

Chapter 402

Dignified Moment

"This is not going to plan, Craig," Franklin said, sitting in the front passenger seat as Vermillion was driving.

"You think?" Vermillion asked wildly as he kicked off what was left of the bullet-riddled, driver-side door.

The streets of Bankstown had been transformed into a realm of stone and fire. The buildings were made from large bricks in dark shades of brown, red and grey. The cars parked on the street had been turned into stone carriages that a team of horses would be hard-pressed to budge. The car Vermillion was driving, along with the ones chasing it, had been brought in from the outside.

The streets they drove on, oddly, were still flat asphalt. Due to Bankstown being abandoned by all but the Cabal, this allowed for the cars to take a breakneck pace as they belted through the streets.

"Bryan, did you find that stuff?" Vermillion asked.

"Come on, Vermillion," complained the vampire in the back seat.

"Seriously, Bryan? This is not the time!"

"But it's never the time, is it?" Bryan complained. Vermillion was about to fire back a retort when a fresh stream of bullets pierced through the car, one of which hit him in the back of the head.

"Damn it, Bryan."

Bryan didn't say anything.

"Bryan!"

"You already have a cool vampire name," Bryan complained.

"I don't have a cool vampire name, Bryan. It's just my surname."

"Well, my surname is Slansky. No one is going to fear Slansky the vampire."

"My name's Frank."

"And nobody fears you, Frank."

"Oh, you might be surprised," Vermillion said.

"Why would I want to be feared?" Frank asked. "Have you ever tried to find four for a bridge game when everyone thinks you're going to eat them?"

An arrow shot through the gap where the back window used to be, buried itself in Vermillion's shoulder and then exploded, blasting the headrest from his seat and leaving

his arm dangling from a strip of flesh. Blood spilled out, but instead of falling away, it transformed into flesh, restoring the massive wound in moments.

“God damn it, Bryan,” Vermillion yelled. “Give me the damn stuff.”

“I’m not responding to that name.”

“Are you...”

Craig bit back his words.

“Night Stalker,” he said through gritted teeth. “Can you please give Frank the stuff?”

“Of course, Vermillion,” Brian said, holding out a crude ball of what looked and felt like putty. “All you had to do was ask.”

There was a thump as the roof bent inward under weight and a pair of huge, taloned claws pierced the roof as some manner of creature landed on it. Frank reached down by his feet and retrieved a sawn-off, double-barrel shotgun with glowing runes carved into the barrels. He casually pointed it at the roof and pulled both triggers, blasting most of the roof off. With a horrific screech, the gargoyle-like creature that had been on it flew off with its long, leathery wings.

“Where did you get that?” Vermillion asked.

“One of those Network guys at the storage facility,” Frank said. “Anyway, you’re the one that stole their car. Maybe that’s why those Network guys are chasing us so hard.”

One of the reasons the car had held up under repeated magical attacks was that of all the cars they could have stolen for the getaway, they found and took the only magical one.

“What were Network people even doing there?” Brian asked. “Shouldn’t they be defending their headquarters right now?”

“I don’t think those are Network people anymore,” Vermillion said. “The Network is fractured as badly as us, maybe even worse. I’d heard talk of the higher-ups trying to recruit essence magicians but I didn’t think they’d have gotten anyone this strong. Are you still holding onto the stuff? Give it to Frank.”

“What do you want putty for anyway?” Brian asked, holding out the ball again.

“Frank’s bloodline lets him absorb materials and pass their properties onto his blood,” Vermillion explained.

“Why would you want your blood to be like putty?” Brian asked.

Frank bit his finger, drawing blood that flowed out of the wound and over the ball in his hand, which was swiftly melted down and absorbed, even the spilled blood crawling back into his skin. Frank then bit his finger right off before plucking it from his mouth and

tossing it out the window. When one of the pursuing cars drove over it, an explosion underneath sent the car rolling out of the chase. Franks finger quickly grew back.

“You really thought that was putty, Brian?” Vermillion asked.

“Night Stalker!”

“Night Stalker doesn’t even sound like a vampire name,” Vermillion said. “It sounds like a rapist from the eighties.”

