

Chapter 363

Sword-Fighting With No Shirt On

"I know Broken Hill must have been rough," Ketevan said, meeting Jason in her office.

"Not as rough as it was for the people who lived there," Jason said.

"Even so, I understand if you need to take some time before getting back into action. That being said, if you are up to it, we could always use you."

"Actually, I came in to tell you that I need some time away from Network activity. Also, a flight to Japan and back would be good. With air travel restricted I can't just go buy a ticket. I could use Shade, but until I catch him in rank that would leave me shovelling coins into him like an old-timey train driver."

"Japan?" Ketevan asked. "Is this a family thing? Something to do with Akari? She's been doing some impressive work for us, helping to shut down proto-spaces and clear dimensional entity waves. We can manage without you, but losing you both at this point will make a dent in our capabilities, I won't lie."

"It's a larger concern than family," Jason said. "We need to have a meeting. You, me Anna and Farrah to start with. It's about preparing for what happens when the grid comes back up."

"We've been holding discussions about what happens following the grid-reactivation since it first went down."

"Those plans are going to need revising."

"I shouldn't have agreed to this," Jason said as Kaito flew him and Farrah back towards Asano village. They were in the cockpit, catching a ride as Kaito moved a load of supplies north for Network ritualist teams. "I should have pushed the issue and had us on a plane to Japan already."

"I don't think you realise how much attention is on you now," Kaito said. "They're saying that Broken Hill is the fifth-largest loss of life from a single incident since that start of the monster waves. There's been nothing else on TV. Interviews with survivors, footage from the evacuation. Every channel has you taking out monsters and shoving people onto buses."

"Footage from your drones," Jason said.

"Don't look at me," Kaito said. "That was Terrance."

The cockpit seats had a two-by-two configuration, with Kaito and Farrah in the front seats. Jason was in one of the rear seats, with Terrance in the other.

“You should see the tracking data for your online footprint,” Terrance said. “There’s enough footage and interviews that people are doing deep-dive analysis of your performance vs. the League of Heroes. They went after the big monsters while you worked on helping people, which did not go unnoticed. I made very sure of that.”

“I’m so glad that all those dead people were good for your optics,” Jason snarled.

Farrah turned around in her seat, patting Jason on the arm. When he first arrived back on Earth, his anger would have let his aura loose. Months of renewed training let him keep it under control.

“I sympathise with those poor people, of course,” Terrance said, “but we need to strike while the iron is hot. The press has been wanting access to interview you for months and now is a perfect time. After Broken Hill...”

Terrance trailed off as Jason turned a withering stare on him. He didn’t lose control of his aura, instead, he used it with pinpoint efficiency. Terrance had never sensed Jason’s aura before but now he felt it like an icicle spike, pressing into his throat.

“If I hear the phrase ‘thoughts and prayers’ pass your lips,” Jason said coldly, “you will not like what happens next.”

“Of course,” Terrance said with a visible gulp. “Obviously the press will be instructed to be sensitive about it.”

Jason had agreed to participate in a press day while the Network prepared to send him to Japan. More than just arranging a plane, there were diplomatic issues with Japan’s Network branches and even the Japanese government. Jason had become a figure of prominence and, more importantly, power. If he wanted to move openly, it involved obtaining government permission; there was a level of nervousness engendered when a one-man army applied for a visa.

“How is this press day of yours going to play out?” Jason asked Terrance.

“We already have some selected press en route to Asano Village,” Terrance said.

“They get vetted at the gate,” Farrah said. “By me.”

“That’s fine,” Terrance said. “In fact, if you could make the magic as overt as possible, that would work nicely. Then you, Jason, give them a little tour. Your sister will make an appearance. A celebrity chef talking about rationing, making it clear that there’s no special treatment.”

“There’s lots of special treatment,” Kaito said.

“The idea is to make it feel like there isn't,” Jason explained. “Our people really are rationing, so there's no catching us out on that.”

“Make sure you go through the medical centre as well. Let them talk to your brother-in-law and that Doctors Without Borders lady you brought back from Africa.”

“She brought herself from France,” Jason said.

“Don't care. I want sound bites for Doctors without Borders, Africa and Ebola. I want to hear the phrase 'experience with handling a crisis,' on every nightly news program. I want interviews with the people being treated talking about how grateful they are.”

The Asano Village Medical Centre was well staffed and well-stocked, so the Asano family had offered it up to the Network as a medical way station for those suffering exotic attacks that couldn't be resolved by the people in the field. Many of the strange poisons and diseases monsters inflicted were easily remedied by Jason if he was on site.

“You're sure they'll say what you want them to?” Kaito asked.

“Very,” Terrance said. “After the tour you're going to do sit-downs with all of them, followed by one in-depth interview.”

