

Chapter 985

Better Natures

The moment they entered Asano's astral space, the people guarding Marie, Elizabeth and Remy relaxed. Apparently no longer wary of any threats, all but one left entirely, leaving only the man named Trenchant.

Marie had never been in a true astral space before. Her early days in the Network had been in the final years of magic being a secret. She'd seen the astral proto-spaces, with their inconsistent magic levels and wild terrain. She had seen a couple with some signs of civilisation, but no more than ruins that looked thousands of years old.

The astral space, by comparison was a revelation. There were no wild energies teasing at her supernatural senses like an insect she was unable to swat. There was no sense that the whole place was on the verge of collapse, instead feeling as solid as the world outside.

That did not mean that there was no sense of unreality to the place. The portal had dropped them in a train station, with décor more at home in an old noir film than the modern Earth. Even the people milling around looked like extras in a sixties movie, complete with period outfits. She also didn't see a single person with their phone out, despite the train station being a bustle of activity. Even the light was strange, washing out the colours. It didn't genuinely render the world in monochrome, yet it felt like living in black and white.

Marie looked at their now-solitary guard. His eyes retained their bright shade of blue, standing out in a world of greys. He led them through the train station, barely even looking to see if they followed.

"We're in a place of Asano's power now," Elizabeth murmured, even though they both knew their gold-rank escort could hear. "There's no escape, no defiance. Only that which he allows."

"What is this place?" Remy wondered.

"I'm going to guess that it's Asano's vampire city," Elizabeth told him. "We've heard about it, of course. The place he keeps all the tame vampires."

"Meaning the ones that aren't monsters," Remy said.

"We monsters were able to keep your daughter alive when your own people could not."

"And then held her hostage."

"She is living very well," Elizabeth said.

“Is she? How long after word gets out that you’ve been taken will your people stop doing as their told and kill her?”

“If you’re so worried, why did you not tell our captors about her? Trade information on our activities for her wellbeing?”

“Don’t poke at him, Elizabeth,” Marie said. “He knows, just as well as you, how much she needs your blood magic.”

“You’re right,” Elizabeth said. “Jabbing at a man’s weakness unnecessarily is unbecoming. My apologies, Remy. And know that I have made accommodations for this eventuality.”

“Really?” Remy asked.

“Coming under Asano’s sway was an inevitability. I had hoped to have more cards in hand, but here we are.”

Outside the train station, every direction Marie looked seemed like the perfect place to murder Batman’s parents. A line of old-school Americana diners and dive bars were punctuated by shadowy alleyways. A long town car pulled up, driven by what had to be Asano’s famous shadow servant. Their escort put Remy in the front and the two women in the back. He didn’t join them, closing the door and watching as the car pulled away.

“Hello again Shade,” Elizabeth said.

“I am under instruction to engage you in pleasantries,” Shade said. “As much as Mr Asano likes banter, that does not apply to someone responsible for the death of millions.”

“You don’t have to be a vampire to sweep across Europe killing people in the millions,” Elizabeth said. “Humans were accomplishing that while I was deep in millennia-long slumber.”

“When we meet Asano,” Remy said, “I hope you come up with something better than ‘it’s okay to be vampire Hitler because there was already human Hitler.’ I don’t think that’s going to help us.”

The car took them out of the city, onto country roads that wound through rolling hills. Moonlight lit their way until they reached a wrought iron gate set into a wall topped with guardian gargoyles. Gaslamps lit their way as the car drove up the long drive of the estate grounds to a gothic mansion. On pulling up outside, Shade got out of the car and two additional bodies stepped out of the original. The other three got out and looked around.

“If this is where Asano keeps his vampires,” Remy said, “isn’t this a little on the nose?”

The three Shades led them inside, taking them all in different directions. Marie was led to a bedroom suite that seemed like a bed and breakfast accommodation designed for goths. Shade told her to remain within the suite and left her there. She briefly explored the bathroom and bedroom before returning to the central lounge area to find Jason Asano sitting in a plush armchair.

Asano looked relaxed, leaning back, legs crossed in a throne-like armchair. She stood in the doorway as they swapped assessing looks. His initial display of relaxation seemed superficial the more she looked at him. There was a weariness he wasn't putting much effort into hiding.

"You don't want to be doing this," she said.

"No," he agreed. "But it needs to be done, and this part is best done by me. Take a seat, Ms Finnegan."

She moved to another chair and sat down. The armchair was oversized and she sank into the deep padding.

"I'm surprised it's me first," she said.

"It's not. I'm speaking with all of you at once."

"You can be in more than one place," Marie realised. "Like your shadow."

"Here, I can do most things."

"How does that work?"

"It's complicated. What you might think of as my real body is having lunch at a bistro in the city. I'll have some food brought in when we're done."

"I suppose you want my gripping back story. Why I threw my lot in with a vampire queen whose queendom was turning against her."

"No. I don't care. I have no interest in punishing you. My sole concern is to prevent as much damage as I can. The blood oaks. The nuclear weapons. The reality core farming. They all need to be stopped, and if that means giving you a cushy life some place where you can't hurt anyone else, then that's what I'll do."

"Is that what this is? A show of what life could be? Perpetual night and drapery ranging from black to medium-grey? I suppose that's for Elizabeth's benefit, but you'll find that red is her colour."

Jason leaned forward, narrowing his eyes, as if peering at something she couldn't see. Then she realised he was reading her aura. They were both gold rankers, but she was new to the rank and poorly trained. She couldn't sense his at all. He apparently found what had piqued his curiosity and leaned back in his chair again.

"You would want whatever exile I give you to be together then," he said. "Will she want that as well?"

"She doesn't want your exile. She wants the other world, free and clear."

"There are many worlds, Ms Finnegan. She doesn't get to pick."

"We still have things to trade. Information."

"Not enough that I will let her loose on Pallimustus."

"That's what the other world is called?"

"Yes, and if I sent you there, you would be neither free nor clear. Elizabeth is powerful by the standards of Earth vampires, but not the ones over there. They're very good at hunting vampires in that world. The ones who survive are cunning, powerful, and understand the world and how to move through it unseen. You would be alien, not even knowing the language. They would find her fast and put you down for being with her."

"Then why not give us what we want? If we're just going to die fast, then what does it cost you?"

"The damage you would do on the way. The people you would hurt before they found you."

"What makes you think we'd hurt anyone?"

"How do you live with the things she's done? What you've done, I understand. You don't know the damage farming reality cores does. The blood isn't on your hands. But you know what she's done. You've worked with the vampires keeping people in farms. Have you seen their blood harvesting facilities, Ms Finnegan?"

She turned her head, not meeting his gaze.

"No," she said softly.

"I have worlds of my own. You won't be free, but you'll feel like it. It's the best I can offer."

"And if we say no?"

