

Chapter 826

Instinctively Protected

Clan Asano had two domains. One was in Saint-Etienne, France, covering most of the city. The other was close to Nitra, Slovakia, on formerly agricultural land. Both contained astral spaces rich in magic, producing far more magical manifestations than on Earth. This meant essences, awakening stones and quintessence, although far more than any of those, it meant monsters.

There were geographical restrictions on the manifestations that cities on Pallimustus would have waged wars to learn the secrets of. Within the city walls, manifestations rarely happened, as infrequent or even more so than on Earth. When they did, however, it was always treasure and never a monster. In the wild territory outside the walls, things were very different. The rich magic was given free rein, spawning hordes of teeming monsters.

Close to the walls, the magic was thick but not very strong. This produced the iron-rank monsters that the clan used to train their fledgling essence users. The further one moved away from the walls, the stronger the magic became, affecting both the landscape and the monsters.

The clan's essence users delved deeper into the wilds as they grew in strength, but it was still early days. The clan had raised an impressive contingent of bronze-rankers using the stockpile of magical items, training materials, essences and awakening stones left behind by Jason and Farrah. Those stockpiles had diminished at first but were now being restocked from finds in the astral spaces.

The clan only had a few silver-rankers, mostly core-users taken in from the Network as it fractured into factions. They had reported seeing gold-rank monsters in the outer reaches of the territory where the astral spaces grew unstable. What little they knew of those zones came from very distant observation. Not only were the monsters too strong for their current forces but the landscape itself was dangerous, shifting and changing.

Going that far out was strictly forbidden by the clan matriarch, Yumi Asano. She was Jason's paternal grandmother, although she looked a third of her actual age. Her flesh-shaping powers not only made her appear younger but offered true physical revitalisation. Wielders of body-morphing essence combinations were often looked at as creepy on Pallimustus, and they weren't known for their power. Neither fact hampered the popularity of such combinations when they offered a lifespan lengthy even by essence user standards.

Yumi stood at the window of a zeppelin flying over the Nitra astral space city. Within the high walls, the city could be mistaken for the life's work of a mad steampunk elf. Looming towers looked like skyscrapers built by industrial-age furnace makers, all rough, dark metal. The defensive walls looked much the same, only thicker and without windows.

The towers rose from a city that otherwise did not match them at all, full of pleasant cloud buildings and sweeping expanses of green. It was a sprawling metropolis in size, but not at all built for cars. Instead of street grids and freeways weaving like veins, it was a space built around walking and public transport.

Walkways passed through parks and tramways wove through gardens. Monorails ran along the ground or up and over trees. There were also zeppelins docked at the massive metal towers, or smaller towers made of cloud stuff. The central hub for the zeppelins was the centre of the city and its one truly unique building. A massive pagoda, taller than any of the metal towers, was topped by an ominous blue and orange eye, floating in the air. This was the administrative and travel hub for the city, including the portal aperture leading in and out of the astral space.

The city's transport infrastructure was all steampunk in design. Overelaborate reflections of a period on Earth that never existed, they blended Victorian and modern technology with magic. The steam engines were driven by a mix of fire and water quintessence; there was no coal. There weren't a lot of accurate physics, either, several scientists and engineers had assured Yumi.

It was not hard to get people interested in the chance to examine the city's infrastructure. There was an arms race going on, both in magic and the combination of magic and technology. The astral space cities both offered access to examples unlike anything on Earth, which had helped Yumi's recruitment efforts. Researchers were high on her list of recruitment priorities.

Magitech was the next arm's race, at least until more essence users reached greater heights of power. There was also the matter of the Engineers of Ascension and their vault, left to Jason by the enigmatic Mr North. Jason had directed her to seek out ethical ways to continue EoA's terrible experiments.

From the zeppelin, Yumi could see people moving through the city below. The vast city was mostly empty, most of it a restricted zone. There wasn't any danger, just a lack of people to fully populate the vast city. Even the waves of refugees were unable to fill up all the space.