“With who?” Jason asked.

“Jeremy Westin,” Terrance said. “He's independent but a friendly, and he's the only member of the press who has been inside the village before.”

“Fine,” Jason said. “What's the tone we're going for? Sober in the face of current circumstances but with enough lightness for a humanising touch?”

“That's exactly what we want,” Terrance said. “They're going to ask you about the League of Heroes, too.”

“How do you want me to approach that?”

“Respect and solidarity while undercutting them with backhanded compliments.”

“You want me to neg them.”

“Yes, but don't go after the League of Heroes directly. Shining a light on the EOA itself works much better. Highlight the EOA as the organisation behind them, inferring that the league is a puppet organisation.”

“They are, so it shouldn't be hard. Point out the shiny fruit of the league while letting people see the rotten tree they're growing on.”

“To help with that, I've set up a video chat with the EOA defector in the US before you meet with the reporters. It should give you some ammunition.”

“Yeah? Thanks, Terry. I genuinely appreciate that.”

“Enough to consider how we introduce you to the press?”

“No. I do not practise sword-fighting with no shirt on.”

“It'd be a great visual. Pouring a bottle of water over yourself after working up a sweat.”

“I don't sweat.”

“You don't sweat?”

“No.”

“We could make it look like you sweat. I could rub oil on you.”

“You know, I thought it was strange when your sister gave me the number for the Network's human resources department. Now I get it.”

The Network office in Asano Village was not large but did include a secure communications room. One of the few areas in which Earth magical development outpaced that of Pallimustus was in communications, due to incorporating magic and technology together. As a security specialist set up the secure link with the Network branch in Arizona, Jason and Asya were in the main office area, leaning side-by-side against a desk. Between them, their hands gently touched.

“We haven't had a lot of alone time over the last couple of months,” she said. “I can't help but think I moved a little too slow.”

“Seizing the moments when you have them can be important,” Jason agreed.

“How are you?” she asked softly. “Have you even slept since Broken Hill?”

“Not yet,” he said.

Broken Hill had only been the day before. After hours of speaking with survivors in between debriefs at the evacuation camp, he hadn't gotten home until first light. Then Dawn arrived and they spoke with Akari before he portalled to Sydney mid-morning. Now it was late into the afternoon and soon the press would be arriving.

“You need to take some time,” she said. “I know you aren't as fine as you make out.”

“Oh, so you're interested me making-out, are you?”

“Time and place, Asano,” she said, a smile teasing the corner of her lips. “This is a professional environment.”

“Oh, I wouldn't call myself a making-out professional. I'm more of a gifted amateur.”

“Gifted, are you?”

“Well, enthusiastic, at the very least.”

“There is something to be said for keenness.”

“I have a whole book on sex magic.”

“You what?”

“Farrah gave it to me. Kind of.”

"She *what?*"

"Uh... it's not what it sounds like."

The woman on the screen looked around Jason's age, although he knew that was not the case. From what he had heard from Asya, Audrey Blaine, the EOA defector, inhabited an artificially constructed body. The result of some shady EOA/Cabal/Network joint research program from years ago, she was forced into it to save her life after the EOA killed her off for refusing to go along with the plans that subsequently killed hundreds of thousands around the world.

A mothballed reincarnation program from years ago, it had been a gamble at best. The body that had been pickled in a jar for well over a decade was apparently not without quirks. The Network was still trying to figure out exactly what she was and what she could do.

In the meantime, Audrey was being kept under comfortable but thorough guard as she coughed up the EOA's secrets. There was no question that the EOA knew about her revival by this stage and would kill her all over again if given the chance.

"It seems that you and I are in a very small club, Ms Blaine," Jason said, by way of introduction. "Not many people come back from the dead."

"I've heard that you claimed to have died," she said. "Your companion that Adrien Barbou was holding in France, too. How did you manage to revive?"

"Oh, various means," Jason said. "A friend of mine's dad rules the afterlife but he refuses to help me out, so I've been making other arrangements. Barbou really is with the EOA, then?"

"Yes, and he's very much in the ascendant. You know that he was playing with you in France, right? Exposing our people so you thought the EOA's objective was the astral space and your outworlder friends, while our larger plan came to fruition."

"You mean their larger plan," Jason said. "You're not EOA anymore, right?"

"Old habits."

"I did realise that I was a cat chasing a string," Jason said, "but only in hindsight."

"For such a stealthy man, you are very loud, Mr Asano. You make a useful distraction. I understand you're looking for some juicy nuggets to use against my former organisation in the press."

"Yes, but that is a secondary concern."

"Oh?"

"Tell me about the implants being used in the silver-rank converted."

“The what?”

“The superheroes.”