"Then the humans get you and Elizabeth dies. There will be a price to that, but we're ready to move on the nuclear devices. I don't know if we've found them all but we haven't missed many. Obviously, we don't want to take that risk, but we will if it comes to that."

"And if a device goes off in a city, killing millions?"

"Then I will mourn my failure. I've done it before. I tried to kill Elizabeth, failed, then left. She then systemised using humans as food. The blame lies with her, not me, but the fact remains that I failed to stop her. Maybe some other vampire would take her place, I don't know. There's little purpose dwelling on it, although I do anyway, of course. But I've learned to live with my mistakes, even though I can no longer count the people I've failed."

He let out a sigh.

"My point is that you have nothing to threaten me with and little to offer. What's left of the reality core program is with the Network, or McKean. We know he betrayed you. I have a friend with the time essence. One of her powers is to look back on the past of an object. An object, for example, like a broken submarine."

"If that were as effective as you imply, you wouldn't need us at all."

"You're right. There is only so much we can get that way. We want what you know about McKean, the blood oaks and the reality core farming. About his contacts in the vampire community. Those are the things you have to offer. I can send you off like old investment bankers, retiring to the country, or I can kill Elizabeth this afternoon and hand you over to the humans."

"You say 'humans' like you don't belong."

"I haven't been a human for twenty years."

"But you felt like one, didn't you? And now you don't."

He frowned, looking down in thought.

"No," he admitted. "I don't. I don't belong on Earth anymore."

He looked up, trapping her gaze.

"But neither do you. You betrayed this world. To the vampires. To the people who would strip it down out of greed and hunger for power, until it collapses under them."

"Have you met humans? That's how we work."

"I have, and it is. But I have hope that we can all find our better natures, human or not."

He got to his feet.

"I'm going to send in some food, and a recording of a briefing I gave about why your reality cores farming was so bad. Perhaps you'll find your better nature and make the right decision."

He walked to the door and she called out to him.

"Asano."

"Yes?"

"Don't be too hard on Remy. He was only—"

"His daughter, I know. Do you know where she is?"

"Her condition does better in high magic areas. She's somewhere in the French countryside, close enough to your territory that the magic level is high. Far enough away to not have your clan stumble over them. I don't know more than that."

Jason nodded and left.

Elizabeth's room had luxurious furnishings, but there was no masking that it was a sealed-off, underground room. Exposed brick and a complete absence of windows marked it as a basement, with the one door leading to the stairs up. The subterranean box was not required to keep her secure, she was certain; Asano was making a point. When he appeared behind her, she didn't sense his aura but caught his scent. She didn't turn to face him.

"She's impressive, your princess," she said. "She is yours, yes? I smelled you on each other earlier, although not now. This isn't the real you, is it?"

"I was so self-impressed when we last met. Playing games of cunning and betrayal with a creature who mastered them thousands of years before I was born. Of course you got the better of me. And, as always seems to happen, others paid the price for my arrogance. I can't help but feel that, deprived of your leadership, the humans could have dealt with your kind. I'm sure that the vampires would still have found themselves some difficult and dangerous leaders, but nothing the people of Earth couldn't have overcome."

Elizabeth finally turned. There were seats in the room but they stayed standing, staring at one another.

"I've been preparing for this since that transformation zone. I don't think you understand what it's like to feel someone else taking over a place on a spiritual level. Imprinting upon it like some folkloric god of the land. I knew then that, one day, you would be a monster from which there was no escape. And here we are."

"Your preparations did not go well."

"No, they did not. My plans have fallen apart, or been usurped. Now, all I have to offer is my help in cleaning up the messes I made. Well, that and the one thing I am surprised you haven't asked about."

"And what's that?"

"Gerling."

"He doesn't matter."

"You should be thanking me. You let him die so quick and clean. I was the one who made him suffer all these years."

Jason stared at her for a moment, then walked over to a chair and dropped himself into it.

"Perhaps that's the difference between you and I," he said. "For me, the desire to make others suffer represented my lowest point. All I want from Gerling is to see his soul released."

“Are you honestly going to sit there and tell me you have no desire for vengeance?”

“Yes.”

“How disappointing. Another wasted effort.”

She also moved to a seat and gracefully placed herself down.

“I’m not going to play games with you, Elizabeth. I know things haven’t gone your way, of late, but I tried games with you once and I lost. The difference between then and now is that games were all I had, because everyone was more powerful than me. Now, I have the power, so I’m going to use it. I am going to let you talk with Ms Finnegan. She is yours, yes?”

Elizabeth gave him a flat smile.

“After you talk, you make a decision. Give me everything you have, and you live. I send you off somewhere that isn’t where you want, but I can promise you that where you want won’t do you any good. It’s far better than you deserve, but so long as I can stop you from hurting anyone ever again, I can live with that. Or, you can go the other way and I kill you today. If I feel you’re being anything less than fully cooperative, that’s how it will go. Even if it turns out I’m wrong.”

“I’m sure we can come to...”

She trailed off as he was suddenly gone, if he’d never been there in the first place.

Chapter 986

The Deaths We Failed to Prevent

The bistro, like the rest of the city, felt like something out of a black-and-white movie. The food was the exception, the vibrant colours making the look of it pop as much as the flavour. Zara had a trio of pie slices in front of her, peach, apple and cherry. Jason had pancakes buried somewhere under the berry sauce, whipped cream and mound of fruit.

Sitting in a booth, the pair ignored the glances of their fellow patrons, mostly vampires. Each booth and table had a privacy screen, cutting off the whispers and leaving them unworried about eavesdropping.

“What do you think?” Zara asked, then spooned a bite of peach pie into her mouth.

“My instincts tell me that it’s going to be a new vampire war. Something worse that came before, because it won’t be restricted to Europe, or to battlefields. I think Elizabeth has been seeding the world with hidden living weapons. The blood oaks, and whatever was put into that poor man in the plane.”

“But she’s in your hands, now, right?”

“That may not be entirely a good thing. Elizabeth was looking for leverage. For triggers not to pull, in exchange for what she wanted. The nukes she still has control over, so we can clean them up. All these biological weapons, though. She’s been seeding them through population centres across the planet. And now, they’re in the hands of McKean and the other vampire lords. People who aren’t looking for leverage but weapons.”

He shook his head.

“I should have realised,” he continued. “I’ve been thinking in Pallimustus terms, where personal power is everything. I’ve been acting like that on Earth, and I keep getting blindsided. Here, they’re better at working with disproportional power levels. Insurgency, infiltration, guerilla tactics. Civilian targets.”

Zara made encouraging noises from around a mouthful of pie, gesturing for him to continue.

“Elizabeth created weapons and strategies so horrific that she knew we’d make massive concession to prevent them from ever being used,” he said. “Now, they’re in the hands of people who fully intent to use them, where she would have happily sold out her own kind and kept her box of horrors shut, if it meant her own advancement.”

“She’s not honourable.”