The residents were an eclectic group, fewer of them human than not. It had taken an amount of political wrangling, but almost every country affected by transformation zones

had allowed those transformed into non-humans by the zones to emigrate to Asano territory. Getting the other nations to acknowledge clan land as sovereign was a whole other thing, but vampires holding most of mainland Europe had led to smoother relations. Desperate for friendly territory, Yumi had bled them for concessions before allowing their forces access to Asano territory.

The clan's territorial defences attacked those of ill intent, driving away many soldiers and even some of the refugees. This had been a major point of contention, but Yumi wouldn't have compromised the protective magic even if she could. She had enough to deal with already, without adding spies and vampire attacks to her slate.

Now there was a new problem. There had been incidents in the past she was certain led back to Jason; thunderstorms out of nowhere or the sky turning red. One day, without warning, the sky within Asano land turned to night while it remained day outside. Another time, the domain had been covered in a dome of bricks for several minutes, after which the landscape of the territories and astral spaces heavily reconfigured themselves.

This latest incident was worse than what had come before. It had the potential to bring everything down, and for the first time, Yumi was genuinely worried. There was sudden and rapid degradation in city infrastructure, most notably the walls. It had only been a matter of minutes yet the city was on the way to looking post-apocalyptic. The growing state of alarm was visible even from this height. The people on the ground were moving with swift agitation, like ants whose nest had just been kicked.

Yumi turned her gaze to the largest problem, which was the walls and the territory beyond it. The walls of the astral space city had built-in defences against the outside, made even stronger when the city had been reconstructed. In the Nitra city, this was embodied in automated Gatling gun turrets atop the walls, each emplacement the size of a delivery truck.

Normally, the defences were unnecessary. Monsters rarely took a run at the walls, the guns mostly dealing with the occasional flyer. But the degradation of the city was matched by a degradation in the monsters. The living monsters were turning undead. In the short time it had taken Yumi to enter the astral space and board a zeppelin, a horde of unliving monstrosities had come shambling to besiege the city walls. Worse, bronze-rank monsters that usually avoided the city were starting to arrive.

If silver and gold-rank monsters started arriving, things would get markedly worse. The wall turrets radiated gold-rank power, but even if they were enough, how long would that remain true? Like all the other city infrastructure, there were signs of the wall and its turrets starting to break down.

The remains of Jason's cloud palace spread across the desert sky, streamers of dark cloud combusting explosively in the air, trailing fire as they burned up. On the ground, Jason's companions all watched in worry, aside from Gary. He was looking down at the avatar, now a shrivelled husk, motionless inside the gold chains binding it to the ground. He gave it an experimental kick and the body crumbled like charcoal, throwing up black dust as it fell apart. Shrinking down to normal size, still head and shoulders above everyone but the messengers, Gary moved next to the others in a blur.

"What's happening?" he asked as he joined the rest in looking up. "That system message about Jason didn't sound good but the avatar is finally dead. Did we win?"

"No," Boris said. "Asano failed to refine all of the god's authority before it entered his soul. The battleground has shifted to inside Asano himself."

"Isn't that good?" Belinda asked. "He's all-powerful in his soul realm, right?"

"He has god-like power in there, it's true," Boris said. "But he allowed an actual god's power in there as well. By inviting that power in, he gave it a certain purchase within his spiritual realm."

"Why would inviting it in matter?" Sophie asked.

"Gods have their own rules," Clive said. "What is impossible to us is easy to them while the reverse is sometimes also true. Jason is fighting by their rules now."

"He's right," Boris said. "Like my kind, Asano exists on the border between the physical and the cosmic, between mortal and immortal. We messengers fall mostly on the physical side of that line, moving further towards the cosmic as we grow closer to becoming astral kings. Jason is growing ever closer to that line, and in this battle has one foot on each side. As this person said..."

He gestured at Clive.

"...sorry, I didn't catch your name. But as he said, Asano is fighting by their rules now."

