

Chapter 1009

Kung-Fu Wizard is Not a Verb

Given the war spilling across Europe, the peaceful, pastoral perfection of the valley seemed a little uncanny. It was a fine day, the warm sun offset by just the right amount of wafting breeze. The air was fresh and clean. The grass was vibrant green and the trees were showing the first hint of autumn colour.

Only two buildings were visible. One had been in this place for centuries, while the other had come from an impossible distance. The castle holding McKean's lair had begun life as a Cabal stronghold before eventually passing into Network hands. It was unremarkable by French castle standards, which was still remarkable by most others. Round towers were set into walls around a central fortress. Weathered white and brown stone made up most of the construction, with grey conical rooftops.

Where the castle was something out of a fairy tale, the other building came from a different kind of tale. Floating in the air, Jason's sky vessel was an alien and unsettling thing. Constructed as an inverted pyramid, the underlying cloud material could be seen between the blood red panels covering the surface. Set into each of the pyramid's sides was a giant, nebulous eye of blue and orange.

The top of the pyramid was a launching platform for Earth's new airships, mostly high speed troop transports. Those ships had been deployed across Western Europe, and the sky over the quiet valley was otherwise empty. Jason stood at the edge of the roof, looking down at the castle. His team members were all positioned elsewhere, some preparing to sneak into the castle themselves. With Jason were his familiars, arrayed next to him at the edge of the platform.

Colin looked like Jason himself, minus the cloak, and with bloody orbs for eyes. Gordon was the most alien, his floating cloak body containing a mirror of the giant eyes on the sides of the pyramid. More eyes floated around him like oversized marbles, filled with power. Shade was normally the most circumspect, but out in the open on a sunny day, he was easy to spot. The shadow familiar had a lot of control over his exact shape, and today he looked like tenebrous butler at a formal event, complete with top hat and tails.

"Best foot forward, Shade?" Jason asked.

"Always, Mr Asano. Will the drone be here soon?"

"Should be, but it's nice just to take a moment. I recognise that what's happening today is serious. People are fighting and dying as we speak, and I don't want to make light of that. That being said, I'd also like to acknowledge that I'm about to invade a French

castle and kung-fu wizard my way through a vampire army to confront a mad scientist. I'm not saying that's the most awesome thing that's ever happened, but it has to be on the shortlist, right?"

"Mr Asano, 'kung-fu wizard' is not a verb. If nothing else, it has too many words."

"Shade, never change."

"I get to eat the vampires, right?" Colin asked.

"Colin, they may have become twisted and warped, but they're still people. Or were, in the case of the ghouls."

"That wasn't my question."

Jason sighed.

"Yes. It'll be good to know if your ability to consume life force will shut down their power to revive."

"That's the only reason I was asking," Colin said unconvincingly.

A drone rose up through one of the elevating platform shafts on the top of the cloud ship and floated over. It was a mostly smooth ovoid with no visible mechanism to aid in flight. From each side protruded a small, round bar.

"Are you ready?" Nik's voice came from the orb.

"We are," Jason said. "Are the others in position?"

"Yep. You're good to go."

"Okay," Jason said. "Let's get to it, coppers."

Jason leaped off the roof, his cloak unfurling like dark wings as he glided towards the castle. Shade and Gordon both floated after him. Colin let out a grumbling noise as he looked at the drone.

"I don't see why we had to do it this way," he said. "He could have just levitated me down using his aura."

"But isn't this way more fun?" Nik asked.

"No."

Colin moved closer to the drone and gripped the bars on the side as if they were handlebars. The drone lifted him off the platform and started flying after Jason, Colin dangling in the air underneath.

"Hey!" Colin yelled. "Why are you flying backwards?"

"I'm not. You grabbed the drone backwards."

"Can you make the drone fly backwards, then?"

"Uh... no."

"That does not sound convincing!"

The Principality of Lichtenstein had not done well in the age of magic. Originally evacuated during the monster waves, the vampires had made it home to a network of blood farms. It also became a hub for ghoulish creation as the humans in the blood farms were used beyond their limits. The principality had been attacked multiple times in several attempts to end the practice, by the Cabal, the Asano Clan, and various militaries. Each time, the vampires operating the farms scattered, only to return and re-establish operations.

Today was the day it ended. Humphrey descended through the air like a missile, complete with an explosion that reduced the Schaan Town Hall to a crater. The vampires inside were immediately killed, but Humphrey now knew that would not last long. A mushroom cloud of dust, dirt and rubble covered the town.

Humphrey leapt out of the massive crater, a single vault easily getting him clear. He glanced around but couldn't see far through the dust cloud. He knew from the mission briefing that the town hall had been one of the few structures from the original municipality still intact. It certainly wasn't anymore, with chunks of shattered brick falling out of the sky.

He found an area that had once been a street, now with long grass growing up through the cracks. He pulled a large, flat wooden square from his dimensional space and set it down. He pulled out a small sack, like a wineskin with a stopper. He opened the stopper and poured white powder out in a circle on the platform. While he was doing that, a small drone appeared, flying through the dust cloud.

"Why do you have a wooden pallet?" Nik asked through the drone.

"It's a ritual platform. The ground is too rough to lay out a summoning circle."

"This is why you need to mix some tech into your magic. All this candles-and-chanting business is rubbish."

Humphrey took out a trio of twelve-sided dice and rolled them on the platform. One of them created an illusion of two more dice that then rolled themselves. One of those did the same thing, after which all the dice finally came to a stop. Humphrey checked the dice faces before picking them up, the illusory dice vanishing as he did.

"Multi-headed tentacle magma frogs," he muttered.

"What did you just say?" Nik asked.

"You'll see."

Essence ability summoning rituals were quick and simple, with Humphrey's being no exception. Soon his dragon bone warriors, modified by his summoner dice, were emerging

from the circle. As he was summoning a full hundred they hopped out of the way as they emerged to make room for the rest.

Each dragon bone warrior was a giant frog, not skeletal but with solid bone in place of flesh. Each frog had three heads, with each head at the end of a very thick tentacle, like the neck of a bodybuilding giraffe. Each summon was also clad in ornate blue and gold armour from another of Humphrey's powers.

"They look like an army of overweight knights turned into steroid hydras by an evil witch," Nik said.

One of the frogs flicked its tongue out at a rock. The tongue was made of segmented bone on a long thread of magma, and when it struck the rock, the rock exploded.

"Okay," Nik said. "They may be ugly, but I can't say I'd like to fight one, so good job."

"Is someone going to come down and make sure the defeated enemies stay defeated?"

"They're on their way now. Mostly silver-rankers, but we don't anticipate a large vampire presence here. You should mostly be dealing with ghouls."

"And if we anticipated wrong?"

"Then you get to be a big hero and raise your online following when I release the footage. Still probably won't have as many followers as me, though."

Humphrey turned to give the drone a flat look.

"Not that I care," Nik said. "I'm just saying."

The main castle entrance was an enormous arch, closed off by a metal-bound wooden door. Jason approached, flanked by Shade and Gordon.

"This thing is begging for a battering ram," Jason said. "I don't suppose it has a portcullis that drops down."

"Unlikely, Mr Asano," Shade said. "I assume you have noticed that we are being watched."

"Yeah, which makes me curious. Why install a magic security camera when non-magical ones are harder to detect."

"Some manner of ruse?"

"Maybe."

"Perhaps," Gordon suggested, "there is a need for the camera to do something that a non-magical variant cannot."

"That makes sense," Jason said. "A lot of sense, given what I'm sensing underneath us."

"We could investigate one of the cameras and see what we discover," Shade suggested.

"We could," Jason said. "Or we could just punch our way in, find McKean and get it sorted nice and quick."

He walked right up to the door and, sensing no magic, gave it a kick. Gold-rank strength instantly transformed the door into a cloud of splinters and warped metal, scattering across the courtyard inside. After waiting a moment for the remains of the door to settle, they strode in under the massive arch.

The courtyard looked like an abandoned historical site, nothing like the lair of a mad scientist and his vampire army. It was a large, open space of cracked and weathered stone, with arched doorways leading into the surrounding buildings. The flagstones under their feet had a hardened patina of dirt. There was nothing else to be seen, empty save for the rotted remains of leaf piles that had blown in over the years. At the far end was the largest door, leading into the castle keep.

"You didn't punch," Gordon said.

"What?" Jason asked him.

"You said we should punch our way in, but then you kicked our way in."

"Well, you should always keep them guessing," Jason said as he looked around. "Not what I'd call ironclad defences," Jason observed.

"When the world is your enemy," Shade said, "secrecy is the only effective defence. I imagine the physical protections will be found in the complex below. Shall we search for an entrance?"

"Nah," Jason said. "You and Gordon are intangible, so just pop right through the ground and I'll shadow jump to you."

The familiars sank into the ground right as Colin arrived, legs flailing as he dangled from the drone's handles. He dropped awkwardly to the ground and looked at the spot his fellow familiars had been standing.

"Where did they go?" he asked.

"Shortcut," Jason said, then pulled his cloak around him and vanished into it. The empty cloak floated on the air for a moment before disappearing as well.

"Oh, come on," Colin complained, then looked at the drone. "I don't suppose that thing has a shovel function?"

