough by now that you can take in the scope of your realm at a thought. It is your true self, after all. You are using that avatar to restrain your mind because you aren’t used to thinking like a transcendent. That body you’re in is not you any more than a breath, expelled from your mouth.”

“Yeah, I could let my mind go all transcendent,” Jason said. “I’ve done it before — with mixed results. But where’s the sense of exploration in that?”

They took an elevating platform into the upper chambers of the fortress. The architecture was classically villainous, all massive hallways of dark metal and bright crimson, with sharp corners and stark decor.

“The layout appears to have changed,” Shade said. “Perhaps you should take Lady Raythe’s advice, lest we wander around lost.”

“What did I just say about a sense of exploration, Shade? The fortress can’t have changed that much.”

“Mr Asano, that sign has directions to an airlock.”

“What?”

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Jason and the others were standing on one level of a multi-storey observation lounge, looking through a massive curved window that spanned every level. Through the window they could see an Earth-like planet.

“The shape of this window is rather akin to that of an enormous eye,” Shade observed.

“Is it?” Jason asked innocently.

“Mr Asano, are we in an evil space station in the shape of your head?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“It is, indeed,” Raythe said. “My dimensional vessel is at a docking port. It seems that Asano chose a space station as the first port of call to those who approach his universe through astral travel.”

“I wasn’t really choosing,” Jason said. “This all just kind of happened.”

“Mr Asano, we will need to find a shuttle bay, or a teleportation room or whatever means you have to go to and from this place and the planet. Again, I ask you to allow yourself the knowledge of your new realm’s geography.”

“And deny myself the joy of discovery?”

“I am sorry, Mr Asano, but yes. The longer you wander around aimlessly, the longer until you start reuniting with your loved ones.”

Jason looked over at Shade and sighed.

“Yeah,” he conceded.

Jason stopped letting his consciousness focus into a single avatar and the avatar faded into nothingness. For the first time, Jason allowed himself to be actively conscious of his new nature as a living universe. It was miniscule, as universes went. Just a single planetary system. The sun at its heart blazed not just with heat and light, but with magic.

There was one habitable planet, in a position equivalent to Earth. It was pristine, wild and untamed. The only developed area was Arbour, the tree city where the handful of people residing on the planet were located.

The space station above the planet was the seat of Jason’s power and the reliquary his astral king relics. It also served as an orbital station and point of entry for dimensional visitors.

An avatar reappeared next to Raythe.

“I’ll show you the way to your vessel,” Jason said.

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Clive marched back out of his office. His assistant and Miles Cotezee were sharing tea and scones.

Jeff tapped a folder on his table.

“This is what I have so far on the locations of your team members, Archchancellor. I’m still waiting on several more. Don’t expect anything on Asano, Remore and Williams, of course. If they return to this world, I imagine you will know before any source I have.”

“Thank you,” Clive said. “Why hasn’t anyone from cataloguing arrived yet?”

“I believe there was some question of who to send.”

“Why not just send Mickel?”

“Security Director Warnock found out that he was a spy for the Magic Society, Archchancellor. You threw him through the ceiling.”

“That was him?”

“Yes, Archchancellor.”

“Why can’t they decide who to send instead?”

“They’re afraid of being thrown through the ceiling, Archchancellor.”

“Are they spies too?”

“Not that I am aware, Archchancellor. I believe they are concerned about Herbert Norris.”

“Who?”

“The former Vice-Dean of Alchemy. You tossed him through the ceiling for, and I quote, ‘asking inane questions.’”

“Oh, him. He *was* asking inane questions.”

“Some might suggest that was an overreaction, Archchancellor.”

“Would they, now?”

“Actually, no, Archchancellor. They’re afraid of getting thrown through the ceiling.”

Clive made grumbling sounds and took a device off his head. It was a metal headband with four vertical protrusions spaced evenly around it. He placed it on Jeff’s desk, next to the tea tray, and then opened a small portal. He took a document from the portal and sat it next to the headband.

“Take this device down to the procurements office and have them replicate another ten. The designs for it are in the folder. Then send the original back here and the rest to the cataloguing department. I want every single item we have re-examined.”

“What is it?” Miles asked, picking up the headband.

“It’s a device for analysing items using a person’s own aura and magic senses,” Clive said. “Devices like this are nothing new, but the problem was always interpreting the results objectively. I made this years ago, trying to replicate Jason Asano’s ability, but I could never replicate his interface. Now we don’t need to, and it works perfectly.”

Jeff took the device from Miles, grabbed the folder and headed off. Clive took his seat and grabbed a jam and cream scone.

“I imagine that the Adventure Society has a lot of questions,” Clive said to Miles.

“Everyone has a lot of questions, Clive. I was instructed to ask a slew of pointed and forceful questions while being very polite and not making you angry in any way.”

Clive chuckled.

“That reminds me of my Magic Society official days. Trust me, Miles, you want to be on top of the organisational pyramid. Mid-level bureaucracy is no way to live.”

“Unfortunately, the Adventure Society makes you earn your promotions. Maybe I should have joined the Magic Society and bribed my way to the top.”

Clive picked up the folder with the information on his team members and started flicking through the reports.

“I don’t think anyone is getting their answers, Miles. Not until Jason comes back.”

“Can you at least tell me when you expect that to be? If I don’t give my bosses something, they’ll just send me right back here.”

“I can’t be certain when he’ll be back,” Clive said. “If everything went as planned, Jason is a universe now.”

“I’m sorry, did you just say that Asano is a universe?”

“That won’t be news,” Clive said. “After more than a decade of dealing with messengers, the society knows what an astral king is. The question is how quickly Jason can assemble a new body. He needs a prime avatar to go wandering around outside, and they are apparently hard to make.”