“But not an actual rapist,” Frank said. “More like a rapist from one of those daytime TV movies where a housewife learns that handsome men are all terrible.”

“You can both go fu—”

He was cut off when Vermillion swerved hard and Night Stalker’s head smashed the car’s last intact window.

“Sorry,” Vermillion said. “That pothole had lava in it.”

Jason, Dawn and Farrah stepped out of a portal near the border of Bankstown. Jason hadn’t been able to send them to a familiar location like the airport because there were no familiar locations left. Bankstown had been transformed both physically and magically, down to the smallest particle.

“I think this is the right street,” Jason said, extending his senses. Dawn did the same while Farrah shook off the teleport disorientation.

“There they are,” Jason said. “Oh, crikey.”

Jason sensed a large number of magical auras moving at speed, along with a lot of overt magic being thrown around.

“Are those magic guns I’m sensing being used?” Jason asked.

“I believe they are,” Dawn said.

“He must have some Network people chasing him,” Jason, tilting his head as if trying to hear a distant sound more clearly. “Yeah, those are essence abilities going off. Silver rank, damn. Who did Craig get cranky?”

“Maybe we should go find out,” Farrah suggested.

“Right, yes,” Jason said. “Shade, if you would?”

Five Shade bodies appeared from Jason's shadow and merged together, taking on the form of a huge, four-seater car. It had sleek, hypercar lines and a smattering of glowing white embellishments on what was, of course, a glossy black body.

“Okay, I’m going to get sued,” Jason said. “This is a straight-up Batmobile.”

"I could add non-trademarked badging," Shade offered, "but you would need a simple and elegant logo. Your personal crest does not translate into a clean, easily iconic symbol."

"Are you saying I need a superhero emblem?" Jason asked.

"It would help," Shade said.

"Can we please go?" Dawn asked. "We need to go catch up with them."

"Good point," Jason said, peering at the car. "Which part is the door?"

"Where exactly are we going?" Frank asked as the careening chase continued.

"Away," Vermillion said, swerving the car around a corner as they rushed through Bankstown's empty streets.

"I don't like 'away' being the most solid plan we have," Frank said.

An explosion to the right of the car tore up asphalt.

"You may have missed it, Frank, but even just 'away' is turning out to be a high bar."

"We don't even have the blood and cores, though," Night Stalker said. "We're the decoy car."

"They don't know that," Vermillion said. "Do you not understand what a decoy is?"

The gargoyle-like creature swept down once more but was met with a bloody mist that Night Stalker spat out and it backed off. Vermillion was about to turn the car hard into another corner when he was startled by something popping up in the middle of his eyeline.

"What the hell?"

➤ You have received a party invitation from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

Vermillion moved his head to look around the obstruction but it kept moving to the middle of his view and he almost ran the car into a stone carriage parked on the side of the road.

"What are you doing?" Frank asked.

"Yes, god damn it," Vermillion yelled.

"Yes, what?" Frank asked.

Missing the corner and then almost crashing had allowed the cars pursuing them to close in. Frank and Night Stalker were gearing up to fend off fresh attacks when a series of what looked like orange lasers started laying into the other vehicles, slicing them up like pieces of cake.

"What's doing that?" Frank asked.

Watching out the back window, Night Stalker saw the source of the attacks.

"It looks like a space cloud on top of the Batmobile shooting lasers."

The lack of cars didn't entirely end the pursuit as the most powerful Cabal members and essence users who had been in the cars gave chase on foot, moving at speeds comparable to a car. There was also the large gargoyle creature still flying after them.

Gordon made short work of the non-magical cars, although the people inside proved more resilient as they sprung from the wreckage to continue pursuing Vermillion's car.

"I'm surprised Craig's car is still running," Jason said. "It must be one of the Network's magically-enhanced ones, right?"

"I imagine so," Farrah said.

Vermillion's car was a wreck on wheels, missing two of the doors and most of the roof, the rest riddled with damage. The fact that all four wheels were intact was too much of a miracle to be anything but magic.

Jason and Dawn both snapped their heads to the left at the same time.

"That may be trouble," Dawn said.

"I'll deal with it," Jason said. "You two make sure our enthusiastic joggers don't run down his car. He almost crashed back there, so I'm not sure he's the best driver."