“Oh, the category three enhanced. You want to know what the implants are.”

“I know what the implants are,” Jason said. “I want to know where you got them.”

“You know what they are, do you?” she asked, scepticism plain on her face and in her voice.

“Clockwork cores,” he said. “they are produced by artificial life forms called clockwork kings, which are themselves created by an entity called the Builder. We don't get along.”

“Clockwork king,” Audrey said thoughtfully. “Is that what it's called? It was dug up in the eighties, buried with a bunch of Assyrian relics more than two millennia old. The archaeologists thought they'd found an alien robot. It took decades before we figured out how to get anything out of it. Part of a joint program with the Cabal and the Network to advance our various research projects. That was the beginning of the human enhancement project, although we were never able to use the implants – clockwork cores, you called them? We were never able to use them properly until we advanced the other aspects of our enhancement program. We didn't get them to category three until around two years ago, at which point we were able to properly integrate the implants. It solved a lot of issues with the earlier iterations.”

“The EOA isn't in contact with the Builder, then?”

“I don't know who that is. If whoever or whatever that is has any involvement with the EOA, then I suspect only Mr North would know. He's the oldest of the EOA's leaders and I'm not exactly sure what he is. I don't think he's human, at least, not entirely. Of course, neither am I, anymore.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Tell me more about this enhancement program.”

“I have to go,” Asya told Jason as he emerged from the secure communications room. “I'm crewing your brother's helicopter again.”

“I'm going to be busy,” he said. “I may not see you for a while.”

“Aren't we all?” she asked sadly.

The loons outside the gate knew something was going on, becoming riled up with the arrival of each additional news crew. Security let the press through the gate so as not to be harassed by the people outside it but they were told to wait until all seven crews arrived. They got out of their vans to film B-roll and establishing shots of the gate, the mirrored security room and the people of the other side of the gate causing a ruckus.

"It's actually not glass," the security guard explained after being talked into an interview. "The whole building is made from an aluminium-based ceramic, along with some magic, but I don't know how that works."

"You're not well-versed in magic?" the reporter asked.

"I don't even have any essences," the guard said.

"Essences?" the reporter asked.

"Oh," the guard said, looking stricken. "I don't think I was meant to say that."

"It's fine, Toby," Jason said, having arrived unnoticed in the midst of the reporters. "I'll take it from here."

"Sorry, Jason," Toby said as he slunk back to the security room.

The reporters all turned on Jason, who was wearing a light, casual shirt and slacks. The camera people stopped filming the guard and B-roll to focus on Jason as well.

"Essences are the source of the powers possessed by members of the Global Defence Network," Jason said. "I'm not, strictly-speaking a member, but my powers also come from essences."

He plucked a green cube from the air and handed it to one of the reporters crowding around him.

"You might say that essences are the natural form of magic. Human beings are actually inherently connected to magic of this type, developing powers in symbiosis with these essences when absorbing them."

The reporter stared at the object in her hands.

"Are you saying that anyone can gain superpowers if they have one of these?"

"Ideally, you'll have three," Jason explained. "Absorbing essences is an easy and actually quite exhilarating experience. You can look at it as the natural method of obtaining powers, without the time-consuming and invasive procedures of the human conversion process that the EOA uses."

"The EOA?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Jason said. "Once you get deeply involved in all this, it's easy to forget that the magic societies aren't common knowledge. The EOA are the Engineers of Ascension, which is the organisation behind the League of Heroes. I understand that the name comes from the desire to modify the human race to gain power - which they've done very well at, if the league is anything to go by."

"Then your powers come from an entirely different source?"

"Oh, goodness, yes," Jason said with a light laugh. "The EOA have spent decades overcoming the flaws in their human modification program, for which you have to admire

their dedication. Most would look at the price of progress and give up under the accusations of playing God but they were unflinching in their resolve. Today, they hardly lose anyone to the process, and without it, we wouldn't have the League of Heroes we see today.”

“Where do these essences come from?” one of the reporters asked as they passed the plant essence around.

“We can talk about that as we head into the village proper,” Jason suggested as darkness flooded out of his shadow to take the form of a bus.

After the footage of Broken Hill was broadcast everywhere, Shade's sleek, bus form was intimately familiar to professional media personnel like the news crew. Although Jason said nothing about it, and indeed, they had been warned that it was a delicate topic, the bus invoked memories of Jason's actions during the disaster.

“Before we hop aboard, we do need to do a quick security check,” Jason said. “My friend Farrah, whom you can see approaching, will be responsible for that.”

The reporters looked around, not spotting anyone. Jason casually pointed up and the reporters followed with their gaze to see a woman descending from the sky with wings of fire. The reporters nudged their crews to aim the cameras upward.