“Honour can kiss my beans. It gets people killed; stirs them to war. If it stops people from dying, I’ll take a shameless opportunist every time. Or be one, if I have to. Elizabeth

wanted out, but the vampires want a kingdom, one where humans are farmed like cattle. Those blood farms aren't just for bleeding people, Zara; they're for breeding them, too. Those places are as bad or worse than anything I've seen as an adventurer. Let alone the victims, the clan teams clearing them out need counselling after seeing those places. The people actually in them? I don't know how a person comes back from that."

Zara looked at him and put down her knife and fork.

"What you seem to be saying is that dealing with the vampires is going to be a lot harder than you thought before you came back."

"Basically, yeah. I figured that we had enough gold rankers to sweep across Europe like a tsunami, but the reality is so much more complicated."

"Jason, remember when you first became an adventurer, and you got the speech about how easy it was all going to be?"

He gave her a flat look. She grinned as she picked up her utensils and resumed eating, shoving a forkful of pie into her mouth.

"I get what you're saying," he said. "It's hard. That's the job, and why they need people like us to do it."

"People like us?" she mumbled with her mouth full, gleeful in her unprincessly behaviour.

"Lunatics," Jason explained, and she nodded her agreement.

"I wanted to bring my friends to see my hometown," he said. "Clear out the vampires easily; show the Earth that I'm not to be trifled with. Magnanimously listen to everyone's apologies for talking about my chin so much."

"I like your chin."

"Thank you."

"Especially here on Earth, where you have those bottles where you need a tool to take off the cap."

He threw a blueberry that bounced off her forehead, her face taking on a scandalised expression. Then the smile dropped off his face and he turned to face the door. A few moments later, Craig Vermillion walked through it. Craig looked around, spotted Jason and moved to join them. Jason scooted along in the booth and slid his plate across, making room for the vampire to sit.

"Is it true?" Craig asked.

"Good to see you too, Craig. I've been fine, thank you. This is Zara, who is an alien princess."

"Is it true?" Craig asked again, his gaze bolted to Jason's face.

"Yes," Jason said. "We caught her, and she's here. Or, more precisely, Zara caught her and she's in a secure location within the astral space."

"You have to give her to us."

"I really don't."

"Jason, she—"

"I know what she's done, Craig."

"I don't think you do, Jason. The vampire community might have been a secret one, but it's older than any civilisation ever to appear on this planet. Elizabeth destroyed that."

"No, Craig, *I* destroyed that. I'm the one who altered Earth's magic levels."

"We could have adapted. You gave us a place where we can still be people. But she declared war on the humans, putting an end to any chance we have of existing on this planet. All we have left is this city, and your promise of some alien world."

Craig stopped himself, forcing a slow breath in and out.

"I'm sorry, Jason. I don't want to sound ungrateful. The sanctuary you've given us has saved at least some of us from the descent into monstrosity. But we've lost nineteen out of every twenty vampires, whether dead fighting the humans or becoming blood hungry predators, too far gone to ever be people again."

"I'm not going to claim to understand what your people have gone through, Craig. I only ever had a superficial understanding of Earth's vampires."

A waitress came over, waiting outside their privacy bubble before being gestured in. Craig only took a coffee, tweaked to satisfy vampiric thirst. She put down a mug and poured it from the jug in her hand before wandering off. Craig looked down at the cup, not lifting it from the table.

"Jason, my people deserve justice."

"And you think that's what killing Elizabeth will get you?"

"My people won't like you protecting her, Jason."

"You think I don't know that? I can tell you, right now, every word uttered by every vampire in this city in the last two decades. Obviously, I would like the goodwill of the people who live here, but I don't require it. The ugly truth, Craig, is that your vampires need me, but I don't need them. At all. I am the ground they walk on and the perpetual night. Mine is the power woven into the crops that grow under moonlight to feed you. What this means is that I don't answer to your people."

"We answer to you," Craig said bitterly.

"And what have I asked of you?" Jason shot back. "What have I done but give your people sanctuary? Do you remember when we met, Craig? I was coming off a war against

endless monsters, cultists and the entity who creates universes. A war I died to help win. I was angry. A blunt instrument, making bloody choices that cost lives.”

“I remember.”

“You’ve been through a war of your own, now. One that petered out instead of reaching a finale, leaving you and your people in limbo. Refugees, dependant on the largess of a man not of your kind, with a reputation that would be generous to call inconsistent. Your enemies are still out there, and now one of them — perhaps the worst of all — is within reach. Of course you want vengeance.”

“Justice.”

“Justice, Craig, is doing the best for those who remain, not drawing blood for those who are gone. Dead, she gives us nothing. Alive she has information that can save lives. Your people’s desire to see her in the ground is hard earned, but has nothing to offer but more death.”

“We cannot tolerate her roaming free.”

“She’s not free, Craig, and she never will be. Elizabeth is spent as an active force. The only threat she poses is in withholding information that could otherwise have safeguarded victims or won battles. You have my word that, so long as she lives, she will never leave the grip of my power. Never taste freedom, ever again. But, ultimately, my promises are irrelevant. You say that you cannot tolerate this, but you can, and you will, because you don’t get another choice.”

“You do. You can give her to us.”

“Yes, but I won’t. I decide what to do with her, and I will not be swayed.”

“Jason, if you don’t hand her over, some of my people might do something stupid.”

“I’ll let you know if any of them are planning something. Best if you put a stop to it without me needing to step in.”

“Are you saying that you’re spying on us?”

“Not actively, but you’ve been told before that this place exists as an aspect of my power. I know what everyone is doing in every domain and on every planet that belongs to me. Every one of your vampires, and members of my clan. A city of people called brighthearts in another universe. You can consider it an invasion of privacy if you like, Craig, but you might as well arrest the wind for trespassing. It’s just the nature of things.”

“I’m not going to lie, Jason: I don’t like any of what I’m hearing.”

“I wouldn’t either, in your position.”

Craig drained the coffee cup in one go, then got to his feet.

"Vampires don't age, Jason. We remember old wounds. But we remember kindnesses, too, and I won't forget that you took my people in when the world turned against us. We know what you've done, and continue to do for us. I'll keep a lid on my vampires, but please keep us in mind. I want my people to live, not just survive."

"Perhaps to do that," Zara suggested, "you need to start looking forward instead of back. I know that's not easy, with what you've been through, but it may be the only way for your people to move past what you've lost."

"Your right," Craig said coldly. "It's not easy."

Jason watched Craig leave the bistro, then tossed his fork to the table in frustration. Zara reached out and placed her hand over his.

"It went about as well as you could expect," she told him.

"It's not that. Craig was a friend, once. Now he looks at me and sees... I don't know. But those weren't a friend's eyes."

"I know that look," Zara said. "It's how people look at a lord."

"I'm not a lord."

"No, you're a king. And a king can't be a friend when it comes time to rule."

"It feels like a loss. I want friends, not subjects."

"The price of being a king."