Sophie glanced at Humphrey standing beside her, his face a storm of anger.

"We need practical solutions," Miriam said. "What do we do? Where even is he? In that exploding cloud?"

The cloud was still a maelstrom of darkness from which burning trails of smoke shot out like fireworks.

"We might be alright," Boris said. "I believe that Asano converted more of the power than got into his soul unchanged. Those forces will be at war within him right now, and he may win. If not, it will be obvious when he comes out of there as an undead monster."

"How do we help him?" Neil asked.

"Short of going into Asano's soul and joining the fight, I don't think we can," Boris said.

"That's as good an entrance line as I could asked for," Nik said. "Thanks, two-piece feed."

They all turned to see the Rabbit man and Shade standing in front of Jason's soul portal.

"Two Piece Feed?" Boris asked. "Are you talking about me?"

"That's right, you chicken-wing motherfu—"

"Alacrity is our watchword, Master Nik," Shade pointed out.

"Right, yeah," Nik said, then jerked a thumb at the portal with one hand while pointing out Jason's team one by one with the other.

"You lot, you're plan B. Get in there."

"Only silver-rankers?" Miriam asked.

"Two Piece Feed can come too," Nik said. "And the therapy lady."

"Mr Asano's soul realm is rather unstable right now," Shade explained. "Those he implicitly trusts and relies on will be instinctively protected, but others will be in danger. Messengers are able to endure exotic dimensional forces, so they can also bring aid."

"Then I will bring all my people," Boris said.

"Hold on, chicken wings," Nik said. "There's no way you nuggets of shi—"

"Please bring them all," Shade said. "And do so with—"

Colin staggered out of the portal in his blood clone state, but significantly worse for wear. Parts of him looked identical to Jason and others were glossy red. There were large wounds all over his body and dead, purple-stained leeches dropped from rotting flesh.

"Faster," Colin growled in Jason's voice, then staggered back through the portal.

Ketevan Arziani stood next to Yumi, likewise surveying the city. After the Network factional conflict in Australia had broken up the branch she had been director of in Australia, Yumi had snapped her up. Her combination of administrative expertise and familiarity with magic had proven a boon to the Asano clan during their rapid initial expansion.

"This seems worse than previous incidents you've described," Ketevan said.

"Yes," Yumi confirmed. "The combination of the walls being compromised and a wave of undead monsters attacking them is something I don't have a solution to. The cities in

the astral spaces are our fallback position if anything happens with the territory on Earth. If the cities fall, we lose everything.”

“Then, what do we do?”

“This is beyond us. Literally. This can only be something happening with Jason. All we can do is get people away from the walls and hope that whatever this is, Jason deals with it before we start losing people.”

“What is happening to him that this is going on?” Ketevan asked. “If the undead overtake this place, it will turn into another Makassar.”

“I don’t know what’s happening to him,” Yumi said. “I’m not sure he told us everything he went through here, let alone in a world full of magic.”

“So, we just wait?”

“No,” Yumi said. “We wait and trust. If we’d done that a little more when he was here, he might not have left so angry.”

Ketevan didn’t respond, knowing it would do her no good. While she didn’t strictly disagree with her new boss, she had her own views on how Jason had conducted himself. His anger and refusal to explain what he was doing in the wake of his brother’s death was understandable, but also counterproductive.

Perhaps it was because Jason wasn’t family to her, but Ketevan found herself struggling to have the faith in him that Yumi did. She looked at the massive metal wall rusting right in front of her and felt fear. Leaving her fate in the hands of someone else, unable to affect the outcome, was unsettling. He was so far out of reach, in circumstances she would likely never learn. I felt like being trapped in the hand of some capricious god.

Both women’s attention was drawn to the top of the wall. The turrets, even the ones that had been broken and stopped working, were blazing with white-silver light. They spat out lines of light like tracer rounds, savaging the undead below.

“See?” Yumi said. “The boy is dealing with it.”

Ketevan didn’t say anything. One change did not mean the situation was resolved.