"Interesting," Simon McKean murmured as he observed Jason's entrance to the castle. The only light in the room came from a bank of monitors occupying most of one

wall. McKean was seated in a luxurious armchair positioned in the middle of the room, the only piece of furniture. Standing next to it was Magdalyn, one of the strongest surviving vampire lords. She looked every inch the vampire queen, with long dark hair, pale skin and ruby lips.

“Just Asano and his familiars,” she observed. “He seems dismissive of the threat we pose. Do you think that’s why he came alone? He disregards the danger?”

“Never assume things are what they seem with Jason Asano,” Simon told her. “He thinks himself a hero yet drapes himself in terror. He plays the fool, yet that is often when he’s most ruthless. I suspect he is alone because he does recognise the danger, and they have wisely decided to let the immortal man face it alone. I look forward to seeing how immortal he really is.”

Chapter 1010

Dangerously Exposing Myself

In his monitoring room, Simon McKean watched Jason Asano and two of his familiars move through the tunnels of his research complex hidden beneath the French castle. Another screen displayed the third familiar, looking confused and frustrated as it wandered the castle in search of a way down. There was a small drone following it.

“Why is Asano allowing his familiar to be isolated?” Magdalyn asked.

“He’s testing us. And possibly the familiar. He wants to see if I’ll pounce on it in isolation. It is supposedly something called an apocalypse beast, but nothing on Earth has proven a sufficient threat to draw out its full abilities. I suspect that Asano and I are both curious as to how much it can handle.”

“Do you want me to send some vampires after it?”

“No. I don’t know what it can do, exactly, but I know it has developed a taste for vampires. The silvers won’t do any good, and let us not risk any vampire lords on an idle experiment.”

“Few of the original vampire lords remain. Most of what we have now are new blood, reaching lord strength in the last quarter century. They lack the mastery of their powers and the command of blood magic the ancient lords possess. To be honest, I could live with losing one or two of them. They won’t die forever, after all.”

“Don’t be so certain, Magdalyn. Earth forces have already found a way to impede the vine’s revival ability.”

“You said that would only prevent their resurrection temporarily.”

“With the Earth forces, yes. With Asano, it is best to avoid assumptions.”

“Well, I can easily enough send a couple of the new bloods I won’t miss if they don’t come back.”

“Very well,” Simon said. “Do so, and we’ll see what happens. As for the rest of the vampires, send them at Asano. All at once, silver and gold. Hold back only the original vampire lords, if you’re unwilling to risk them. I want to see for myself what he’s capable of.”

“And you’re willing to burn all of my vampires to assuage your curiosity?”

“However this plays out, Magdalyn, the vampire war ends today. The best outcome you could hope for was always taking your closest allies and going into hiding. Now that they’re using the grid to track you, I’m not even sure that’s possible. I might be able to

mask a few of you from the grid, but too many and it won't work. Choose the most important of your vampire lords and give up on the rest."

"And then what?"

"Then go into hiding. If you don't get discovered for a few decades, they'll stop looking and you can begin to rebuild your numbers. You can go back to existing in secret."

"Your 'best outcome' is hardly good."

"Mine is no better. I too will have to retreat even further into hiding. I'm going to show the world that Asano can be effectively fought, but the world will not thank me for it. The most I can accomplish is to show the world that they don't have to capitulate to him. Once they realise that he can be fought, then he will be. Sooner or later, humanity will always rise against tyrants."

"I only care about survival, not your ideology."

"And right now, you have too many vampires to survive being hunted down. Send them against Asano, so we can see firsthand what we're up against."

"Our reports are that he grows in power the longer he fights."

"I recall."

"Then why make him stronger before he faces Gerling?"

"To show that even at in the fullness of his power, Asano can be effectively confronted. That's what all of this has been about."

"I thought it was about killing him. For us, it has always been about eliminating the greatest threat to our kind."

"I'm not sure he can be killed, although we will certainly be testing that today. Either way, unkillable doesn't mean invincible. He can be defeated. As for him being the greatest threat to your people, Jason Asano is the greatest threat to all of us. Look at what has come about since his return. The entire planet has undergone a revolution, with him in control, and that's just the beginning. We've caught only a glimpse of the vast and alien powers that exist beyond our world, and his presence draws their eyes upon us."

"I hate to break it to you, guy," Nik's voice came from the speakers, "but Dad *is* a vast and alien power from beyond your world."

"The rabbit," Simon said. "Your powers are heavily related to communications technology, yes? You have used it to access my audio from the surveillance system."

"It seemed fair, with you watching us. You were smart to not put any cameras in there. I have to use sound mapping to get a look, and that doesn't produce a colour image. Is your vampire friend pretty? Her silhouette looks pretty. Enjoy it while you can, lady, as

you won't be once Colin is through with you. But you'll see that in a moment. Your gold-rankers are about to arrive."

All that remained of the first vampire were a few bone remnants, broken open to get at the marrow. They were at the feet of what looked like a blood-drenched mummy, a humanoid figure wrapped in long strips of rag. The fabric was coarse and wet with blood. The body beneath was bulbous and misshapen, not a person but a collection of leeches, bound in the cloth.

The second vampire was more intact, although most certainly dead. Only a hand and a foot could be seen jutting from the mound of leeches roiling over it. Both limbs were half-stripped of flesh to reveal the skeleton beneath.

The stone floor of the castle was riddled with cracks from where vines had grown out, reaching for the vampires. The vines had been quickly set upon by leeches that drained the life force out of them, causing them to wither and crumble. Soon they had stopped emerging at all.

Colin finished the second vampire and the pile of leeches rose up, melting together to form a facsimile of Jason, minus the cloak and with blood orbs for eyes. The mummified body also transformed into the blood clone form. The two Colins looked at each other before setting off, resuming their search for a way underground.

Directly beneath the castle were stone tunnels and old catacombs, but moving deeper found something very different. McKean's research facility felt like a hospital in design, with wide hallways connecting various rooms containing benches and lab equipment. As Jason searched the complex, he found signs of a recent and rapid evacuation. Papers were scattered around and broken lab equipment had been left where it was dropped. A refrigerator with a glass door had been clearly picked clean of the most important contents, the rest left behind, often knocked over. Jason only took a quick look through the rooms, leaving Shade bodies to take more time recording everything.

"I can sense all the people," Jason said. "They're deeper underground, all together. A bunker, maybe."

"Or a deathtrap," Shade said. "Perhaps McKean intends to use them as hostages. You've been known to make self-destructive choices to help others, even those who don't seem deserving of help. McKean may be looking to exploit that."

"Those people made some choices of their own. We're at war and they picked the side that keeps people in torture farms. I'll keep them alive if I can, but I have a long list of

people I failed to save. If they end up on it, they won't be the ones I mourn. Before we deal with them, that vampire army we've been looking for is almost here. Mostly silvers, but a few golds."

Jason looked around. He was in a corridor that was spacious for walking through, but not for fighting.

"These corridors make good choke points," Shade said.

"I didn't come here for careful tactics," Jason said. "McKean wants an epic showdown, and I'm here to deliver."

Jason flexed his aura, pushing against the walls. Plaster cracked and the steel underneath groaned and then shrieked as the walls were ripped from the floor and ceilings to be tossed into the rooms behind them. Workbenches and lab equipment was shoved away. In a few moments, the corridor had been expanded, the conjoining rooms combined into a single space.

In the aftermath of the destruction, water sprayed from ruptured pipes and light fixtures flickered and died. Much of the now-expanded room was cast in flickering shadow as what remained of the lights sputtered off and on.

"Mr Asano, you may have compromised the structural integrity of the facility."

A small few of the hidden cameras had survived Asano's destructive renovation, but many of McKean's monitors had gone blank.

"What was that? Magdalyn asked. "Did he just smash apart steel walls with his mind?"

"His aura, technically," Simon explained. "Telekinesis is a feature of messenger auras that is related to the nature of their beings. Something to do with the interaction between the physical and the spiritual, but I've had little chance to study magic related to the soul. Both Asano and Boris Ketland have been too protective of their messengers to capture any for study. Not without dangerously exposing myself."

"Why would he open up the space that way? Doesn't it make it easier for the vampires to swarm him?"

"That's exactly what he wants. Asano's greatest weakness is vanity. His powers include powerful stealth abilities, and what does he use them for? Dramatic entrances. In his head, he's not a shadow dictator, but the only man who can guide humanity into the future. He needs to be the hero. To confront the bad guy and save the day for — and this is the important part — everyone to see. Being nigh-invincible matters less to him than being seen as invincible."

“To the point that he will make a dangerous fight more difficult?”

“This is not a dangerous fight for him, Magdalyn. You overestimate your vampires.”

“Even Asano has limits.”

“Yes, but they are beyond what can be found on this world. Your vampires are not. Watch for yourself and you will see.”

It had been a long time since Jason had truly fought a horde. It took him back to his time fighting the nameless great astral beings in his soul, who wanted to stop him from restoring the cosmic throne. It was a chance to pull out every weapon in his arsenal, from his powers to his weapons to his combat skills.