“So, you don’t know how long it will take.”

“No, I don’t. Jason has a plan, though.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Jason’s plans have a way of going really, really bad for someone. Mostly that someone is whoever he’s up against, but not always.”

“And who is it that he’s up against?”

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Yumi Asano walked into her office to find an avatar of her grandson sitting in her chair.

“G’day Grandmother.”

Magic left Yumi looking no older than Jason, despite the age difference.

“Jason, do have any idea of the chaos you’ve caused?”

“You know, that’s the same question you ask me every time I visit.”

“That’s because you only ever visit after you’ve tipped over the biggest appcart you can find.”

“I also came by on your birthday.”

“You did,” Yumi conceded. “But most of the time, you aren’t sending these avatars here for social visits. You could have warned us about this System business.”

“No, Grandmother, I couldn’t. Otherwise, I would have. I just repaired one of the key mechanisms of the entire cosmos, and I had no idea how that would go. Was anyone hurt?”

“Was anyone... you can’t just skip past ‘I repaired the cosmos,’ Grandson.”

Yumi staggered as the room pulsed, like a heartbeat. For a fleeting instant, she felt a power so vast it was like catching a glimpse of the universe and seeing how small she was within it.

“You will find, Grandmother, as will the Earth, that on this planet, I can do anything I please. Now, was anyone hurt when the System came into being?”

Yumi looked at Jason warily, not answering. He looked like her grandson, but there was something inside him that was very alien. She couldn’t help but wonder if any of the boy she knew was still in there.

“It is still me, Grandmother. We all change with time, magic or not. If we can’t change for the better, we should at least change in ways that allow us to meet our responsibilities.”

“And what do you see as your responsibilities, Jason?”

“This family. This clan. The people who ended up in this place because of their connection to me. The troubles they’ve faced; being trapped here. A lot of people have been caught in my wake. I can’t give them back the lives they had, but I can at least make sure they aren’t trapped in this astral space. Or stuck in my domains, worried about being grabbed and leveraged by the wider world.”

Yumi nodded.

“I’m glad you understand. People are worried, Jason. Less than fifteen years ago, no one knew magic existed. Now we live in an age of wonders and horrors. This magical realm is lovely, but we’ve been trapped here for years. There are children in here who have never seen the world outside. Teenagers who have lived their whole lives inside your domains. How will you fix that? Or even get back to it? If you can do anything you want, why haven’t you restored the domains and kicked out all the vampires?”

“I’ll get to that. How many people were hurt when the System first appeared?”

“Isn’t this place a part of you? Can’t you just tell?”

“Things were hazy for me at that time the system appeared.”

“We suffered little. A few scrapes and bruises. Taika’s mother fell off her scooter, but she wasn’t hurt. She’s bronze rank and was wearing enchanted riding gear.”

“That’s good.”

“Now, why are there still vampires sitting over our heads?”

“I need to make what’s called a prime avatar. Avatars like this one can’t leave my territory, but a prime avatar can. I won’t go into the specifics, but basically I have cosmic power and mortal power. The prime avatar is tied to my mortal power, which is much lower than my cosmic aspect. Accumulating the power to create such an avatar would take twenty-seven years at my current strength.”

“What does that have to do with vampires?”

“The most powerful vampires on Earth got that way by consuming blood infused with power stolen from reality cores.”

“I am aware.”

“The power of those cores is the kind I need to make an avatar. And, while I didn’t use it much, I’ve always had the ability to strip it right out of the vampires. That’s what I’m going to do.”

“They aren’t going to enjoy that, are they?”

“No, Grandmother. They are not.”

“Good.”

## Chapter 885

### We're All Stuck in a Hole

Nigel Thornton hadn't been the first person on Earth to hit gold rank, or even the first to do it without cores. The US had non-core training programs long before Farrah Hurin arrived, so that title went to some unnamed yank. Nigel's claim to fame was being the first outside of the US to hit the milestone core-free.

The rest of his team were core users, and still only silver rank. There were only so many places on Earth that spawned gold rank monsters, and the cores taken from them were arguably the most precious commodity on Earth. They certainly didn't find their way into the hands of a squad of mercenaries.

Nigel's team was the same nine-person unit it had been almost two decades earlier. Back then, magic was still a secret and they were part of the Network's secret paramilitary wing. His team had stayed together when the Network fractured, surviving through years of upheavals. From the reveal of magic to the vampire war, they had weathered countless storms.

When the Network schismed into different factions, Nigel and his team had gotten out. Sickened by the infighting and the actions of the Australian government, they had decided to go it alone. The world had no shortage of work for people with a specific set of skills, and a gold ranker for hire was a rare commodity.

Although they had done jobs for a variety of employers, they were most frequently contracted by United Nations official Anna Tilden. They had worked for her in their Network days and now they were her first call for black bag operations. That included their current assignment. They were embedded in France, deep inside vampire territory. It was a region they knew well, having been hired to extract people from vampire blood farms many times. They had been there for almost two months, watching the former Asano Clan land for changes.

The first priority when embedded in hostile territory was to avoid being discovered. Fortunately for the team, vampires were prone to murdering one another. If the occasional one stumbled onto the team and went missing, its absence didn't alert the rest. The vampires weren't wary towards humans in the area as the only value it held was symbolic. Without the protection of the domain aura, the former Asano territory held no strategic or tactical value. That lack was not lost on certain members of the team.

“I don’t know what we’re still doing here,” Orange complained. “Sitting in a building every day, watching the edge of a city? We can’t see a damn thing from the outside, and if we tried going in, we’d be lunch inside of an hour.”