"I want to argue, but that would defeat the purpose of surrounding myself with people who know what they're talking about. Princess."

"I feel bad for him. He looked tired."

"I know. I'm weary of everything that's been going on, but he's been through far worse. Lost most of his people and been forced to hole up in a city of my creation."

"The brighthearts all over again."

"Exactly. Is that what my life is, now? Scraping up what's left of wiped out communities?"

"You'll get your chance to rest. Particularly if you leave it all to the humans. It's their planet, after all. I'm not saying don't help them out, but don't take over, either. Give them a chance to get it right, but let them know that you're there to call on if needed."

"If I call in the taskforce now, to interrogate Elizabeth, will I look flaky? I made such a big deal of it being my thing at the big meeting."

"If you did this, would it be in your realm, with your avatar standing there, creepily staring at them the whole time?"

"Not creepily."

"Then it will fall under your authority. You're just being smart and magnanimous enough to include them. Have Anna sell it; she can probably get some concessions out of them for the right to participate. But has Elizabeth actually accepted your terms?"

"Of her cooperating and me murdering her if I even think she's holding out on me? She says yes, but even I can't read that woman. I'm going to bring in task force people to interrogate her, under my supervision. I have the power, but I could use someone detail oriented, who knows how to question a subject. I tend to drift off topic. Miss things. We'll see what she gives us and go from there."

"Well, what else is on the agenda?"

"I want to see what we've found out about the thing that was in that poor man's body. I have some of our people working on it, along with some clan specialists. They haven't had enough time with it to have any results yet, though. In the meantime, there's someone I want to check in on."

In an Asano village house, dug into a cliffside, Holly Macrossan stared blankly out at the ocean. Her armchair was set in front of the glass wall, with most of the room to her back.

"My family are in Sydney," she said, her voice hollow. "I was able to go and break the news in person. To tell my brother that the son he entrusted to my care was dead. I had to get out, though. So many questions I couldn't answer. Accusations I couldn't face. They didn't say it, but they didn't have to. I could see it in their eyes."

"I'm sorry," Jason said. "I don't have answers for you yet. When I do, you'll get them."
He was standing in the middle of the room, out of her line of vision.

"I'm sure it will all get sealed away," she said. "Important people and their important secrets."

"I don't answer to them. I'll tell you as much as you want to know, up to the limit of my own understanding."

"The why doesn't matter. It wasn't really to do with him at all, was it? It was about me."

Jason didn't answer.

"Is it true that it only came out of him because you realised it was there?" she asked.

"Yes."

"So, if you hadn't visited me on that plane..."

"He would still be alive, yes."

"You didn't know it was in him, though, did you. Not before you came to us."

"I didn't know such a thing existed at all."

"Even so, I find you an easy target for my ire. You don't deserve it, but since when did 'deserve' matter?"

"It only does when we make it. When we can. I have more power than most, and I still find myself falling short, as I did with your nephew. I'm sorry I failed him."

"Have you saved a lot of lives, Mr Asano?"

"Yes."

"Probably a lot of people you couldn't, though."

"Yes."

"How do you live with it?"

"I'm not sure I do. My therapist tells me that I need to accept my failures and let them go. Focus on doing better the next time."

"And that's what you do, is it? Accept the failures?"

"No," he said. "I don't. I work with people who do what I do. None of us accept the deaths we failed to prevent."

"Like your friend. The one who got me out of the plane. I don't remember her name."

"Sophie Wexler."

"Saved my life, I suppose, getting me out of there. When you leave, thank her for me."

Jason took the hint and headed for the stairs. He would go outside before portalling away. He was on the stairs when she spoke again.

"Mr Asano?"

"Yes?"

"Sophie. Is she single?"

Jason's eyebrows rose.

"She's not."

"Oh well," Holly muttered. "Wouldn't have worked out anyway, I guess."

Jason looked at Holly from the top of the stairs. He couldn't see her well, hidden by the large armchair.

"If you need anything, Mrs Macrossan, anything at all, just ask. I mean it. Anything within my power to give."

"Can you give my nephew back? I've heard you came back from the dead."

"That's beyond me, I'm sorry. We think there might be others like your nephew, and we're trying to find a way to identify and save them. Before the thing inside them activates. It won't help your nephew, but it might save others."

"You said to ask if I wanted anything."

"Yes."

"Ask who?"

"Just ask, Mrs Macrossan. I'll know."

Chapter 987

Consistent Agent of Chaos

“Jason,” Anna said. “While there is no question that you and your friends are powerful, you make the taskforce members nervous. Things have gone smoothly over the last few weeks with the hands-off approach you’ve been taking. There have been some questions as to why.”

“The objective was always to become a non-factor,” Jason said. “Or, one that can be largely ignored, at least. The endgame, for me, is the powers of Earth leaving me alone, and me doing the same.”

“Which is exactly what I told them. But they also know that you’ve been active in a less direct manner. The resources you’ve been providing for the Cabal social programs, especially in Africa. And then there’s this.”

She gestured from the rooftop in Jason’s Slovakian domain. Dominating the skyline was the dimension ship Jason had taken as a prize after defeating the pirates on his return to Earth. It was floating over a research centre that looked like a sports stadium. From the picnic table they were having lunch at, they had a view of clan researchers, crawling over the hull like bugs. There were also messengers present. A few were clan members, but most were from the Unorthodoxy. Boris’ people had a much more advanced grasp of magitech than anyone in the Asano Clan.

“You’ve brought the taskforce interrogators through here to question Elizabeth. They’ve obviously noticed the giant spaceship you took. They’ve been offering to send their best magitech experts to help you examine it.”

“I bet they have.”

“Do you intend to let them?”

“Maybe. Grandmother tells me that there were impediments put in place when the clan was on their recruiting drive, trying to find researchers to work on magitech. She did manage to snake Audrey Blaine from the Network, though. That was rather a coup.”

“She’s the energy vampire, right? One of the leaders of the Engineers of Ascension leadership?”

“Yeah. She ran a joint magitech research program between the Engineers, the Cabal and the Network, years ago. That’s how she ended up the way she is. There was an experimental research project on resurrection that she kept quietly operating after the joint program was shelved. When the EoA murdered her for resisting their plans to sabotage the grid, it brought her back, just not perfectly.”

“And she has been spearheading the magitech research in the clan?”

“It was a good fit,” Jason said. “The man who killed her, Mr North, left me a vault full of all the research he’d done in his centuries on Earth. Including all the projects previously overseen by Audrey. That’s been the basis for almost all the clan’s magitech research since I left Earth.”

“If he’d been working for centuries, I can’t imagine the clan has made much more progress.”

“You’d be surprised. Mr North didn’t come into this with a grounding in magical theory. He was a magic spider. A familiar of the man you know as the network founder.”

“That’s something I’d like to hear more about. A lot of people would. Do you mind if I add it to the list of supplemental briefings for you to do?”