He moved as an untouchable blur, barely seen as he merged in and out of the shadows that danced under the flickering lights. Only the glowing red runes of his sword stood out, the black blade itself all but invisible in the poor illumination. The sword dealt no killing blows, instead leaving blood gushing from gaping wounds and rot overtaking flesh.

Silver-rankers were sturdy enough that even most gold-rankers could not dispatch them swiftly. Only the likes of Humphrey and Farrah, with their eruptions of damage, could take one down in a few moments. Jason was just the opposite. As he danced through the vampires, he left not dead behind him but the promise of inescapable demise. He marked his enemies, delivering unto them a misery and suffering that would consume the brief remnants of their lives.

The gold-rankers amongst the vampires put up a greater fight, but it was far from enough. Jason honed his skills and mastered his powers fighting everything from monster hordes to the forces that governed the cosmos. His list of fallen enemies included a long and bloody trail of dead vampires. He knew how they fought and what they were capable of. He knew exactly what his powers could do to them.

A gold-rank vampire fuelled a terrible bolt of energy with her own blood and launched it at Jason. It fed on the vampires it passed through on the way, draining their power and leaving withered husks behind. A churning orb of black and red power, it twisted through the air as it hunted Jason down, unrelenting and unstoppable.

When it reached him, Jason drew his cloak around himself until he looked like a living portal to some ineffable void. That proved to be exactly what he was as the bolt passed through, sailing off into a starry expanse from which nothing would ever return.

Other vampiric powers were brought to bear, with no greater effect. When a gold ranker turned into a blood mist to escape Jason's blade, Jason cast a spell, incanting with a voice as cold as a stony grave.

“Your blood is not yours to keep but mine on which to feast.”

The time it took to recite just a few words could be an eternity at the pace silver and gold-rankers fought. Jason didn't stop as he chanted the incantation, his sword drawing blood half a dozen times before the words were done. Once he was finished, the battlefield changed in an instant.

The Feast of Blood spell drained the life force from every vampire that Jason had set to bleeding which, at this point, was all of them. Bright red life force lit up the room far more than the mostly shattered ceiling lights. The vibrant red energy surged through the room, yanked out of the vampires to be devoured by Jason.

To the vampire who had turned into a blood mist, Feast of Blood was especially devastating. The cloud of blood motes was consumed as if some vast abomination had drawn a terrible, hungering breath. What remained of the ravaged mist cloud coalesced back into a human-like form, but emaciated and feeble, the vampire collapsing to the floor. Even so badly savaged, gold-rankers of any stripe were hard to kill. The vampire scurried off like a beetle on all fours, vanishing into the crowd of silver-rankers.

Jason used another spell that effectively announced an end to the massacre that could barely be called a battle. If described, the spell might seem like a mercy, while the reality was anything but.

“Feed me your sins.”

Feast of Absolution was a spell which took away all the terrible things Jason had done to his victims, consuming every malediction he had inflicted upon them. For every horrifying malady that was removed, what was left in its place was Penance. Penance was an affliction that devoured from the inside out with transcendent damage that no power in the cosmos could shield from.

Light blazed from their eyes and mouths. They shone from the inside as if their bodies were filled with blinding, white-hot steel. They were denied even the relief of screaming as something beyond pain overtook them. Those already closest to death found its mercy first, their bodies not just burned away but annihilated entirely. One after another, the vampires disappeared as if they'd never been, utterly excised from reality itself.

Jason stood with his eyes closed, watching with his aura as the vampires expired. The silver-rankers were beyond struggle, not even falling to the ground. They stood in place, too stricken to fight as they were claimed by their inescapable doom. The gold-rankers struggled, some crawling, all but broken, while others fled madly. Those that reached the doors found themselves gripped in Jason's aura, dragged back to their fate as his voice marked the end of their existence.

"Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death."

The roof lit up with blue, gold and silver light, droplets of which started falling to the floor. Lightly at first, like a spring shower, it soon became a monsoon of transcendent power that blinded vision and inundated the vampires. Every mote of light turned flesh and bone into nothingness, wiping them from existence, drop by drop. When nothing was left, the light faded and the rain stopped, leaving Jason standing alone.

As Gordon manifested and Shade rose from Jason's shadow, two Colins came rushing along the corridor, looking around at the destruction.

"I'm here! I'm ready to fight. Where are all the vampires?"

Chapter 1011

Join Me, and Together We Could Rule the World!

Both of Colin's bodies sniffed at the air.

"You've been killing vampires in here," one of them accused Jason.

"I have."

"You didn't wait for me?"

"You'll have your fill before we're done."

"I've never been full in my entire life."

"Then today's going to be interesting."

The Colins gave a pair of mirrored sceptical snorts, but didn't push it further.

"Did you find that they tasted funny?" one of them asked instead.

"I don't eat them, Colin. Or actually drink blood. But I think I know what you mean."

"I don't know what..." Colin began, but trailed off as Jason put a finger to his lips.

Jason reached out to the other group infiltrating the complex through his voice chat ability.

"Clive? How's it going?"

"This may have been a mistake," Clive replied.

"Did something go wrong?"

"Yes. I'm running around with four women bonding over places they've broken into. They're talking about using burglary as a girls' night activity."

"He's exaggerating," Belinda said. "Farrah does have some surprisingly impressive intrusion magic, though. We probably should spend more time stealing things."

"See, this is what I'm talking about," Clive said.

"This is why I prefer working alone," Estella said. "No professionalism whatsoever."

"Except for me, obviously," Belinda said.

"You're the worst of all," Estella told her wife.

"I don't suppose you could give me an actual update on what you're doing?"

"We're having a surprisingly easy time of it," Farrah said. "Nik has helped us stay off the cameras. Sophie has been scouting out some of the other wards McKean has in place, for Lindy and I to disable. Stella has kept us clear of the locals, but something drew off all the vamps, so we've had a clear run for a while now."

"These rooms have been cleared out, so we haven't found much," Clive said. "We just found a broken laptop someone left behind that Lindy was able to fix with a repair spell."

"Found anything useful on it?"

"It's not very helpful," Farrah said. "Some lunatic set it up to run on Linux."

"There's nothing wrong with Linux," Clive insisted.

"Linux is for people who love fiddling around with very specific details when 'good enough' will do," Farrah said.

"Specific details are important," Clive said.

"To fastidious nitpickers who think they're smarter than everyone else," Farrah said.

"I don't think I'm smarter than *everyone* else," Clive said. "There's Lindy, and Emi, and... look, it's not my fault the world is full of people asking stupid questions."

"You're too judgemental," Jason told him. "You dismissed drawing ritual circles with toothpaste out of hand, and I still think there's some potential there. How handy would it be just squeezing it out of the tube?"

"In Clive's defence," Belinda said, "that would take a lot of toothpaste tubes."

"You could make a dimensional bag toothpaste tube," Jason said.

"I don't suppose there's any chance we could go back to fighting evil?" Estella asked.

"There was something I wanted to tell you," Jason said. "Colin and I just drained a bunch of vampires, and there was something strange in the power we sucked out of them. Like the reality core energy from back in the day, but this was something else."

"We know that McKean has been linking them to the blood root vine with a power that almost has to come from the astral somehow," Clive said. "I assume that's what you're picking up on."

"It's definitely cosmic," Jason said. "I know what that power feels like. There's something familiar to it, though. Almost like the power belongs to me, and these vampires have somehow stolen some of it."

"General Mills floated the idea of McKean siphoning power from your spiritual domains," Farrah said. "We dismissed it out of hand, but maybe we shouldn't have."

"That's not it," Jason said. "That power is too intimately connected to me. I'd know if it was being taken and I'd recognise it if I sucked it out of a vampire. This power isn't as closely connected. It didn't come from my spiritual domains or from my astral kingdom."

"Interesting," Clive said. "That does leave one candidate. Farrah, have you gotten anything from that computer?"

"Nothing useful," she told him. "I've gotten into the research files and it looks to be all about grafting vampire flesh onto the blood oaks. Nothing about the magic fuelling it all."

"Makes sense," Belinda said. "This looks like some kind of alchemy biolab, based on the equipment they left behind."

"We'll need to find something more concrete before we can confirm any hypothesis," Clive said.

"I don't suppose you'd like to share that hypothesis with the group," Jason said.

"I hesitate to voice what is little more than speculation at this stage," Clive said. "I'll let you know if we find something more as we continue on."

"We're making our way down through the levels of the complex," Estella said. "I assume you sensed all the people gathered below?"

"Yeah," Jason confirmed. "We're thinking either bunker or hostage deathtrap."

"I don't care either way," Farrah said. "But it's probably where they took everything when they cleared these labs out, so that's where we're heading."

"Okay, I'll go and make some noise, try to keep McKean's eyes on me," Jason said. "He's fed me a bunch of vampires to fatten me up, so let's see how he'll bring me to slaughter."

"Do we know where McKean is?" Lindy asked. "If I was him, I'd have snuck off long before we showed up."

"Not sure," Jason said. "I've never met the man, so I wouldn't recognise his aura if I saw it. He could be blended in with the other people in that bunker, but I'm sensing some kind of dimensional anomaly down there. My guess is that's where we'll find him."

"Why is he just standing there?" Magdalyn asked as they watched Asano on the monitor bank.