“We’re here because we’re being paid to be here,” Darcy told him.

They were in an underground room that Woolzy had made with magic, sealing the hard-packed earthen walls until they felt like smooth porcelain. One concealed entrance above them led to a section of woodland not too far from Saint Étienne. The room was loaded up with camping gear, but there was no getting around that they were nine people living in a hole in the ground. Even if three were always off on observation duty, it was starting to feel — and smell — like living in an old fried chicken box.

“You’re both right,” Higgy said. “Yes, this is the job, and we’re being paid well. But he’s not wrong to wonder what all this is in aid of, or how much longer we’ll be out here.”

“It’s obvious we’re waiting for something,” Digit said. “Something big enough that we don’t need to get close to see it.”

“Then let them watch on bloody satellites,” Orange said. “Why does the UN need us out here on the quiet? I thought the UN’s job was to ask people to stop violating human rights, and then get sad when they say no.”

“Anna knows something,” Digit said. “She knows something is going to happen, and she wants an eyes-on report the moment it does.”

The others all turned to look at Nigel, sitting silently.

“Yep,” he said, and left it at that.

“Honestly, the why of all this isn’t even the problem,” Orange said. “My question is, why are we spending our lives living in holes in the ground? We’ve been doing this long enough that I’m richer than mud cake. Between the nine of us, we have family connections in every Network faction. This work has brought us contacts across the whole damn planet. Why are we crating ourselves in a dirt box instead of sitting on a beach?”

“I find that hard to argue with,” Higgy said. “If we’ve got enough money to live like kings...”

He nodded at Darcy.

“...and one Queen, then why are we living in caves and digging bunkers out in the woods?”

Of the six in the bunker, five again turned to look at their leader.

“You want to retire?” Nigel asked them.

“Don’t you?” Higgy asked.



“As a matter of fact,” Nigel said, “I do. Maybe not completely, though. Semi-retire. Live the high life, but if the right job comes along—”

“Or the right payday,” Darcy cut in.

“Or the right payday,” Nigel conceded. “Then, maybe we saddle up again. If that’s what we want to do, then that’s what we’ll do. Together, like always. You’re right, Orange; we have accumulated a lot of wealth. And the connections we’ve built up are probably worth more than the money. But how much is enough? Where is safe? The United States and China are fairly safe for most people, but we aren’t most people. What happens when someone in charge wants something from us that we don’t want to give?”

“Thorny,” Higgy said to Nigel, “let’s not pretend like you can’t write your own ticket. You hit gold rank outside of any of the big groups and they all want to recruit you.”

“Or kill you before someone else does,” Orange added.

“They won’t try,” Nigel said. “No one has managed to kill a gold ranker yet, even with other gold rankers. As far as I’m aware, the only one to die was that guy who turned into a monster.”

“Which one was that?” Orange asked.

“Vietnamese guy,” Darcy said. “Worked for the Chinese. Followed Asano into a transformation zone and turned into a tentacle monster when he came out. Every major magical faction had people there and they still barely managed to kill it.”

“There was Jack Gerling, too,” Higgy said.

“I thought he went to work for the vampires,” Darcy said.

“No, he’s right,” Nigel said. “I forgot about him because he’s still around. He also died after he followed Asano into in a transformation zone and then turned into a monster. The vampire queen brought him back as some kind of blood clone slave.”

“I guess the moral is to avoid following Jason Asano into big magic domes,” Orange said. “Makes me think about those astral proto-spaces we went into with him. We might have been lucky to get out without turning into wombat snakes or something.”

“Wombat snakes?” Nigel asked.

“We have officially veered too far off topic,” Higgy said. “Thorny, I can tell you’ve got some kind of retirement plan in mind. But for some reason, you haven’t told us yet.”

“Yeah,” Nigel admitted. “I have a plan. And no, I haven’t told any of you yet.”

“Why not?” Darcy asked.

“It’s too unreliable. Too many unknown factors. On a basic level, the plan is simple: we find a safe place to land. Somewhere the people in charge will value us without trying to bend us over.”

“And where do you expect to find that?” Orange asked. “Some little island in the Pacific with white beaches and blue water? That’s big enough to import beer, but too small for the Network to set up shop? We all get bungalows and clean up any monsters that turn up?”

“That actually sounds pretty good,” Higgy said.

“It does,” Nigel said. “Maybe that’s what we’ll do.”

“But you have something else in mind, don’t you?” Digit asked. “Something more ambitious, meaning a huge pain in the arse for us.”

“I do,” Nigel said.

“Out with it then,” Orange said.

“It’s going to sound like a terrible idea if I say it now,” Nigel said.

“Say it anyway,” Darcy told him. “We’re all stuck in a hole, Nige. It’s not like you can run off.”

Nigel sighed.

“Fine,” he said. “I want to join the Asano Clan.”

“Are you out of your frigging gourd?” Orange asked. “The whole reason we’re here is that the Asano Clan vanished. Everything they had now belongs to the biggest, nastiest pack of ravening vampires on the face of the Earth. Jason Asano hasn’t been seen in a squillion bloody years. His magic town probably lost its power because he cacked it and his family’s most likely dead too. And we’re here for what? To check if all these dead pricks are going to magically reappear?”

“In fairness,” Woolzy said. “If they’re going to reappear, then magically is how it’s going to happen.”

“You weren’t wrong about it being an unreliable plan,” Darcy told Nigel. “Why is that where you’re putting your hopes? What do you know that we don’t? Is that why Anna sent us here, watching this place after years without change? She thinks the Asanos are coming back?”

Nigel rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment.