Farrah strained her senses and picked up what the others had already sensed.

"A conjured Vehicle. Vermillion isn't the only one bringing in reinforcements."

Vehicle specialists were more common on Earth than Farrah's world. Many were flyers like Kaito and his helicopter, but land-based vehicles were much more the norm, trading off the capability to fly for an increase in combat power. The common thread for vehicle specialists was that their vehicle-based powers were awkward to use but proportionally more powerful than more convenient power sets.

Australia didn't have a lot of vehicle users, compared to China who boasted a higher percentage of them than any other major nation. Combined with China's population, this made for a powerful force. Jason had occasionally seen them in action in large, multi-national actions like Makassar.

Because of Australia's deficit, Jason quickly guessed the identity of the silver ranker coming his way in a huge armoured personnel carrier. It wasn't someone he'd worked with personally but Kaito's specialised training had been carried out by the senior vehicle specialist.

Jason opened the car door and hopped out, using weight reduction to drift a moment and slow down before dropping his feet to the asphalt. Gordon waited on his left, with

Shade on his right. A short time later, a huge, futuristic armoured vehicle roared around the corner before slowing down to a stop.

“Mr Asano,” an amplified voice boomed from the vehicle. “I have no quarrel with you. Please walk away and don’t involve yourself in this affair.”

“Andreas Kosmopoulos,” Jason responded, his own voice booming in a trick of voice projection. “You’re chasing a friend of mine. I’m not going to let that go.”

“He stole from us.”

“Putting aside that the goods in question were plundered from reality itself and that none of you have a right to them,” Jason said, “he stole from the Cabal. Last time I checked, you were a member of the Network. Brisbane branch, if I remember rightly.”

“These are dangerous days and the old order is breaking down,” Kosmopoulos responded. “If the ship is sinking, you find anything you can that floats.”

“You’ve grabbed an anchor, Andreas, not driftwood. Let go, before cling to it drags you under.”

“And what would you know, Asano? Running around the world, not having to watch everything you’ve come to rely on crumble and break. You were never in the Network. You never understood what it meant to be a part of it. How much was lost when it crumbled. Human civilisation is over; people just don’t know it yet. Now it’s about monsters claiming the biggest pile of the rubble that they can.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” Jason said. “I haven’t given up quite yet and I’ll never give up on my friends.”

“I know you’re powerful, Asano, but this is a bad fight for you. Only a fool fights a vehicle specialist on the road. My vehicle has no blood to poison or flesh to rot. It’s shielded against teleportation and intangible creatures, so neither you nor your familiars can breach it.”

A panel in the massive vehicle’s roof opened up and a huge rotary cannon emerged.

"It has weapons you cannot endure," Kosmopoulos continued. "The matchup is bad for you, Asano. Leave."

“Your one of those people that sees a guy on the TV and thinks ‘I could take him,’ aren’t you?”

“Very well, Asano. Bear the consequences of your actions.”

The rotary cannon spooled up and started spitting bullets. Gordon turned into a swirling nebula and dashed away before reforming, while Jason ducked into Shade and vanished. The gun started tracking Gordon, but six orange beams bore down on the

weapon and sheared it off. A force field snapped into place around the vehicle and a new gun that immediately started firing was conjured in place of the damaged one.

Gordon sank into the ground, avoiding the bullets, and started popping up in random places to blast six blue beams at the force field, only to vanish into the ground as the gun rapidly swung in his direction.

The silver-rank bullets fired specialty ammunition that added disruptive-force to the impact of the bullets, ideal for an incorporeal creature like Gordon. Sensitive to the dangerous damage type, he used dashes to avoid them. In between dashes, he fired bursts of the same damage: blue beams of pure disruptive-force that were highly effective against the force field.

The armoured vehicle started moving again, heading once more in pursuit of the other vehicles. As the force field collapsed, Jason appeared from behind a stone carriage and used his cloak's weight reduction to leap high into the air. His shadow arms reached out, grabbed the now-unshielded APC and dragged him to it. Its exterior immediately electrified and he tumbled, twitching off the back to face plant the street as the vehicle roared away.

"Not my most dignified moment," he muttered into the asphalt.