"He's communicating with his team," Simon told her. "I imagine they're on standby in the flying vessel outside in case things go wrong. He knows I can't eavesdrop while they speak through his power."

They watched as Jason started moving again.

"I think we're ready," Simon said. "If Asano is happy to walk into whatever I have waiting for him, let's go ahead and show him the way."

Jason and his familiars paused as the lights in the hallway dimmed. A moment later, the lights started shining in sequence, this time in yellow, leading off down the hall.

"I think McKean is ready for the big finale," Jason said. "He's even being kind enough to show us the way."

"I know your whole plan is 'walk into the trap and be such a boss it doesn't work,'" Nik said through the drone, "but could you maybe show any kind of caution whatsoever?"

"I mean, yeah, but nah, but yeah, but... nah."

"Dad, could you please stop being Australian long enough to not die?"

"I'm afraid, Young Master Nik," Shade said, "that anecdotal evidence suggests not."

Jack Gerling stood in a chamber the size of a basketball arena. It was a massive steel dome, with everywhere but the floor filled with holes large enough for a car to pass through. Through each hole grew thick roots that jutted into the cavernous chamber. The roots were deep red and slick with blood.

There were no lights, but Gerling did not need to see. He could feel the air and taste the spores that floated on it. He could smell the coppery tang of the blood dripping from the vine roots onto the steel floor. His mind was still and calm. It had taken a long time and a lot of work to restore his sanity after years of having his soul chained by the vampire queen. Now he was no longer a slave trapped in a cage of blood, but a true undead being, unique and flush with cosmic power.

Was this how Asano felt? Jack had long ago accepted that, as an essence user, he had been at the bottom of a pile. Back then, Jason Asano sat at the top, with a strength relative to his rank that Jack could only have imagined. Now, Jack was the one with the power. His new body all but hummed with it, every iota of his being saturated with a power beyond anything on Earth. A power that would replenish just as fast as he could use it.

Jack frowned as he noticed something wrong. Something in the way the spores stirred in the air, as if they were moving around something. Some object his senses had failed to notice.

"Hello Gerling."

Asano opened his eyes, their orange and blue light arresting in the darkness. Then his cloak lit up with stars that shot out, filling the vast chamber with dancing silver light. It sparkled off the blood vine spores.

Asano held a hand out to his side and blood gushed from his palm. It coalesced into a strange, mummified creature as bloody as the roots growing out of the walls. Another entity manifested out of nothing, a floating cloak with a massive eye inside it that mimicked Asano's own. The last familiar, a creature of shadows, was hard to spot and may even have been there all along.

"You look surprisingly sane, Gerling," Jason said. "I assume that McKean turning you into whatever it is you are has given your soul an actual body, not just a trap to stop your soul from moving on."

"I have trouble recalling my time under the vampire queen. I have memories of torment. Of wanting nothing but release and being denied it."

"I apologise for that. I wanted you dead, quick and clean, but Elizabeth outplayed me. I never imagined that she could do that to a person. I would have freed you, if I'd captured her before McKean got to you."

"I thought you would have enjoyed my suffering, after what I took from you."

"I've killed a lot of people, and not all of them deserved it, if I'm being honest. I don't recall what I convinced myself of when I was trying to kill you. Probably something about stopping the damage you'd do in the future. The truth is: I wanted to kill you just to see you dead. But some things I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy, Jack, and you're not even close to that. I know what it is to have your soul tortured, and no one deserves that. I am genuinely sorry that happened to you."

"I'd say that I appreciate it, but I don't really care."

"Fair enough. I have to say, I'm curious about what McKean has done to you. I mean, look at you, so overcharged with power you're practically throwing off sparks. I'm not going to lie, mate: the idea of fighting you again never especially worried me. The last time we went at it you were gold rank while my friend and I were silver. You won, but it shouldn't have even been a fight. It should take an army of silvers to drop a gold. You were, without question, the single most underwhelming gold-ranker I've ever heard of. And since you started popping up under McKean's flag, you've been bowled over a few times."

"McKean has been holding back most of my power."

"Right, so we wouldn't figure out what he had going on."

"So you wouldn't be scared off."

Jason burst out laughing.

"Mate, are you giving the old leg a tug?"

"What?"

"Are you having a go? Bloke, do you seriously think that you would scare me off? You? I'll grant you that the cosmic roids you're on have juiced you up proper, but I've faced a lot bigger than you."

Gerling smiled.

"You have nothing to worry about then. I've heard that you like the sound of your own voice, but do you ever shut up? Or are you stalling to buy time?"

"Actually, I'm kind of waiting for your boss. He's got a whole bunch of cameras in here and he's setting up a livestream, my kid tells me. Wouldn't want folks to miss the start. They already missed my big monologue. Should I do it again?"

"No!" Nik's voice came from a drone floating down from above. "He started streaming a while ago. The whole world is watching, and you're starting to sound like an idiot."

"Well, you saying that isn't going to help! Hey, McKean! You want to have some villain banter before it all kicks off?"

Simon's voice was broadcast from speakers hidden around the room.

"Showing the world that it is possible to fight you is the only statement you need to make."

"That's seriously why you're doing this? You sold out to the vampires for that? People are dying fighting your army of crazy monsters over that? Am I really worth all that effort? All that time, all that death?"

"You are the greatest threat this world has ever faced. You have transformed our civilisation and the world has knelt before you because they think you cannot be fought. If no one else will do what must be done, then I will, even if it costs me my very humanity."

Jason looked up, although there was nothing to look at. He pulled back the hood of his cloak to reveal his face.

"Holy crap," he said. "I get it. Bloody hell, I actually get it. You're me."

"What?"

McKean's voice had a strain of anger, breaking his calm for the first time.

"No, I get it," Jason continued. "You see a threat, an existential threat to the world, and the people who should be doing something about it just aren't. On the contrary, they see it as something to exploit, a way to get power for themselves. So, you do what you have to do, because no one else will. Even if you have to go it alone. To sacrifice your principles. To become something you never thought you would. Mate, I know that story. It was my story, the last time I came to Earth, and I know what living it does to you."

"You don't know me."

"I didn't. But now I know exactly who you are, and I respect that. I know how isolated you are. How it feels to have the very world you're trying to save be against you. Simon, we don't have to fight. Let's talk this out, you and me. You've gone this far because no one would listen to you. You warned them and they did nothing. I'll listen to you. There has to be some common ground we can find. Let me tell you about why I've done the things I've done. Maybe you can help me find a way to do them better. All I hear about is how brilliant you are. And now I know the lengths you're willing to go to protect this world. We could do that together, Simon. Just talk to me. We can sit down like adults instead of fighting like children."

"Gerling," Simon said, his voice tight with restrained fury. "Kill him."

Chapter 1012

We Have to Kill Clive

The mysterious cosmic power flowing into Jack Gerling turned him into an overcharged battery, thrumming with power. It pushed him to the very limits of gold-rank physicality, demonstrated as he launched himself at Jason, little more than a blur of movement. Thunder cracked as he breached the sound barrier, only to smash into the dome's roof an instant later.

The impact was hard enough to dent the magically reinforced steel. It rang like a gong, joining the still-echoing rumble caused by Gerling's supersonic speed. He pushed himself out of the dome's new indent and dropped all the way to the floor, landing in a crouch.

"Your boss did you a disservice," Jason called out over the fading noise. "He fed me a bunch of vampires and now I'm just as juiced up as you. I think he wants to make a point about beating me at my strongest, but he shafted you in the process."

Gerling glared at Jason but said nothing, instead attacking in another blur of speed. This time he deflected off Jason and smashed through one of the massive blood vine roots, reducing it to wet pulp. Gerling pulled himself free of the mess, wet with blood from the vine. Jason turned to face him, having not moved from his original position.

"Right now," Jason continued, "you and I are as strong as my friend Humphrey and fast as my friend Sophie. And, let me tell you, that's very strong and very fast. The thing about speed and strength like that is they're hard to handle. When you can bench-press an aircraft carrier but only weigh a couple of times more than regular people, leverage becomes critical. Humphrey's whole fighting style is built around hitting things without sending himself flying in the other direction."

Gerling continued the attack, only to once more be sent crashing into the wall.

"Speed is even more complicated," Jason said. "Managing the momentum is hard enough, but if you put on enough pace, even the physics start going funny on you. If you can't handle your own speed, it becomes a liability in the face of someone who can. You probably noticed it just then when I backhanded you like I was your pimp."

Gerling didn't relent, once more leaping to the attack at the limits of his speed. Jason took a step, slightly shifting the line of his body in relation to Gerling trajectory. Gerling tried to adjust, but his own speed became the enemy. He reached Jason, whose slight movement had given him a minor but critical advantage in positioning. It wasn't much, but at the speeds they were moving, it was enough. An uppercut caught Gerling square in the

chin, the power mixing with Gerling's momentum to send him smashing into the roof for a second time.

"It's a matter of experience," Jason explained as Gerling dropped to the floor once more. "Neither of us will be as good as Humphrey at strength management, or Sophie at handling speed. But I've trained with both of them, and I've had plenty of chances to put myself through my paces at full charge. There was a whole thing with the grim reaper and a space bird and using a Muhammad Ali strategy. Probably not worth going into right now."