“Yes,” he said. “She thinks they’re coming back.”

“Why?” Orange asked. “The vampires have been sitting on the holes the Asano Clan vanished into for years. We don’t know if those astral spaces are even still there. Or if the vampires figured out how to crack them open and ate everyone inside. Or if the clan all starved to death in there.”

“They didn’t starve to death,” Higgy said. “Thorny and I went into one once, playing bodyguard for Anna. They had full-blown farms in there, growing magic food like you’ve never seen.”

“What very few people know,” Nigel said, “is that right before we were sent out here, the Asano clan reached out.”

“How?” Higgy asked.

“Rufus Remore. He left the place the Asano clan are hiding and made his way through vampire territory, completely unnoticed.”

“Well, damn,” Digit said. “We don’t get any closer than the edge of the old clan territory, and that magic door the Asanos keep locked is right in the middle of it.”

“But he’s alive,” Darcy said. “And the rest of them too?”

“Yes,” Nigel said. “And they’re getting ready to make a move. Remore reached out to certain people. Anna Tilden and Boris Ketland, for sure. I don’t know who else, if anyone. For all I know, telling you just doubled the number of people who know about it.”

“So, the Asano Clan is coming back?” Higgy asked. “Properly back? Magic domain, the whole lot?”

“Remore certainly thinks so.”

“Let’s assume he’s right,” Higgy said. “The Asano Clan comes back out and reclaims their territory. Who is to say they keep it? They lost it once before.”

“According to Remore, it was some kind of ruse by Jason Asano,” Nigel said. “A ‘fool your friends to fool your enemies’ scenario.”

“He’s alive too, then?” Darcy asked. “Is he coming back as well?”

“Yes. And supposedly with a dozen gold rankers as strong as Remore himself. And you’ve seen that guy fight.”

“I haven’t,” Orange said. “There’s just a flash of light and every prick’s dead. I wouldn’t cross that bloke for quids.”

“Okay,” Higgy said. “Let’s say all that’s true. Asano and his clan come back, stronger than ever and rock solid. What makes you think that the clan is a good place for us to land, and that they’ll even take us?”

“They’ll take us because they know us,” Nigel said. “They know who we are, what we’ve done, and what we haven’t.”

“Sure,” Orange said. “That’s why they take us. Why should we take them?”

“Because they’re loyal,” Nigel said. “The one thing they’ve consistently done is take care of their own. Not just themselves, but everyone who has helped them or gotten caught up in their mess. They took them in and shielded them. The only ones who they cut

ties with was the Network, who screwed Asano time and again. And I'll remind you that we cut ties with them too. I'm not saying the Asano Clan is perfect, or that I like every choice they've made. But their leadership has demonstrated some actual integrity. That's a hard thing to find."

"You say this based on what?" Orange asked. "Rumours and second-hand stories? A few visits to clan territory when we were operating out of the military bases they hosted? That's without even thinking about Jason Asano himself? What changes when he shows up? That guy was a lit fuse when he sodded off."

"I did tell you this was unreliable" Nigel said. "That's why I didn't say anything until you all pushed. I want more information before we do a single bloody thing. That's why we're here. I want to see what the Asano Clan does when they're under the gun and not ready to put on a show for visitors. I don't want to make any promises to you all that I can't keep."

He checked his watch. "It's time to relieve the others. Orange, Darce; you come with me."

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The most dangerous time for Nigel and his team was when they were swapping out observers. This happened three times per day; twice during daylight and once at night, when the vampires were more active. Fortunately, Farrah Hurin had given them proper aura training, which they had been practising for well over a decade. They weren't sloppy at all with their aura control, and vampires were better at manipulating auras than detecting them.

The major threat was a gold-rank vampire in the wrong place when the team made a move. The city had several, so even if Nigel could take on one, more would be on them before the fight was done. Accordingly, the team were always diligent. Each time they swapped out people at their observation post, they moved slowly and carefully.

The observation post itself was on the outskirts of Saint Étienne, still in ruins from the original vampire occupation. Just outside of the area claimed by Jason Asano, it was a section of city not replaced with a replica made from Asano's weird magic clouds. Best of all, the vampires ignored it in favour of the luxurious cloud buildings of the city proper.

The post itself was on the third floor of a mostly collapsed building. With the area around it surrounded by overgrown rubble, it was easy to approach from their bunker in the woods without needing to move into the open. As most of the other buildings had been toppled entirely, the sightlines from the upper floor were good.

The area had been largely reclaimed by nature in the years since Jason turned a transformation zone into a domain under his control. Grass grew up through shattered streets while bushes, vines and moss grew over the rubble. Only a handful of buildings were even partially standing, and they too were covered in the encroaching green.

Nigel, Orange and Darcy picked their way carefully through the overgrown ruins. The sky was clear, giving them enough moonlight to see. That also made them more visible to the vampires, or anything else roaming about. The magic level had been reduced since the clan domain went away, but even a silent kill on a bronze-rank monster could be a problem. The senses of a vampire were sharp already, but especially so when it came to smelling blood.

They reached the right building without incident and slipped inside, joining Cobbo, Jonno and Green. What remained of the third floor was set up as their observation post. The handful of intact rooms offered views in multiple directions, including the Asano territory. They couldn't see deep into the city, but it was enough that any major events wouldn't be missed. The biggest problem was that the roof was not intact and none of the windows had any glass, making rainy days bad and windy, rainy days completely miserable.

The inside of the room was etched with sigils that would mask their presence, from their auras to their body heat. Woolzy had learned them from Farrah back in their Network days and was now an old hand at them. Even a gold ranker would have to pay direct attention to the building to sense them. Despite requests from the team, Nigel had not allowed any rain-shielding magic.