“Go ahead. The point is, Mr North didn’t have the foundation in magic theory his ambitions required. He was just feeling his way along exploiting whatever magical detritus had drifted onto Earth that he could dig up. Like a dead clockwork king.”

“You’re saying that the Engineers of Ascension were a magic faction created by someone with no understanding of magic?”

“Not enough of one.”

“But he was from the other world. How did he not know magic?”

“The same way not all Asian people know martial arts. Mr North was developing magitech with almost no knowledge of magical theory, drastically low ambient magic, and essentially zero technology. Humans developed very little of use to him until the back half of the twentieth century. Even then, he was too paranoid to trust anyone, so he had trouble recruiting capable scientists.”

“Like Audrey Blaine.”

“Yes, although her value is in project management more than pure research. Her strength was in being a buffer between North’s ambitions and his paranoia. It was people like her who allowed the EoA to function at all. Mr North’s biggest impediment was that he got in the way of his own objectives, crippling his progress.”

“Which the clan has not, after inheriting his research.”

“Precisely. The clan has a better grasp of magic and technology the North did, and a willingness to recruit and involve those with the expertise to make it work. Farrah and I left behind a comprehensive library of foundational magic texts. We sent comprehensive training materials back with Rufus, including what amounts to an online university course in magical theory. Clive and Farrah designed it for Emi, and Emi has been disseminating it through the clan. On the tech side, Boris helped my grandmother recruit people. He even

sent some of his own magitech experts to nudge us along, but in limited and careful doses. There are rules about how much you can nudge the progress of less developed civilisations.”

“Is that why Boris never helped Mr North? They did know each other, right?”

“They did. Boris said that North’s paranoia prevented them from working together. Boris supplied Mr North with the spirit coins to survive on Earth as a gold ranker, but North never fully trusted him. If he had, North’s core research might not have been such a mess.”

“Core research?”

“The clan has been studying magitech across several fields. Medicine is somewhere they’ve had a lot of success. Mechanical engineering has been showing progress as well. Young Gary is a prodigy in that area, as you know, and Boris has been showing him some things. The project North had worked in the most, though, was what he named his organisation after.”

“The Engineers of Ascension,” Anna said. “Are you talking about transhumanism?”

“I am. He was looking for a way to infuse people with magic. To give them the power to rank up without essences. It’s something I’ve seen used to horrible effect, enslaving people and transforming them into hideous abominations. He was looking for a version of that where autonomy was maintained. That didn’t require turning people into monsters.”

“The superhumans the EoA created.”

“Yeah.”

“Many of them are still around, you know. And life isn’t good for many of them. Physiological and psychological problems. A lot of them just up and died one day, without anyone knowing why.”

“They were failed experiments. But even Clive and Carlos praised the innovation, after I showed them the research, even as they said that it was a horrible practice that was years away from being viable to even begin testing on humans. They were astounded that he got as far as he did, given his start. Carlos has already started incorporating the research into his own, along with medicine-based magitech.”

“Please tell me the clan hasn’t been conducting human experiments for a decade and a half.”

“The clan hasn’t been conducting human experiments for a decade and a half. Even making leaps and bounds beyond North’s original work, the research hasn’t progressed to any kind of test on living things. It’s all been about taking North’s innovations and excising the shortcuts and crutches his inexperience forced him into. Like relying on damaged

clockwork cores to stop his superhumans from going insane. Nothing has been done to people yet. Boris has been helping, given that the messengers have access to science and magitech from other worlds. Ones more advanced than Earth, but there are limits, as I said. The messengers have lived here long enough that this is their home, but if they bring too much outside influence, they become outsiders in the eyes of the Laws of Intrusion.”

“So, they can help Earth develop magitech, but not just hand over the knowledge. That would be like aliens giving machine guns to a bronze-age tribe.”

“Yes.”

“Does bringing your people from the other world trip up on that rule?”

“No. Cosmically, Earth and Pallimustus are almost considered the same world. Two sides of a coin, one with the magic and one with the technology. They can get away with helping each other. The Asano Clan is now positioned to embody that collaboration. Now that we have healers and experts like Carlos, Mr North’s most ambitious project has a real chance at reaching fruition.”

“His human experimentation project.”

“Yes. Obviously, it needs to be done as ethically as possible. Checks and triple checks. Multiple layers of oversight, focused on care and ethics. But if we can actually manage it, imagine the possibilities. A world where anyone can have magic. There will still be haves and have-nots, as essence users will absolutely be more powerful. But everyone could have the change to tap into their magical potential.”

“Jason, you’re talking about transforming the human race.”

“Yes, so make sure to ride me on it. Don’t let me make decisions without being challenged.”

“And if I want to challenge the fact that you should be doing this at all?”

“Then do. Please. I want to hear every argument. But do your research first. I’ll make sure you have access to everything the clan has been doing.”

“Jason, do you remember how this conversation started? About you leaving things alone? Ushering in an age of transhumanity is the opposite of leaving things alone.”

“I was more talking about living quietly and unbothered *until* we reveal all this to the world. Like it or not, the changes to Earth have just begun. One day, the connection between worlds will be much closer, and Earth needs to be ready. Pallimustus needs to see it as a foreign power, not a fresh land to colonise. I intend to use the clan as an incubator to advance Earth as swiftly as I can get away with.”

“Even if that means turning the human race into a magic species.”

"It's less about transforming humanity and more about providing a second option. There are only so many essences to go around. Even in the other world, only a fraction of the populace has magic."

"You could have mentioned these grand ambitions before now."

"I have, in bits and pieces. But just getting you onboard was hard enough. If I led with all this, you'd have probably signed up to fight against me."

"That feels manipulative."

"I never hid my intentions from you, Anna. Tell me what I've just told you that doesn't fit into the agenda I laid out from the start. This is just the full context."

Anna rubbed her temples and then stood up.

"You know I have to go and shift all the modelling for how the clan's diplomatic future is going to play out, right? The plans I've been making for expanding the clan into a recognised sovereign state, not just a de facto one?"

"Sorry."

"It's not like I haven't done it before. You are nothing, Jason Asano, if not a consistent agent of chaos. If anyone, I'm angry with your grandmother more than you. I've been working with her on the clan's future."

"I don't think she considers it. Her concerns are with diplomacy and the lives of the clan members. I suspect that she puts all of this in a box in her mind, labelled 'mad science shenanigans.' She'd probably defund it if I wasn't providing all the funds."

The first vampire war had ended without conclusion. The humans and vampires alike had exhausted themselves, and were wary of escalation after the vampires got their hands on nuclear weapons. By the point the Asano clan retreated into their astral spaces, the military bases at the edge of Asano Clan territory had been unused for some time. The restoration of those bases marked a return to active operations, striking at locations provided by Elizabeth.