Gerling attacked once more, this time not trying to crash into Jason but approaching at a more measured pace. He swung a fist while too far away for it to land, but Gerling's entire arm exploded, the force blasting forward like a shaped charge. It was Jason's turn to leave a dent as he crashed into the wall. Gerling staggered back, largely unfazed but now missing an arm.

"Was not expecting that," Jason muttered as he peeled himself out of the imprint he'd left in the steel. He looked over at Gerling, who had grown a vine from his shoulder that bulked out and morphed into a fresh human arm.

"Wow," Jason said. "And I thought my regeneration was impressive. Which it is, now that I say it, yours is good too. Your essence powers were fairly explosion-centric, right? Do you still have them?"

"You'll pay to find out," Gerling snarled.

Jason grinned and pulled his hood up over his head, shrouding his face in darkness. He drew his sword and held it leisurely at his side.

"Alright Gerling. Show me what your boss has done to you."

Gerling's clothes had already been dirty when Jason arrived, a loose t-shirt and track pants with no shoes. After smashing against walls, the ceiling and through one of the massive vines poking into the room, they were now ragged and stained, with one arm of the shirt missing from the explosion. The pants were further shredded as roots grew out of Gerling's legs and dug into the steel floor.

Massive vines erupted from the floor around Jason, ripping through steel as if it were paper. They shot at Jason from every angle, boxing him in as he shadow-jumped from one spot to the next. The lighting came from the star motes Jason had produced from his cloak, making the dome a playground of shadows.

Vines erupted from every surface, punching holes in the steel. Soon, the entire room into a complex net of dripping, bloody strands, the blood vines taunted and thrumming. The thickest and fastest vines were more like tentacles, growing out of the heavy roots scattered throughout the dome. These vines had bulbs on the end that exploded whenever

they got near Jason as he shadow-jumped around the chamber. As for the now immobile Gerling, a tight web of vines had woven a barrier around him to keep him safe.

Jason's familiars went to work on countering the vines. Gordon stuck close to Jason, his orbs either cutting through vines with beams or turning into shield to block them or shield Jason from explosions. When Jason shadow-jumped, Gordon would transform into a cloud of orange and blue light, then shoot across the room to rejoin him.

Shade was simply everywhere, yet unseen in the dim light. The ability to drain mana was not something Shade used often, but proved highly effective against the vines, causing them to wither and crumble into dry ash. This made room for Jason to move as the vines continued to fill the available space in the dome, slowly forming an inescapable net.

Jason fought to reclaim space, his sword hacking away like a machete in the jungle. Shadow arms filled the room, growing out of the dark and holding conjured daggers that likewise cut away at the vines. The growth was so prolific, however, that the vines grew faster than they could be cut down.

Afflictions struck the vine network with every blow, but whole sections fell away before the rot spread, protecting the larger organism like a lizard shedding its tail. It made more space for Jason, but also diminished the impact of his most powerful weapon. His afflictions were taking hold, but the vine did a remarkable job of isolating and shucking off the affected areas. When it could regrow with great speed and no limits, it was a worthwhile trade-off.

The roots were more critical to the larger organism, and could not as easily be cast aside. Where Jason's own efforts to deliver afflictions went poorly, Colin did a much better job. Leeches swarmed the root system, feeding off the blood and power that saturated them. That life force fed Colin in turn, the boundless power of the blood root vine becoming a boundless feast for the swarm. With an endless capacity to devour, the leeches propagated at an astounding pace, until every root was buried under its own swarm.

While Colin's efforts were slowly taking hold, the vines shooting through the room continued to pin Jason down. Jason's afflictions cut away vine after vine, their rotted remains dropping to the floor as wet gunk, but there were always more. When no space was left for Jason, Gordon would detonate some of his orbs to clear space, but it was only buying time.

There was no evidence of Gerling having retained his old essence powers, but something had obviously remained. Some aspect of his explosive abilities had been passed onto the vine to which he was now connected. Many of the vines had bulbs that

detonated on coming close to Jason, and Gordon couldn't block them all. Occasionally, Jason would be knocked into a nest of vines that would immediately burrow into his flesh. Energy surged through the vines and into Jason's body, causing exploding from within. Holes were blasted in his torso and sometimes limbs would be blown off entirely. At one point his whole head burst like a melon struck by a grenade.

All the damage, even the outright decapitation, grew back almost instantly. Jason had not been idly boasting about his regenerative powers, and his body was flush with life force taken from the vampires. Such rapid recovery expended that life force swiftly, but Jason would also use his life drain magic on the vines to replenish it. With both Jason and the vines growing back as fast as they could harm one another, the battle entered a bloody stalemate.

"How does it feel, Asano?" McKean's voice boomed through the room. "To face the inevitability of absolute and limitless power?"

Jason's laughter echoed through the room.

"Did no one tell you, McKean? Facing absolute and limitless power is kind of my thing. That means I can tell you with some authority that what you've got here isn't it."

Slowly but surely, Jason's afflictions escalated in severity. This was mostly down to Colin attacking the root network while Jason was too pressured to do the same. As the maledictions permeated the roots, the web of vines filling the room began to rot and crumble. Soon it was collapsing entirely, falling away in wet gobbets to paint the floor in black, viscous goo. The massive roots protruding through the walls were either consumed entirely by Colin or withered and died to afflictions. The woven vine shell around Gerling blackened and softened until it fell apart in clumps.

Eventually, Jason had no more need to run or to fight.

He hovered just above the floor, keeping his feet out of the thick layer of gunk coating it, draining through holes punched in the steel by the vines. Remnants of the vines continuing to rot fell from above, Jason pushing them away with his aura. He drifted towards Gerling, now exposed in the middle of the room. The roots growing out of his legs had inherited the afflictions from the larger organism, passing them onto Gerling himself. Dark veins writhed under his skin as his bloodshot eyes glared at Jason, who raised an arm in Gerling's direction.

"Your fate is to suffer."

The taint overtook Gerling's body in an instant. His expression went blank as his body was reduced to the colour and texture of bog peat and started falling apart in clumps.

There was nothing like flesh left, just rooted plant material that sloughed away with a horrifying stench of putrescence and decay.

"That wasn't really the end, was it?" Jason asked.

"No," McKean's voice echoed through the room. "I'm not hiding my power anymore, Asano. There is no end to it."

At that moment, the entire dome imploded.

Estella cast an eye at the ceiling as the entire room shook.

"What was that?"

"Gerling used to have explosion powers," Farrah said, not looking up from the computer terminal she was working at. "That was probably him."

"We're very deep underground at this point," Estella said. "In what's meant to be a secure bunker. If an explosion can shake this whole place, maybe it's all going to collapse. Maybe it was even designed that way."

"That would be good thinking on McKean's part," Belinda said. "Kill the intruders and bury the evidence, all in one stroke. I wonder if he's got anti-portal magic embedded in the infrastructure?"

Belinda was holding a magically enhanced assault rifle, pointing it at the scared-looking researchers. The bunker was one large room, with a computer terminal at one end and dormitory-style bunk beds along both walls.

"I'm more interested in the plumbing," Clive said, looking over Farrah's shoulder at the monitor. "When we swept the room, you said it was a bathroom through that door, right?"

"I did," Sophie confirmed.

"How does that work?" Clive wondered. "Is it plumbed? Deep under an abandoned castle in a portion of French countryside uninhabited since the monster surges? That would be immense trouble. Are there water and septic tanks? How do they get filled and emptied?"

"Maybe there's a magic filter that cleans the content of the septic tank and puts it back in the water tank," Belinda suggested.

"Okay, of all the reasons that working for McKean is a bad idea," Estella said, "I think that drinking communal poo water tops the list."

"Clive do you know what that is?" Farrah asked, pointing to the screen. "Is this where he's getting his power?"

"I think it is," Clive said. "And I do recognise it. I helped design it."

"Wait, *you're* working with McKean?" Belinda asked. "Great, now we have to kill Clive."

"We do not have to kill Clive," Farrah said, then gave Clive a suspecting glance. "Do we?"

"No!" Clive said.

"Good," Farrah said and turned her attention back to the monitor. "So, what is this thing, and how do we turn it off."

"We can't turn it off," Clive said.

"Well, that's not great," Sophie said. "Given that's the whole reason we're down here. Why can't we turn it off?"

"It's the bridge between worlds," Clive explained. "The one Jason and I built to regulate the flow of magic to Earth. Even if shutting it down were possible, we shouldn't. If the bridge goes away, the Earth's dimensional membrane will start breaking down again."

"And that's bad, right?" Sophie asked.

"Yes," Farrah said. "Hole-in-the-universe, planet-wiped-out bad."

"The bridge is an infinite source of power, at least on a planetary scale. What we need to shut down is whatever McKean is using to tap into that flow of power. Presumably the grid."

"It is," Farrah said, pointing at the monitor again. "Look at the energy draw and dispersion. He's pulling power into the grid from all around the world and distributing as he needs. But we can't shut down the grid either. Even if we were willing to do that, we can't do it from here. After the EoA sabotage took the grid down years ago, McKean and I made doing it again a lot harder. We'd have to map out key nodes all over the planet and sabotage them simultaneously."