Nigel didn't ask if anything had changed. They had been in place for months, and if anything happened, the others would have mentioned it immediately. The trio being replaced got up to leave and their replacements prepared to settle in. It was a bright night, with a clear sky and a gibbous moon, so they noticed immediately when the change came. The silver moonlight spilling through the window was suddenly replaced with blue and orange.

## Chapter 886

### A Silent City

When the light coming through the window turned from moon silver to orange and blue, Nigel and his team moved to look outside. The moon was still there, but its luminance was being outshone by a massive, nebulous eye, floating over the city like an alien invader. Colour spread out from it, more like fire crawling across the sky than simple light. The orange danced like fire and the blue swam like water, painting the city below.

They had barely caught sight of it when its aura hit them like a bomb. It had not just spiritual but physical force behind it, sending all but the gold-rank Nigel stumbling back.

“That’s not even the full force of it,” Nigel said. “We’re on the periphery. It’s much stronger inside the boundaries of the old clan.”

“That wasn’t the full strength?” Darcy asked, wary of moving back to the window. “What is that?”

“It’s him. Asano. You’ve felt his aura before.”

“I’ve never felt anything like that,” Orange said.

“It’s changed,” Nigel said, “but I recognise the core aspects. But this is something we’ve never seen from him. Get back to the others and move to fallback position three.”

“Three?” Orange asked.

“Whatever is happening here,” Nigel said, “it just changed the colour of the sky. I want you all as far from this as you can possibly be.”

“We don’t want you anywhere near this either,” Darcy said.

Nigel turned to look at her.

“Whatever it is we’ve been waiting for, Darce, it’s happening now. I’m the only gold ranker among us, meaning I’m the only one with a real shot of getting in there, taking a closer look and getting out.”

“You’re going in there?” Orange asked. “You don’t have to do that just for a job.”

“I know. But. Whatever’s going on out there, it’s big. Getting ahead of the information curve will give us a better chance of navigating whatever comes next. I’ll learn what I can and then get out. If I don’t join you within three hours of reaching the fallout position, use one of our exfil plans; don’t tell me which one. We’ll regroup in Casablanca.”

Nigel didn’t wait for further argument, leaping through a window that hadn’t held glass in years.

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As Nigel moved through the streets of what had once been Saint Étienne, the replica nature of the city started to reveal itself. What looked and felt like stone and metal warped like clay, the colour fading as sections of building and street turned into cloud substance. Nigel cautiously touched some of it and found it thick and sticky, like glue.

The city's horrific denizens were taking to the streets, and the vampires weren't the greatest number. Many were ghouls; vampiric victims warped into mindless, withered servants. They were erupting from doorways and bursting up from cellars, driven to a frenzy by the aura. Vampires came out after them, trying and often failing to assert control.

Nigel watched from hiding as the vampires themselves seemed to have trouble reining in their own mania. Wide-eyed and twitchy, some even joined the ghouls, scrambling up walls like animals or leaping right onto the rooftops. From there, vampires and ghouls alike started shrieking at the eye in the sky.

Nigel had seen similar behaviour before. When vampires lost control of their predatory instincts, they became savage beasts, with no thoughts beyond killing and feeding. He also knew that these were the weaker vampires, far more aggressive, but mercifully less powerful.

Nigel watched out for the frenzied ones, but it was the stronger ones he kept an eye on. They maintained control of themselves but looked unsettled, casting worried looks at the sky. Some tried to re-establish command over the ghouls and even their fellow vampires. Others moved up to the rooftops for a better look at the eye. More than a few started running, although there was no consensus on direction. From what Nigel could see, they chose to either head for the centre of the city, or to flee it entirely.

Nigel followed those heading deeper in, spending more time hiding than moving. In his hand was a gold-rank pistol with a magical silencer; a rare gift from a powerful and grateful client. He used it to put down a couple of vampires, both slower-moving bronze rankers that caught him between hiding spots. He dropped them in an instant and moved on without bothering to hide the bodies.

The gun made no sound at all and the smell of blood was already in the air. As the aura-induced madness intensified, ghouls were attacking their masters now, and the vampires were feeding on each other. Those trying to get them under control gave up and started running with the others.

The aura driving their behaviour was tyrannical, angry and hungry, as if the aura itself had become vampiric. Nigel was relieved that, while terrifying, it did not affect him as it did the vampires. It was a cyclone of power that moved around him as if he were in the eye of the storm. He could sense that the aura was gold ranked, but also that some other power

lay beyond it. He'd never sensed anything beyond gold rank before, and that was rare enough. Whatever lay behind this aura, it was clearly not of the Earth.

Nigel felt the moment the aura shifted. He wasn't sure how, exactly, as it still wasn't affecting him, but the vampires reacted immediately. The vampires and ghouls on the rooftops had been screaming rage at the eye in the sky, but now those screams turned to fear. They joined the vampires that had retained sense enough to run and started fleeing, either across the rooves or leaping down to the street.

The chaos made it harder to stay hidden and Nigel ducked down a stairwell and into a cellar. The ghouls that had once been inside had ripped apart the door on their way out. He had not been in there long when a gold-rank vampire entered in a blur of movement.

Nigel froze. He was confident of fighting one vampire in isolation, but the fight would inevitably bring more down on him. He watched as the vampire panned its gaze over the cellar while sniffing the air. Its eyes passed over him as if he weren't there and, after a moment, it left. After it did, mist appeared around his body and a voice came from nowhere.

"You can move safely, now. They will neither see nor sense you, so long as they don't touch you."

"Jason?"