In most cases, all they found were recently abandoned facilities, but not always. Nigel Thornton's team had been working with a multi-national strike team when they encountered a research centre still being evacuated. Nigel was gold rank and had ended up clashing with the gold ranker on the other side, Jack Gerling. The blood clone was now actively opposing them, free of Elizabeth's influence.

Gerling's intervention had limited the success of the raid. The vampires and researchers who failed to evacuate before human and Asano clan forces arrived were killed rather than captured, Gerling himself making sure the humans had no prisoners to

take. The silver lining had been that Gerling was focused on killing his own people rather than targeting Nigel's silver-rank team.

After the raid, Nigel was on his back on a gurney, back in the base infirmary. In a private room, he was being seen to by multiple healers. They were silver rankers, quickly exhausting themselves at the effort of healing a gold ranker. They all turned to look as the door opened and Jason walked in, Neil right behind him.

"You can go," Jason told the healers, who scurried off like bugs after the light was switched on. Neil was already a figure of admiration and sometimes intimidation to the clan's healers. More than that, Jason was Jason. To the clan, even more than the world at large, he was the embodiment of mystery and power.

"How is he?" Jason asked Neil, who was using his perception power to assess Nigel's condition.

"I'm fine," Nigel insisted and tried to sit up. He gave Neil a suspicious look when the healer easily pushed him back down.

"You have the inherent recuperative ability of a gold ranker and you still need active healing," Neil said. "That is not fine."

Neil turned to Jason.

"Some kind of wounding effect affliction," he explained. "Impedes healing and can't be purged unless you clear off a separate bleeding affliction first. As bleeding is also a wound effect that soaks up healing, it's a nasty combination. If I didn't know better, I'd say you did this, Jason."

"Are you sure you know better? It could have been me."

"It's two afflictions, not twenty. I know your nonsense when I see it. Basically, I need to dump huge amounts of magic to heal though it, which was why it was so hard for the silver rankers. He'll be fine."

"What about my team?" Nigel asked.

"Already taken care of," Neil assured him. "You did a good job keeping them safe. Taking gold-rank afflictions as a silver is rough, especially ones like these."

"Good," Nigel said. He visibly relaxed and lay back on the gurney.

"They say you ran into Gerling," Jason said.

"Yeah. And I'd say he seemed alive, but I could feel death in his aura. But not regular death. This was wrong. Nasty. Tainted."

"Undeath," Neil said.

"Yeah." Jason said. "Nigel, tell me everything."

Chapter 988

If You Can't Keep Up

Elizabeth's current accommodation was a cell with a glass wall. There was a wall cot and a bookshelf. A large table was bifurcated by the glass, half in the room and half in the wide hall outside. The hall looked like it belonged to an old hospital, plain and empty. The once-pristine plaster was discoloured and cracking. The tiles on the floor tapped loudly at every footstep.

Elizabeth sat at the table on one side of the glass, while Neil, Carlos and Ian Evans-Asano were on the other. Emi's father had been a doctor when he learned about magic and now had two decades of experience on the confluence of medicine and magical biology. All of them, including Elizabeth, had tablets displaying a diagram of the human body that looked a lot like one from traditional Chinese medicine.

"Meridian mapping is imprecise when taken broadly," Ian explained. "Essence users alone develop different pathways based on the specifics of their individual power makeups. If we're going to suppress and extract the blood parasites in people, we have to start with being able to detect them without triggering the reaction that Jason encountered."

"What about Jack Gerling?" Elizabeth asked. "I am certain that McKean introduced some manner of parasite into him to steal control from me. Probably some variant of the parasites I had implanted in various people."

"Probably," Ian said. "I don't see how that helps us."

"I have samples from Gerling, left behind in various battles," Carlos said. "Perhaps, between the information we have gleaned from Elizabeth about her blood magic and those samples, you could also map out Gerling's meridian system. If we can get a framework for how his magic operates, there are options we can explore. I've developed targeted weapons before."

"Carlos," Neil said, his voice a warning. "Do we have to have the discussion about what is and is not appropriate for a priest of the Healer again?"

"I am just saying there are options," he said.

"I don't see how there are," Ian said. "Putting aside the implications of targeted bioweapons, building a meridian map is not easy. Essence users are one thing, but Gerling is a blood clone with who knows what modifications. The idea of mapping his meridian system with a few samples, some notes on ancient blood magic, and guesswork

simply isn't viable. It's like trying to run an MRI scan on someone you only know by vague description, via mail. That's just not how it works."

"Where did you even learn the blood magic to create a blood clone?" Neil asked Elizabeth. "Or to base the blood oaks and the blood parasites on? It's more sophisticated than the magic this world has access to. I'm assuming it came from my world, but long ago. It has the hallmarks of Pallimustus-style magic, but an archaic variant I've only seen in historical records."

"It came from what you call an outworlder," Elizabeth said. "Neither Asano nor the man who founded the Network was the first."

"Magic that old has flaws," Neil said. "Especially with the way you used it. Gerling's body wasn't really alive, but it wasn't undead either. It was sustained using your power, and that was how you maintained control."

"Our current thinking is that McKean found and exploited those weakness to displace your power and usurp your control," Carlos said. "Transforming Gerling from an extension of you into a self-sustaining undead. Some kind of vampire variant. We've been studying what we've recovered of the blood magic research your vampires have been conducting."

"McKean was never given access to my blood magic research," Elizabeth said. "Marie only had him working on the dimensional magic, to farm reality cores. My vampires only provided infrastructure."

"You shouldn't have put him in the same building," Farrah said, walking down the hall and into Elizabeth's field of view. "I worked with McKean, and he is the greatest field-agnostic researcher I've encountered since Clive Standish. He soaks up knowledge like a sponge. The only thing he lacks as a researcher is a sense of ethics or restraint. He has no shortage of ambition or brilliance. The moment he got anywhere near your research, I promise you he was looking over their shoulders. It probably started with a useful suggestion. Some insight that your people missed. Next thing you know, he's quietly collaborating, letting them take the credit so they keep quiet about his involvement. Next thing you know, your vampire researchers are planning to betray you, probably thinking that it was their own idea."

"Okay, that sounds like Evil Clive mixed with regular Jason," Neil said. "That's not someone I want to be up against."

"I don't understand why you're all even here," Elizabeth said. "Jack Gerling, even as a now-autonomous, corrupted vampire, is a limited threat. He's one gold ranker and, even if he's stronger than he was, you have access to many who are stronger. Certainly you, Hurin."

"The reason we're here," Farrah said, "is that McKean has made Gerling the solution to the problem you could not solve."

"Should we be telling her this?" Ian asked.

"Jason is confident she's secure," Farrah said. "And the more she knows, the more she can help."

"Assuming she wants to," Neil said. "Which is an open question."

"The more she helps, the more she can get out of Jason," Farrah said. "And she has a lot to do just to get 'not being melted down into bloody slop' out of Jason, given everything she's responsible for."