"I don't think that fits our timeframe," Sophie said.

"Lindy," Clive said. "We could use some of your innovative thinking right now to dig up a third option."

"Okay," Belinda said. She shoved her rifle at Sophie and nodded in the direction of the cowering researchers. "Just point this at them and they'll stay quiet."

Sophie took the gun and held it out awkwardly, like some distasteful thing she didn't want to get any closer.

"I've never fired a gun in my life."

"Then beat them to death with it, I don't care."

Sophie shifted her grip to hold the weapon like a club and cast her gaze at the researchers.

“I can do that.”

“I think McKean knows we’re here,” Estella said, looking around as if she could see through the walls. “They’re trying hard to hide their auras, but we’ve got what feel like vampire lords moving in on our position.”

Chapter 1013

Something Jasony

The arena McKean had chosen for Gerling's confrontation with Jason had significantly more robust sensors than most of the complex. With magical sensors feeding signals instead of vulnerable cameras, the feeds kept running after the dome chamber was detonated. McKean was not going to allow the livestream to be interrupted, although all that showed on McKean's monitor bank was dust, lit up by motes of light from Asano's cloak.

Standing next to McKean's chair, Magdalyn was watching a different video feed on a tablet she was holding.

"These feeds are looped," she said. "The rabbit is interfering with your cameras."

"It doesn't matter. The ones monitoring the room with Asano are much more resistant to outside influence."

"But someone else is here."

"They're irrelevant. Only Asano matters."

"We don't know what they're doing."

"But we know what they can't do. They can't interfere with the cosmic source, and they can't interrupt the grid. Those are the only things that matter and they can't do anything about them."

"Your people are down there."

"Asano is obsessed with playing hero. He won't let them be hurt. And at this point, they are surplus to requirements. As will you be, if you keep complaining about this. If you're that concerned, go join the rest of your vampire lords in attacking them."

"What?"

"Didn't I mention? I sent the vampire lords you held in reserve to deal with our secondary intruders."

"Are you mad? Farrah Hurin is almost certainly there. She's killed more vampires than anyone but Asano himself. Why would my vampire lords go after her?"

"They don't know what they're going after, just that you told them to."

"I didn't!"

"Well, as far as they know, you did. The rabbit is not the only one who can meddle with a communications system."

Magdalyn stared at McKean whose gaze did not waver from the monitors, even though they still showed nothing but dust.

"This was your plan all along. Eliminate any loose ends, until only those bound to your vine and your control remained."

"Yes," McKean said, disappointment in his tone. "Elizabeth would have picked up on that long before now. It's why she had to go, shame that it was. You were necessary, for a time, but that time has mercifully passed. Now you can run off and join your vampire lords in attacking whoever Asano has running around my basement. Or you can try to escape alone. I doubt that either path will offer you much longevity."

"Or I could take your throat out now."

McKean finally turned to look at the vampire queen looming over him.

"Magdalyn, given what you know about me and how I operate, how do you think that would go? Do you honestly believe that I would have this conversation within arm's reach of you if I was anything but supremely confident about the outcome?"

Magdalyn glared at him for a long moment, her arms twitching at her sides in their eagerness for violence. Finally, she stormed out, slamming the door behind her.

"I wonder," McKean mused, then there was a scream from the other room. He sighed as he got up to go check on the seal. The trap wouldn't have triggered unless she'd attempted to sabotage the seal, and he needed to check that she hadn't done any actual damage.

"I'm going to need someone else to talk to."

Estella watched as Farrah scraped the charred remains of the last vampire lord from her obsidian armour. She wanted to avoid getting any vampire on her when she dismissed the conjured item. Clive and Belinda were standing over a table Belinda had conjured up, looking over notebooks and papers taken from Clive's dimensional space. Sophie was still watching the researchers, freshly cowed by the battle. Where Farrah had ended the fight painted in magma-scorched vampire, Sophie had remained clean and untouched, despite having fought hand to hand.

Estella was splitting her gaze between Farrah cleaning herself off and the space where the wall containing the door had been. Now it was a magma-scorched hole, with the corridor behind it a burned wreck, white-hot steel still throwing off incandescent sparks.

"That was quite thorough," Estella said.

"You have to be thorough with vampires," Farrah said. "Especially with this blood vine nonsense, but these seemed like vanilla vamps. Do you think I got it all?"

She craned her neck to try and see around her armour. Then it vanished and a few globules of ichor she'd missed fell onto her clothes.

"Ah, damn it. Does anyone have some crystal wash?"

"What's that thing on your arm?" Estella asked.

Farrah held up her wrist that had a black and red marbled stone bracelet. It was glowing with an internal red light that looked a lot like life force.

"This is a trinket I picked up on my last trip to Earth. Growth item, mostly useful when you're killing vampires. Might not get much use out of it, going forward."

"I think I have something," Belinda said, and Farrah moved to join her and Clive at the table.

"These are Clive's notes on how the dimensional bridge works," Belinda said. "We can't shut the bridge down, or the grid. But what if we mess up the power flowing through them?"

"Mess it up how?" Farrah asked.

"This is actually brilliant," Clive said. "To be precise, Lindy's idea isn't to mess up the power, which is raw magic from the astral."

"Meaning that it's already messed up," Lindy said. "Raw, primordial chaos, fresh from the tap. Part of what the bridge does is that it refines that magic and makes it more palatable for Earth's fragile dimensional membrane. That's why the magic is slowly repairing the membrane instead of breaking it down, which was the problem they built the bridge to fix."

"Lindy wants to turn off the mechanism that refines the power. She realised that McKean can only use that magic because it's been processed down from raw chaos."

"Meaning that if we stop refining it," Lindy said, "McKean will be feeding that raw chaos into the blood vine, into the vampires and whatever else he's hooked up to it."

"Which will do what, exactly?" Farrah asked.

"Not sure," Belinda said.

"Which is the part I don't like," Clive added.

"It could be a spectrum of results," Lindy explained. "It might be that everything hooked up to the juice explodes on the spot. Could be that they all turn into hideous astral abominations the next time they try to revive. It might just shut off the resurrection and do nothing else. But it will shut it off, one way or another. That much we're sure of."

"Resurrection magic is difficult at the best of times," Clive said, "which this is not. The Reaper made revival magic much harder a couple of decades ago. Frankly, I'm a little surprised McKean has gotten away with this without intervention, now that he's tapping into cosmic forces. If there was a death god on this planet, McKean definitely wouldn't

have gotten away with it. Even without that, resurrection magic requires precision, or you come back wrong, if at all.”

“Astral abominations,” Belinda said with a grin.

“Please don’t say that like it’s the desired outcome,” Clive pleaded.

“I don’t *want* it to happen,” Belinda said. “I’m just saying it would be amazing to see. Tell me you wouldn’t want to see that.”

“I will confess to a certain academic fascination,” Clive conceded, “but—”

“No,” Farrah cut him off. “Bad Clive. No astral abominations, just stay on topic. How do we shut off this raw magic regulator? I didn’t think we could manipulate the dimensional bridge from here.”

“There is one component that we can access,” Clive said. “One intrinsic part of the dimensional bridge that just happens to include the regulatory element.”

“And that is?”

“Jason,” Belinda said. “When he first started building the bridge, he was using a relic given to him by Dawn. That relic, amongst other things, bound Jason intrinsically to the bridge itself.”

“Why?” Farrah asked.

“We don’t know,” Clive said. “But after Jason broke the relic and we had to finish the bridge the hard way, we built on what was already there. And, as you may recall, one of Jason’s many ridiculous abilities is that he stabilises the physical reality around him. The World Phoenix gave him that power to better deal with astral spaces and transformation zones, but that’s not all it can do. We used that trait of Jason’s to stabilise the raw magic being fed into the dimensional bridge, delivering refined magic to Earth. I was actually quite proud of that idea.”

“Okay,” Farrah said. “I see two problems with this. Firstly, won’t you then be dumping raw magic on the Earth, along with all the vampires?”

“We will,” Clive said, “but the bridge is all but complete now. Earth’s dimensional membrane is much stronger than it was, and it’s almost ready to handle raw magic. That was always the goal. Even if it’s not quite ready there yet, it can handle unrefined magic for a while without suffering real damage. The vampires can’t.”

“Define ‘a while.’”

“A few years. Certainly more time than we need to handle the blood root vine.”

“Alright, that’s good,” Farrah said. “That leaves the other problem. You want to turn off the regulating mechanism.”

“Yes,” Belinda said.

"Lindy, *Jason* is the regulating mechanism. What exactly does shutting him off entail?"

"We don't have to shut off Jason," Clive said. "He should be able to simply stop using that aspect of his power. But he will need a more direct connection to the bridge for that to happen."

"I thought he was already connected to it."

"Yes," Clive said, "but we also established a buffer between Jason and the bridge, so they wouldn't interfere with each other. We didn't want Jason going funny because of some astral anomaly, or the bridge going wrong because Jason did something Jasony again. Jason will need something to enhance his connection to the bridge."

"And you have something for that?" Farrah asked.

Clive and Belinda shared an awkward look.