"Can't really talk, Nigel; I'm in the middle of a thing. G'day, though."

Nigel made his way back outside, the mist shroud moving with him. The streets were teeming with ghouls and vampires. There were even some blood servants; humans who had been fed on vampire blood. They were stronger and faster than normal people, but enslaved by the blood's addictive properties.

The rooftops and even the walls had ghouls and vampires running along them, clawed hands and feet digging into tile and brick. The buildings continued to devolve into thick cloud substance, sometimes forcing ghouls to yank themselves out. The buildings warped and undulated as Nigel watched, disgorging vampires right through the walls.

He was careful to avoid all of it, but it was hard when the city itself was changing around him. A balcony he was hiding on might collapse, or the street turn to cloudy glue under his feet. Fortunately, the city's monstrous denizens were having as much trouble or more, and things only got worse for them. Nigel heard Jason's voice again, but not as a nearby whisper. This time, it crashed from the sky like thunder.

*"BLEED FOR ME."*

Nigel recognise the incantation from Jason's bloodletting spell, but the results were more extreme than what he had seen in the past. The effect on the ghouls was familiar, if



exaggerated, as they bled from every hole in their bodies. The vampiric servants fell to the ground, in flailing seizures. As for the vampires, mist started rising from their bodies like steam, but darker. Nigel would have guessed it was red, but it was hard to tell in the eerie light. The smell was much easier to identify as the coppery tang of blood filled the air.

There had already been a scent of blood carried on the breeze, but it quickly grew thick and heavy. Haze filled the streets as blood mist poured off the vampires, creating a sanguine humidity.

Even the vampires that had maintained their senses were now turning to madness. Nigel leapt to a balcony and ducked down to avoid the tide of ghouls dotted with vampires. Nigel and his team had known there were ghouls in the city, which was normal for any vampire enclave, but the number of the emaciated creatures was startling. It looked like the vampires had been using the city to build a new army of them, probably using spent humans from the blood farms.

Jason's voice spoke again, once more crashing from the sky.

*"YOUR BLOOD IS NOT YOURS TO KEEP, BUT MINE ON WHICH TO FEAST."*

The moment the thunderous incantation was completed, the blood haze filling the streets started to clear. It rose into the sky, splitting into streamers that converged on the giant eye. When they reached it, they were drawn in and devoured. As the eye absorbed more and more blood, it shifted from blue and orange to purple and red. The light coming from it changed with them until the city looked painted in blood and shadow.

On the streets, the fleeing ghouls and vampires were suddenly stopped in their tracks as a forest of bizarre shadow arms erupted from every dark crevice and cranny. The arms were void black and utterly inhuman; something between tentacles and the twisted branches of a dead tree. Each limb ended in fingers with too many knuckles, tapering to wicked points. As they dug into flesh, the vampires and their ghoul creations squealed like tortured pigs.

A forest of bizarre limbs grasped arms and legs, wrapped around bodies and grabbed heads, sharp fingers jabbing into mouths and digging into eyes. More than just on the street, many were left hanging from walls, caught climbing or mid-jump. They now hung like insects in a web, and like a spider's prey, they were being drained.

The vampires used a variety of powers to try and escape. Nigel saw one turn into a weasel and try to slip away, only to be skewered by sharp fingers and pinned to a wall. Similar fates met all those who shape-shifted into various animals. Those who turned into smoke and mist fared far worse. While they did escape the arms, a surge of aura

surrounded them. Their smoke and mist forms turned dark, thickening into more of the blood mist and vanishing into the haze.

As the blood evacuated their bodies, the vampires withered, their bodies emaciated and limp. Once the last gasps of blood mist sputtered from their bodies, they were barely distinguishable from the ghouls. The younger vampires fell apart into congealed gobbets, splashing onto the street. The older ones crumbled to dust and were carried away on the breeze.

Only the vampires were shedding the blood mist. From the ghouls, blood splattered to the ground, thick and dead. Nigel noticed that some of the vampires weren't shedding mist. These were mostly weaker ones; bronze rank and a few scant silvers. They were still trapped, but their blood spilled from their bodies and onto the ground.

Nigel made his way through the nightmare landscape, barely bothering to hide now. The freakish arms avoided him, and everything else was either dead or dying. He leapt onto a rooftop and saw only a handful of the blood mist streams still rising from the streets. He guessed that these were the gold rank vampires, apparently failing to escape the fate of their lessers.

Nigel watched from a roof as the last of the blood haze rose from the city and was drunk up by the eye. There were no more howls of rage or fear or agony. Only whimpers remained; a city of ghouls clinging to the last vestiges of their perverse existence, a scant few of their masters doing the same. Jason's voice rang out one more time, booming across a conquered city.

*"MINE IS THE JUDGEMENT, AND THE JUDGEMENT IS DEATH."*

All the blood collected in the eye erupted at once, up from the eye into a cloud that spread over the entire city. Blood rain fell, but each droplet was transformed before it ever reached the ground. Dark blood drops became shimmering motes of gold, silver and blue light. When they struck the mist shrouding Nigel, or hit the tiled rooftops, they vanished without effect. The ghouls and vampires did not get off so easily.

Vampires and ghouls still trapped in shadowy limbs had their flesh explode where the rain touched them. The blood servants that hadn't already died in seizures didn't explode when touched by the shining raindrops. Only their blood did, turning each into a gruesome and extremely deceased mess.

The process of killing off anything that had survived the blood draining was accompanied by fresh howls of intense agony. Nigel looked up at the eye, once more blue and orange. By the time the shining rain stopped falling, there were no more howls and no more whimpers. Nigel was the only thing alive in a silent city.