"What problem could Gerling possibly solve?" Elizabeth asked. "He's a tortured soul in a blood bag."

"Now he's more," Farrah said. "The vampire war is back in full swing. The humans are back to hitting the vampire centres, be it the blood farms, the research centres you've identified or even some of their major strongholds in the big cities. In the years since the last open conflicts, human essence users have been growing stronger, more swiftly than the vampires."

"I'm well aware," Elizabeth said.

"Yes," Farrah said. "That is why you dedicated so many resources to the creation of the blood oaks, yes? But the problem you had was controlling them. We know from the Melbourne incident."

"If they were still uncontrollable, their threat would have been real, but limited," Farrah said. "Uncontrolled, animalistic aggression is a localised, isolated threat. But what we're seeing from them is coordination. They're operating regionally and strategically. On an individual level, they're using tactics and going after objectives with focus. There have been several encounters with Gerling present where we failed to capture him because of how effectively he was commanding them."

"You think that he is the solution to the control issue," Elizabeth said. "That whatever Simon has done to him has turned Gerling into their king."

"The origin of all the blood magic responsible for this is you," Farrah said. "Even if McKean has advanced it, the foundation is what you gave the vampires."

"I'm not the only blood magician amongst my kind," Elizabeth said.

"But you are the most knowledgeable," Carlos said.

"Yes," Elizabeth admitted.

"If you want Jason to genuinely pay attention to your contribution, you need to give us something we can use," Farrah told her. "What have you got?"

"You just told me what your problem is, and you expect me to find a solution right away, off the top of my head?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes," Farrah said. "I know you don't understand what it's like in the other world, but there are adventurers and there are *adventurers*. All modesty aside, we are some of the most capable people in two worlds. If you can't keep up with that and make meaningful contributions, don't expect things to go well for you."

Farrah turned and started walking back down the hall.

"Wait," Elizabeth said. Farrah stopped and turned back around.

"Obviously," Elizabeth said, "I don't know what Simon has done to Jack. But, as you said, the foundation of it all is blood magic. My blood magic. How wide an area is Gerling communicating with the blood oaks?"

"We don't know," Farrah said. "They are displaying new behaviours across Europe, but whether he's in constant contact or just directing them and sending them on their way, we don't know."

"I suspect that he needs to maintain at least some contact, to suppress the natural instincts of the blood oaks," Elizabeth said.

"I'm not sure that 'natural' is the word to use," Ian said.

"My point," Elizabeth said, "is that the basic mechanisms of what Gerling is and what he does come from my blood magic. If Gerling is in contact with all of the blood oaks, I have a good idea of how that would work. It might be possible to use it to track the blood oaks, potentially even trace them back to Gerling. At the very least, I can probably put together a ritual that will help you detect their presence within a certain area."

"Good," Farrah said.

"Tell Asano that I'll need a place to work on this. Ritual materials, a space that can have the ambient magic balanced out. I can't do it from inside an empty cell."

"He already knows," Farrah said, nodding past Elizabeth.

The vampire queen turned to see a new door in the wall of her cell.

"He's always listening," Farrah told her. "Always watching. Behave yourself, vampire." She turned around again and walked away.

Anna had known Holly Macrossan for a long time. When Anna had been running the Network's Sydney branch, Holly had been someone Anna was keeping an eye on. Unsurprisingly, a Network branch was heavily focused on magic, monsters and, back in the day, secrecy. The people within it tended to focus on those aspects, despite administration, logistics and politics being the engine that kept the vehicle running along.

As one of the rare bureaucrats who could navigate magic society effectively, Holly rose swiftly through the ranks of Network officials, but without making splashy waves. After the Network schism, Anna had taken Holly with her to the UN, ultimately recommending Holly to be her successor upon leaving. That recommendation hadn't been accepted, but Anna's original replacement had crashed and burned, after which Holly had been installed.

Anna knew that Holly had a tolerance for the wild events that happened around magic, but there were always limits. Losing her nephew had hit her hard, and her extended hiatus from her job had ultimately led to her being replaced. After hearing about it, Anna went to visit Holly where she was still staying, in Asano Village.

"I wasn't expecting company," Holly said as she let Anna into the house. "You'll have to excuse the mess."

Holly certainly was more dishevelled than Anna was used to. Her t-shirt had a food stain and her track pants were scuffed at the bottom.

"I understand, Holly. There aren't that many of us who do what you and I do. Not well, anyway. Dealing with powers that are so vast and dangerous. You'll find that most of us have collapsed at some point, after fully confronting the forces we have to navigate."

"Did you?"

"Oh, yes. After the vampire lord invaded my branch in Sydney...I know it's hard, Holly. I really do."

Holly led Anna downstairs, into a lounge room overlooking the sea. There was a mustiness in the air, along with an assortment of empty pizza boxes, beer cans and liquor bottles.

"Wasn't expecting company," Holly said, and fell into an armchair. Anna took the one next to it.

"There's a group in Sydney," Anna said. "People who understand what we've been through. I used to attend a lot, before I got the UN job."

"The one I just lost. I assume you heard."

"I did."

"You think a group therapy circle is going to help?"

"It helped me. It's been a while so I had it checked out. It's still going, and a bit more professionally, now. Back then, it was Network insiders, sitting around in a community centre. Everything's out in the open, now, and so factionalised. They're more careful about anonymity and information control, now. Making sure that it's a space that can help, and not be another stressor."

"I don't know, Anna."

"I won't push. If you want the details, reach out anytime."

"It's not like I don't have the time. What am I going to do, now? I'm going to be poison, after getting fired. Add that to the Asano factor, and I don't know where I'm going to land."

"The Asano factor?"

"The last couple of weeks, I've had a lot of people calling with their condolences. Funnily enough, the conversation always winds its way around to one of two things. Do I have an inside line with Asano, or that I maybe shouldn't reach out any time soon. They couch it in nicer terms than that. Mostly. But they make it clear that they want nothing to do with me. You must have had it worse than I did, after you went to work for him."

"Yes. But you can use that, whichever way it goes. It becomes leverage, down the line, if you play it right."

"I don't know that I have that in me anymore, Anna."

"I think you do. Only you can know that for sure, but sometimes an outside perspective is the one you need."

"Are you here to recruit me?"

"No. That comes later, once you're living somewhere that doesn't smell like a uni student's dorm."

Holly laughed, then looked surprised by it.

"Can't remember the last time I did that."

"For now," Anna said, "I'm here to ask you to dinner."

"Did Asano tell you to do that?"

"No, Susan did. She's been worried about you, but didn't want to reach out yet. She figured you had plenty of vultures circling you already."

"Susan's here in Australia?"

"No, France. I know a lot of gold rankers with portal magic now. A lovely man named Clive has offered to ferry us. And send you anywhere you would like to go after. You should probably figure out where that is. I talked with Lenora, who runs the village. She said you can stay as long as you like, but that's not a good idea. Sooner or later, people will try and use you, myself included. I'm just not going to quite yet."