"Clive, Lindy. What do you need Jason to do?"

"The good news is," Belinda said, "that there's something right here that's connected to the bridge, through the grid."

"Are you talking about the blood root vine?" Farrah asked.

"Uh, yes," Clive admitted. "He's going to have to connect to the blood root vine."

"And how would he do that?" Farrah asked.

"Unpleasantly, I suspect," Belinda said.

"It should be within the realm of his abilities as an astral king," Clive said. "Two of the three core tools of an astral king are an astral throne, which manipulates physical substance, and an astral gate, which manipulates cosmic forces. Using those, he should be able to do the job quite intuitively, using his prime avatar as a medium."

"Can his prime avatar withstand the kind of power he'll need to channel through it?"

"Have you ever seen a water balloon burst because it was overfilled?" Belinda asked.

"Sure. You're saying his prime avatar probably can't handle that much power."

"I'm not saying probably. Imagine trying to fill a water balloon with the Pacific Ocean."

Steel plates and chunks of concrete were pushed aside as Jason levitated up from within the rubble. He could barely see what was left of the domed chamber as it was filled with a thick dust cloud. Leeches squirmed their way out of the wreckage as both Gordon and Shade appeared.

He reached out with his aura to probe the room. He sensed fresh roots growing through the walls, free of his afflictions. The vines had detonated the tainted material, having more than enough power to grow back. There was one very prominent aura in the

middle of the chamber and Jason floated in that direction. What he found looked like a giant red seed, dripping with blood. As he approached, a naked, dripping wet Gerling ripped his way out.

"You thought you killed me?" he snarled at Jason.

"Nah, mate. You might come back to life more than I do."

"I can do this forever."

"Uh, no you can't."

"You think you can stop me?"

"Probably. But also, give it a few billion years and the sun will expand, turning this planet into a sauna hot rock."

"A billion years?"

"Mate, have you actually thought about what immortality means? You can't just toss around words like 'forever' anymore. They have meaning."

"You can't fight for a billion years, Asano."

"You have no idea of the scale on which you're trying to operate, Jack. That power flowing through you? It doesn't just dwarf anything on Earth, but the whole damn universe. You've touched something that is so vast that the mind can't comprehend it. The only beings that can are so alien that they need interpreters to think like mortals for them. This fight isn't about vampires or McKean's small-minded xenophobia. This is me stopping a fool before the real fight begins."

"Small-minded?" McKean's angry voice echoed through the room. "I have brought to bear a power so vast that even you can't imagine it."

"Yes, McKean. Small-minded. You still haven't realised that you're fighting me with my own power."

"What are you talking about?"

"You want to see power, Simon? Real power? Shade, it's time for the contingency."

"Are you sure, Mr Asano? You've been holding on to this one for a long time."

"Simon wants to see power, so power he gets."

"You want to see power, Asano? I'll flood a universe of power into you! I'll blast that body to shreds, over and over until you beg for the release of death! Gerling!"

Vines erupted from all around the room, breaking up through the rubble and darting out of the dust cloud. Jason didn't dodge as they plunged into his body.

The picturesque French valley was peaceful and quiet. The cloud ship floating in the sky gave no external indication of the frenzy of commands being issued within. The castle

on the ground revealed nothing of the cosmic powers fighting deep in the ground beneath it. Then came a sound, spreading out from the airship to fill the entire valley and spread across the countryside beyond.

In the command room of Jason's cloud ship, Michael Mills watched the main screen while listening to his sub-commanders issue orders and direct battles across the continent. The lieutenant assigned to monitoring the situation around the cloud ship pushed aside one ear of his headphones and turned to address Michael.

"General Mills, sir. There's some kind of sound outside. It's very loud, sir."

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"I think it's electric guitar, sir."

"Electric guitar?"

"Yes, sir. And I think it's coming from this cloud ship."

"Patel, what do we have on the McKean feed?"

Patel was the lieutenant assigned to monitor McKean's livestream.

"Still just dust, sir, and some more cringy villain banter. They're both boasting about how much more powerful they are than each other."

Michael walked over to the officer with the headphones and put them on himself. A moment later, he handed them back.

"Yes, that's electric guitar, Lieutenant."

"What does it mean, sir?"

"Well, that was 'Thunderstruck' by AC/DC. If I'm not mistaken, it means that Simon McKean is about to get his ass kicked."

Chapter 1014

A Satisfying Day

Jason's body was a pincushion for blood vines, strung up so thoroughly that he couldn't move. Gerling walked closer, looking at him in confusion.

"You didn't dodge. You could have avoided that."

"Yeah," Jason said, "but what would be the point? We fight, you lose, and while you're growing a new body, all the vines I messed up explode and new ones grow. That's what McKean wanted. To show that I can throw everything I've got at you and his creepy gardening project, and it won't be enough."

"So, you gave up?"

"No, Jack. I'm going to kill you today."

"You can't kill me, Asano."

"Did Simon tell you that? He probably believed it, to be fair. But he's wrong about a lot of things, and that's one of them. I am going to kill you, and not just for revenge. I'm not going to say that you killing my brother, my girlfriend and my mate doesn't mean anything. Of course it does. I want you dead, Jack, and I want to be the one that killed you. But, at the end of the day, you're a monster, and I'm the guy who fights monsters."

"You talk big for a man strung up like a butcher's carcass."

"Yeah, well, my friend Clive told me I had to, and he's generally right about these things. Like I said, there's no point fighting McKean's big vine the regular way. Your boss keeps pumping cosmic power into it, and I can't fight that like a normal essence user. It's why he thinks he can win. Thing is, Jack, I'm not a normal essence user. The same way McKean uses the vine, and you for that matter, I'm using this body. It isn't me; it's just a tool. Simon thinks that he's found some infinite power source, but he doesn't even realise what he's tapped into."

"You have no idea what power I'm calling upon," McKean's voice boomed through the room.

"Actually, Simon, you're the one who doesn't get it. That power you're using? That's my power. The conduit it's coming through? I built it, with my friend Clive. And this monologue? It bought me the time to tap into that power, through these vines Gerling generously hooked me up to. Now I have a direct line to use that power for myself."

"WHAT?" McKean bellowed.

General Mills was watching the live feed that McKean was still broadcasting from under the castle. He turned as his own shadow rose from the floor to turn into Jason Asano's familiar.

"My apologies, General Mills, but the cloud ship may experience some turbulence over the next few minutes. Mr Asano is going to be exerting the influence of his true self, and he needs the cloud ship as a vessel. If he used his avatar, it would be destroyed immediately. All functionality as a control centre should go uninterrupted, but your people may be subjected to an echo of Mr Asano's aura."

"We've felt his aura before."

"No, General Mills. You've experienced a facsimile of his aura, but not the real thing. Mr Asano's prime avatar does not contain his soul, and therefore cannot use his true aura. This cloud vessel is one of Mr Asano's spiritual domains, and he is going to project his true aura through it."

"Why?"

"Because his prime avatar's false aura is insufficient to drag a castle out of the ground."

At Gerling's direction, power flooded through the vines and into Jason's body. Gerling was connected to the blood vine through roots growing out of his arms and legs, digging through the rubble. He directed more and more power into Jason, whose body was blasted apart by explosions. Limbs flew off and his head detonated, only to regrow in an instant.

"I WILL DESTROY YOU!" McKean screamed, only to be met with Jason's laughter. "Even your body can't keep this up, Asano!"

"I think you'll find it can, Simon. If you want to see what it takes to truly overwhelm this avatar, let me show you what vast cosmic power truly looks like."

An aura descended on the chamber like the waking of a nightmare god. The mere presence of it shook the walls and stirred the rubble. Its ineffable vastness left Gerling's eyes wide and gaze blank, his mind shutting down from the domineering force pressing upon it. The roots connecting him to the blood vine snapped and he fell to his knees, trembling and sobbing. Across the entire planet, every person with essence powers saw the same thing.

System Alert: Cosmic Intervention

- [System Administrator] has identified a dimensional infraction and initiated an intervention action.
 - The Hegemon has arisen. Beware his wrath.
-

The pounding noise of hard rock was not the only thing to blast out of the cloud ship and into the valley below. A tyrannical aura reached out like an invisible hand to wrench at the earth. The castle rumbled and shook as earthquake forces tore rents in the ground. Rooves fractured and centuries-old brick crumbled. The entire castle and the land it stood on were dragged into the air, as if plucked up by some unseen deity.

An entire column of earth was ripped up as the castle rose into the air. Bedrock, riddled with the steel and concrete of McKean's underground complex, was pulled into the air. Thick roots of the blood vine were ripped away, their torn ends dripping red.

Finally, the castle and the column of rock, steel and vines attached to it were dragged clear of the ground. A plume of dust and dirt rushed out of the resulting chasm to spread across the countryside. After floating in the air for a moment, the hovering mass went flying as the invisible power tossed it casually aside. The resulting crash shook the ground, the thunderous sound of it drowning out the music still blasting from the cloud ship.

The newly created shaft dug deep into the ground, ending in what had once been the dome chamber where Jason and Gerling had fought. The dust had cleared, drawn up and out of the shaft. From above came daylight, with the sun directly overhead in a clear blue sky. As the rumble of the crashing castle faded, sounds of music echoed down as well.