## Chapter 887

### The Fundamental Things

Nigel looked up, watching the night sky close over the nebulous eye. The blue and orange light painting the city disappeared with it, allowing the moonlight to once more have primacy. The macabre remnants of the city were illuminated in silver. The buildings were warped, like plastic models melted under a hot lamp. Some sections had broken down entirely, leaking cloud material that sparkled in the moonlight.

Pools of blood and streaks of gore shone black under the silver light. They had no smell to them, as if everything that made the congealing fluids blood had been leached out of them. The sanguine aroma that had drenched the air was no longer carried on the fresh night breeze.

“You’ve been diligent in your training, I see.”

Nigel span around on hearing Jason’s voice. His aura senses hadn’t registered the man’s approach and still didn’t recognise his presence. To his supernatural perception, Jason Asano and the world around him were one and the same. Jason was standing on the roof in a floral shirt, tan shorts and sandals. He slouched casually, hands in his pockets. While moonlight washed the colour out of everything else, it lit him up like he was standing centre stage.

“Nigel? You okay, mate? You look a bit shell shocked.”

Nigel continued to stare at him.

“You’re going to ask that after what you just did?”

“Yeah, fair enough.”

“Are you back?” Nigel asked. “Or are you some kind of illusion?”

“Not exactly. This body is an avatar. A physical projection from another universe, like an interdimensional phone call.”

“But you are still alive.”

“Was that even a question? The answer is more complicated than you’d think, I’ll admit. I guess it depends on how you define alive.”

“Are you undead?”

“No. I guess I’m, I don’t know. Geographical?”

“What does that even mean?”

“Let’s put that aside for now. For practical purposes, I’m alive. You thought I was dead, though? I’d have thought the System would have put that idea to bed.”

“One of the prevailing theories is that the System is what’s left of the magic that once inhabited this place. That the domains fell because you died and their power seeped into the planet, and once it permeated the entire earth, the System happened.”

“People actually think that?”

“The impossible isn’t what it used to be, Asano.”

“I suppose not.”

Nigel looked at the man, an utterly incongruous figure in the dark and blood-soaked city.

“You seem relaxed for a man that just turned a city into a grave.”

“I’m trying to be a better man than the one who left this world. But I don’t have it in me to mourn the ones who had it coming. Not anymore.”

“Who decides who has it coming? I won’t argue about killing vampires, but I just saw a power this Earth has never seen. What is to stop you from deciding anyone you don’t like has it coming? Where’s the line?”

“Wherever I decide it is.”

“Why do you get to make that judgement?”

“Who do you think should decide where I use my power, Nigel? Some faction leader? A president or a prime minister? A parliament or a congress? The United Nations?”

“I don’t know, but you just wiped out a city. That’s a dangerous power to leave unaccountable to anyone.”

Jason tilted his head, peering at Nigel. He realised that Jason was reading the emotions in his aura.

“You’re asking me this because you’re afraid of yourself, aren’t you? Of the power you have as a gold ranker.” Jason said.

“Yes.”

“Who do you work for now, Nigel? Who do you answer to?”

“Myself. My conscience. My team and I are private contractors. This job is for Anna Tilden, but my team and I aren’t attached to any group. We answer to each other, choosing which jobs to take and which to refuse. My team are the ones who hold me to account.”

Jason smiled.

“Mine too. I didn’t have them on Earth, which is probably how I went so astray. If not for Farrah, I’d have lost myself completely, I think.”

“Sometimes I question myself. The power I have at this rank is right out of a comic book. I could knock down a building with my bare hands. Throw a train like a javelin. My

team are my brothers and sisters, but they don't have this much power. It scares me sometimes."

Jason nodded.

"I understand. Maybe more than anyone. You're a gold ranker with no affiliation? You got out when the Network fell apart?"

"Yeah."

"But you were silver, then, and no one much cared, right? Until you hit gold rank and suddenly everyone wants a piece of you, and they aren't scrupulous about how to get it."

"No, they're not."

"Sucks, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, I didn't handle it very well, so I might not have the best advice. For what it's worth, though, I think you're on the right track. Listen to the people you trust. Let them show you when you're heading off the rails."

"I need more than that. Sooner or later, someone is going to decide they don't like a gold-rank free agent and start looking for levers."

"Your family. Your team's families."

"Yeah. A lot of the team come from old Network families, so they have protection enough for now. But if people with real power come along..."

"You don't trust the Network factions to not sell them out."

"Exactly. I've been looking for a place we can all belong. Where our families can be safe and the people in charge won't use us for things we don't want to do."

"Are you asking to join the Asano Clan?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I don't know if they'd have us, and I'd want to know more before we agree to be a part of it. But I saw you, during your time here. What loyalty and betrayal meant to you."

Jason nodded.

"When you have so much power that you can solve most of the old problems," he said, "you realise that it's the fundamental things that really matter."

"Yes."

"Well, I'm not going to say you can be in or out. I'll leave that to my grandmother. But I think it might be a good fit, so I'll have a word with her."

"There's something I'd like to know, Asano."

"I'm guessing there's more than a few, but go on."

“I understand you wanted to clear the city of vampires, but why do it this way? To show the rest of the world what happens when they cross you? Letting me see so I can go back and tell everyone how dangerous you are?”

Jason shook his head.

“Nah, mate. The people who make the decisions in this world don’t scare, no matter how real the threat. I learned that the last time I was here. Once I’m back, they’ll take their shots and pay the price for trying. I don’t like it, but there’s nothing I can do to stop it. Not without becoming just like them.”

“Like them how?”

“Letting innocent people pay the price for what I want.”

Jason gestured at himself.

“This, the gawking tourist outfit, is aspirational. Casual. Fun. A little dorky. It’s who I want to be. But this...”

He spread his arms out to indicate the city around them.

“This is who I am. When I have to be. This wasn’t a show, Nigel. This was a practical necessity. I left all these cloud buildings intact in the hope that the vampires would move in. I wasn’t taking their blood, but the remnants of reality core energy, from when they were infusing the power of those cores into blood.”

“And that’s why some weren’t drained,” Nigel realised. “They were the younger ones, who had never fed on reality core blood.”

“Yes.”

“How powerful are you? Are you at the rank after gold?”

“That’s complicated. Technically, I’m both gold rank and the rank that’s after gold. In this place, my domain, I’m extremely powerful. I don’t like the term ‘holy ground,’ but that’s essentially what we’re dealing with. I’m not a god, but I do certain things the way that gods do. When I come to Earth, it will be in a mortal vessel. Gold rank, like you. It will have power like what you saw here, but scaled back. It will be an extension of myself, a more developed version of this avatar. Killing it won’t hurt me, just cost me time to make a new one.”

“Did the same thing happen in Slovakia as happened here?”

“Yes. But the vampires there kept their blood farm within the domain, so I was able to rescue those people. Here, the blood farm is off site, outside the reach of my power. This avatar can’t go beyond the boundary of my domain, so I can’t intercede there myself. You know the blood farms they used, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Nigel said. We’ve been here for months, scouted it all out. We just didn’t have the numbers to rescue the people, or a way to extract them if we did. After your domains went down, mainland Europe fell entirely to the vampires.”

“The clan can offer you numbers and safety. Is the rest of your team nearby?”

“Yeah. If I move fast, I can reach them before they evacuate the region.”

“Then please go and bring them back. In the meantime, I will clean the city.”

“It’s quite a mess.”

A nearby patch of blood smeared across the roof burst into ghostly white flame.

“That won’t be a problem,” Jason said.

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Sophie swung her leg in a horizontal kick that hit nothing. A wind blade shot out, widening as it passed over the plain. The horizontal wave of razor-sharp air passed over the grass, shimmering like a heat haze and humming like an engine. In its path was a massive horde of stonehide lizards, the crashing sound of their feet overpowering the sound of the wind blade.

It was a large group, far too many to come from a normal manifestation. They were left over from the monster surge, four years previous, and hidden in an uninhabited mountain range. Sophie’s contract was firstly to eliminate them before they caused havoc on the trading routes of the flatlands. Once that was done, she needed to investigate what had driven them down from the mountains. They’d been up there for years without bothering anyone, and the Adventure Society wanted to know what had changed.

As the wind blade struck the stampeding herd, secondary wind blades erupted from the struck monsters. Those in turn triggered more and more secondary blades, bouncing back and forth between the monsters until the massive herd became a meat grinder of rent armour and spraying blood.

Sophie stood and watched, listening as the countless cracks of new wind blades rang like a thunderstorm. The gem in her wristband started blinking, indicating someone was contacting her sky talk tablet. She pulled it out of a dimensional pouch and accepted the call. Clive’s face appeared on the tablet.

“It’s time?” she asked.

“It’s time. The portal to Jason’s soul realm has opened up again. Finish whatever business you’re on and make your way to Yaresh.”

Sophie ended the call, put the tablet away and turned back to the horde of monsters. Despite the power of her gold-rank wind blade, stonehide lizards were tough, even for silver-rank monsters. They were all savagely lacerated, but yet to fall. The only ones that

had died so far were those trampled in the frenzied stampede. By the time the magic of her attack was expended and the blade storm came to an end, the stonehide lizards were rushing all the harder. Bellowing in rage, they hurled themselves across the plain in Sophie's direction.

She watched their approach, took out a sandwich and bit into it. From the sky, a sound started at a high pitch, growing deeper as the source descended at breakneck speed. Humphrey landed in the middle of the herd like a bomb. The shockwave of his abrupt arrival flung the monsters away from his impact point. The force of the wave ripped bodies apart in the air, splitting them along lines broken in their armour by wind blades.

Pieces of monster flew more than a kilometre away, several chunks avoiding Sophie as she manipulated the air to deflect them. A massive cloud of dust followed, again moving around Sophie thanks to her wind control.

Visibility died as the cloud surrounded her. A figure came striding out, tall and broad shouldered. Dust had caked onto his armour, muting its colourful rainbow scales. He pulled his helmet off with a grin.

"Took you long enough," she told him. "I was starting think that Nik would rank up before—"

She dropped her sandwich as he pulled her into a passionate kiss. A moustachioed dog dashed out of the dust cloud like a cheetah, snatching the sandwich before it hit the ground.

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"...whatever business you're on and make your way to Yaresh," Clive said. The image on his tablet of Sophie nodded and the call ended.

"Would it kill you to say goodbye like a normal person?" he muttered, and shoved the tablet into his storage space. He got up and went to the outer office.

"Jeff, how are preparations for my trip away?"

"Vice Chancellor Grantham reported that she was read up on everything and ready to stand in during your absence. She did request a meeting to go over any last details, and update you on the portal network project."

"That's fine. Set something up."

"She suggested a dinner meeting."

"That's fine. Tonight would be best, if she can accommodate it. I want to leave tomorrow."

"I'm sure she will, Archchancellor. And, if I might suggest, sir, do dress up nicely."



“Why?” Clive asked. “I’ve got too much to do to go fancying myself up just to eat and go over administrative details.”

Jeff watched as Clive stalked back into his office, closing the door behind him. Jeff shook his head sadly.

“That poor, poor woman,” he muttered.