The chamber had already been strewn with rubble, and now there was even more. Jason was still suspended on taut vines sticking out of the walls, now bathed in sunlight from on high. Gerling was still on his knees, making babbling sounds. He'd been struck by falling concrete and steel but showed no indication of noticing.

Within his hood, Jason's eyes glowed brighter, shifting from blue and orange to ghostly white. Ethereal flames of the same colour started burning their way out of his body, burning up flesh that, this time, did not grow back. Holes appeared across his torso and limbs, ghost fire crawling out to cover his body. The vines jabbing into him tried to yank themselves free, as if scared of the flames. Shadow arms emerged from the rubble to hold them in place.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” McKean’s voice screamed. “HOW ARE YOU DOING THIS? WHAT IS THAT MUSIC?”

Jason didn’t respond. His avatar had been almost entirely consumed, more person-shaped flame left than body. The last remnants burned away and the flames expanded out as a dark shape grew within them, taking on the form of a bird. The bird grew larger, black as the void of space. Motes of silver starlight appeared inside it as the outside continued to be wreathed in ghost fire. It grew larger and larger, until its wingspan was almost too great for the shaft.

The vines still plunged into it flailed madly, as if desperate for escape. They remained trapped as white flames crawled along them, following to where they emerged from the walls and floor of the chamber, seeking out the blood root vine still buried behind them.

Clive and his team didn’t portal directly into the command centre, but a dedicated room close by.

“Are we just going to leave all those researchers down there?” Estella asked.

“I don’t think they’re going to move,” Sophie said. “Not with the battle taking place over their heads. And if something happens to them, I won’t be crying myself to sleep.”

“We can round them up when this is all over,” Belinda said.

Belinda, Estella and Sophie made their way to a monitor room where various military and civilian brass were watching events, while Clive and Farrah headed for the command room. Inside they found an array of soldiers looking less than well, ranging from pale to hunched over in their seats. Several Shade bodies were moving around, distributing potion vials.

“What are those?” Farrah asked.

“Mind breeze potions,” Shade said. “They clear the head and enhance mental fortitude.”

“Jory came up with them,” Clive said. “To help people who don’t handle portal travel well, originally, but it would help handle Jason’s aura. Fortunately, it’s not too strong inside the cloud ship.”

“This counts as not too strong?” Michael Mills asked, turning from the monitor where he was observing.

“Trust me that you’re better off in here,” Farrah told him. “You do not want to catch the full force of his aura when he’s using it as a weapon. It’s unnerving enough when he’s using it as a shield.”

"Sir!" one of the operations staff called out. "We're getting reports of anomalies with the reviving vampires. There's something wrong with their regeneration."

"That's what I wanted to hear," Michael said. "Where's that coming in from?"

"The theatres closest to us, sir. Spain and Italy."

"It's taking effect quickly," Clive said. "That's good, but what exactly is happening to the vampires?"

"Reports are still coming in," the operator said, "but it looks like they're just exploding. If the vines try to heal them, it does even more damage instead."

She continued reading information as it scrolled quickly down her screen.

"Sir, I would recommend issuing a warning. Those pods that form to regrow a full body are basically bombs. Our people are seeing casualties."

"Comms," Michael said. "Get that report from the lieutenant and signal all units with the details."

"Yes, sir."

Michael glanced at Farrah and Clive.

"Put the McKean feed up on the main screen please."

A moment later, a massive bird appeared on the screen, made of darkness and filled with motes of starlight. Its entire body was limned with ghostly fire.

"We were a little distracted with the falling over and vomiting," Michael told Farrah and Clive. "Can either of you tell me what is going on down there?"

The ghost fire phoenix flared with blinding light and then was gone. In its place was Jason's prime avatar, restored to its normal state. His cloak was absent and his body was coated in a thick layer of blood that congealed and dried into his usual combat robes. His eyes, still blazing with ghostly flames, set on the cowering Jack Gerling.

The power of Jason's true aura had been withdrawn, once more contained to his astral kingdom. Sanity returned to Gerling's eyes, but fear that would never leave was carved into them. Jason slowly walked toward him and he scrambled to get away. Shadow arms reached out from the rubble to pin him down and soon he found himself kneeling before Jason.

Jason looked down at Gerling who, of all McKean's minions, was the one most closely bound to the blood root vine. Jason could sense the volatile power of raw magic coursing through him, threatening to tear him apart. Gerling looked up at Jason, no defiance left.

"I told you, Jack," Jason said softly.

He reached out, gently touching a fingertip to Gerling's forehead. Gerling explosively liquified, erupting away from Jason to paint a red cone on the rubble. The white fire in Jason's eyes dimmed and they returned to their normal blue and orange.

Jason looked up. The sun had been blocked out by the cloud ship floating over the hole, and the music was echoing loudly down the shaft.

"It's not a bad trick, Simon. You had cosmic power on tap, so using it to create a proto-astral space as a safe room was a clever idea. But proto-spaces are unstable at the best of times, and yours just got a dose of unmitigated chaos. You need to come out, or you'll die when it collapses on you."

McKean's response was broadcast through the room, but it was breaking up like a bad radio signal.

"How did you do this?"

"I did tell you the power was mine. I just wasn't using it because I've got that kind of power shooting out of me like last night's curry. That doesn't mean you get to wave it around like you're a toddler with a chainsaw. Now your toys are broken, but people are still out there dying because you couldn't tolerate that I exist. Now I find that my tolerance for *your* existence is running short. That being said, and putting aside everything you've done, you're a brilliant man. The Earth is going to need people like you, and sooner than I'd like. For that reason, and despite my immense distaste for the prospect of you living past the next few minutes, if you get out here and come along quietly, we can discuss getting you the Nazi scientist deal. But if I have to go in there and get you, I'm going to have a satisfying day, and you're going to have your last one."

"I'm not surprised that you noticed my astral space. I know that you have a power that will let you walk right in, regardless of what traps and seals I've placed on the aperture, so I'm coming out."

A few moments later, a portal appeared in the air. It was a round, shimmering plane of energy, twitchy and unstable. Simon McKean walked out, in jeans and a button-down shirt with a satchel slung across his shoulder. He looked Jason square in the eye.

"Here we are, face to face," Jason said. "Is it everything you hoped for?"

"Can you at least shut off that idiot music?"

"You wanted power, McKean. Instead of getting a bunch of people killed, you could have just cranked out some Acca Dacca. There's not much on Earth more powerful than that."

“You really are an idiot, aren’t you? Which works out for me, as it happens. You see, there is something about proto-spaces that you seem to have forgotten, Asano. Which is a little embarrassing for you, given how many you dealt with, back in the day.”

“Oh? And what’s that?”

“That they accumulate monsters. And when that proto-space collapses, those monsters become a monster wave.”

A magical sphere sprang into place around McKean as the portal behind him shuddered before imploding into nothingness.

“Normally,” McKean said, “it would take time for the space to collapse and the monsters to manifest. I managed to accelerate the process, using that power you’re so insistent is yours. Goodbye, Asano. Enjoy the monsters.”

Jason’s aura flooded down the shaft from the cloud ship hovering over it. McKean winced as it struck him.

“Why didn’t...” he muttered, and pulled a stone slate the size of a computer tablet from his satchel. He traced the magical diagram engraved on it and he flickered in and out of existence for a moment, before solidifying again.

“See that cloud ship up there? That’s one of my domains, and I can extend its influence a little, enough to reach down here. And in my domain, you don’t teleport unless I allow it.”

Jason moved his head to gesture behind McKean. Simon turned to see an expanding vortex of rainbow light where the portal had been. He scrambled away, stumbling on the rubble.

“Nazi scientist deal, Simon. Last chance.”

“Fuck you, Asano.”

Jason looked up. The cloud ship was an inverted pyramid, with a giant eye on each side. All four eyes were closed, until Jason tilted his head and one of them opened. Blue and orange light filled the shaft like floodwater. McKean fell to the ground and rolled into a sitting position. He watched as the light started disintegrating the rubble, dissolving magically reinforced steel and concrete like aspirin in a glass of water. He felt the shield around him tremble. He looked at Asano, now standing over him, unaffected by the beam.

Behind Asano, light from the still-expanding rainbow vortex clashed with the light from the cloud ship. Monsters were spilling out of the vortex, only to be swiftly annihilated by the energy filling the shaft.

"That's quite a shield, Simon. Did you make that? You truly are a waste of potential. Unfortunately for you, this weapon is designed to breach shields the size of a city. When yours breaks, it'll be all over. Do you have any last words?"

"Asano, you can kill me, but you've still lost."

"Is that so?"

"Your grip on this planet relies on one thing: people believing that you're invincible. I may have lost this fight, but I showed the world that a fight is possible, and that's all they needed. Humanity won't lie down for a tyrant. Not if there's even a chance of rising up. I showed them that a chance does exist, and they will seize it. It might take generations, but humanity will rebel against you Asano, until they finally find a way to destroy you."

Jason sighed.

"It would be nice if we had that kind of time. Goodbye, Simon."

The beam surged and the shield broke. Simon's body was disintegrated before he could feel the pain.

The music stopped.