"How is Susan?"

"Good. And likely the only person you'll meet whose only agenda is your wellbeing, so you should take her up on the dinner invitation."

"In Asano territory. In vampire-overrun France."

“You’ll find that the vampires keep their distance. I wouldn’t expect them to come bursting in during the meal.”

“Fine. I’ll come to dinner. For Susan, not for you.”

“You should take a shower first. A long one, while I find you something to wear. Do you have any clean clothes somewhere?”

Chapter 989

A Man Fought Monsters

As a girl, Delia DeWitt had watched on television as a man fought monsters. People ran and screamed and died. There were heroes in brightly coloured costumes, but they were performers, there for show. They weren't there to fight monsters but to be seen fighting monsters. It was the one draped in shadow who moved with passion and ferocity. A dark avenger, giving everything he had.

Today, Delia was an essence user with the Global Defence Network. From the day she saw the man with the dark powers, all she had wanted was to be a warrior who fought the monsters. A hero who protected people. He had shown her that it was a dream that could be reached. Now a freshly minted silver-ranker, she had just been appointed the primary defender of Bangor, a small, Welsh cathedral city of twenty-one thousand. Along with a team of bronze-rankers, she was responsible for eliminating any monster threats that appeared in the region.

While still nervous at the new responsibility, Delia was excited at the chance to live up to her childhood dream. To be the hero, standing against the tide. In this moment, however, that dream was rapidly becoming a nightmare.

The manifestation had appeared on the grounds of the cathedral itself. The massive orb of rainbow light had appeared amongst the trees and torn them apart. The ground was carpeted in leaves, shattered branches and shards of wood, as if the trunks had been hit by a bomb.

The grid had done its job, the monitoring station reporting the event to Delia's team in plenty of time. By the time the monsters spawned from the manifestation, she was ready and waiting while the rest of her team were well into evacuating civilians. The readings from the monitoring station were of a silver-rank manifestation of mild strength. That meant one monster that was powerful for its rank, a small number with more moderate strength, or weaker monsters in a pack or swarm.

The monitoring station was wrong. What emerged was a pack of iron lions, each a beast of living metal, the size of a small bus. Fast, agile and highly resistant to damage, one or perhaps two should have emerged from a manifestation of the reported strength. Instead, no fewer than nine of the monstrosities stalked out of the manifestation, the rainbow light gleaming off their metallic bodies.

Delia had been ready. Not for that many who were that strong, but she had been prepared. Her power set came from the Gun, Swift, Trap and Skirmish essences, and was

built around lacing a battlefield with traps. She would lure enemies into them with hit-and-run tactics before ending things with abilities that multiplied damage on trapped enemies. It was an approach that allowed her to fight effectively against larger forces, and why she was trusted to be the sole silver ranker in a remote posting.

Delia had always pushed herself to be better. To master her powers and hone her skills into the best monster hunter she could possibly be. How best to position her magic traps, rigging a battlefield before the fight began. How to direct the flow of battle, using skirmish tactics to bring enemies into her pace. She even had experience fighting iron lions before.

Through practise and dedication, she knew exactly how good she was. What her skills, powers and experience would allow her to accomplish. And she knew, without a doubt that it would not be enough to handle nine of the metal monsters at once. As good as she was, as thoroughly as she prepared, she didn't have the traps, the skills or the power to win the fight she now faced. But she didn't have an alternative, either, other than to cut and run. And if she did that, if she left the people of the town to be slaughtered, it would be a betrayal of everything she was. Of the dream she had held for herself since she was a girl, clutching her mother's hand as they stared at the television in awe and horror.

Iron lions were a familiar monster, known for playing with their food. They would turn the town into an abattoir of torment if they got amongst the population, but it was also a weakness Delia could use. As a skirmisher, she could play too, and the one prize she could strive for was time. She had signalled her team to run and not come back, instead contacting the Network for backup.

If she could tie up the monsters long enough, her counterparts in Rhyl and Caernarfon could arrive, maybe even giving her a shot at survival. If those reinforcements weren't enough, they could buy time together. Once the Network branch in Liverpool knew what was happening, they would deploy forces that would turn the iron lions into iron scrap.

A message from her team came through in snippets, broken up by heavy interference. Her heart sank as she caught only scraps of a panicked warning amongst the intermittent hiss of static.

"Can't get...satellite phone won't...vampires..."

The last she heard was a scream before even the static went dead.

Jason was in his private residence, on top of the administration tower in Slovakia. He had a large office that he rarely used, and he was standing in the middle of it. Cloud substance rose from the floor to transform into a swarm of monitors. They displayed footage taken from the internet, of social media posts and news footage. Jason's gold-rank, half-transcendent mind was easily able to track all twelve feeds at the same time.

Monster manifestations had first appeared during Jason's last trip to Earth, and years later were reported like the weather. Only when they occurred near major population centres did they draw additional media coverage.

The world as depicted on the screens was one careening out of control. The rise of magic had set a fox in the henhouse for religions, which saw rising membership alongside a general shift towards extremism. Not only were governments falling but entire systems of governance. The most stable regions were the USA, Russia and China, who had settled their early turmoil in the wake of magic being revealed. It was in regions where the impact of a changing world came slower that seemed on the verge of falling apart.

In Australia, a double-dissolution had ousted the entire government for the second time in history. It triggered not just new elections but fresh debate over the nation's place in the Commonwealth. North Africa and the Middle East were seeing violent clashes between political reformers and establishment forces. The ongoing transition from fossil fuels to magitech had diminished external influence in the region. Old conflicts fermented like bitter wine into new wars.

With a flick of Jason's hand, all but one of the screens went blank. The volume on the remaining one, displaying a news report, turned up.

"...spotted in Kolkata for a second day. Religious authorities continue to avoid any public stance on the 'miracle breeze' attributed to the silver haired woman, who is likewise yet to make any statement on..."

With another flicking gesture, the screens all returned to cloud-stuff and dispersed.

"Despite holding the attention of the world's political powers," Shade said, "your public image remains relatively subdued."

"Good. The longer that holds, the better."

"Perhaps, but perhaps not. Too many people know too much. The world can see the ripples caused by our arrival in this world. They will trace them back to you soon enough. According to Gordon, your profile online is growing in a conspiratorial direction. I have seen other worlds where networked communication is in its infancy. Disinformation runs rampant, even without malice. Trying to keep secrets that cannot be kept feeds an ugly beast."

"I'm starting to worry about how much time Gordon is spending on the internet."

"Better than watching films. He had one on last night with a scientist, a ninja, a riverboat captain and a time-travelling cyborg called... the Mandroid."

Shade's disapproving pause was heavy enough to be a paperweight.

"...the Mandroid."

He finished the sentence with the tone normally reserved for when Jason left his dirty socks on the floor.

"You mean *Eliminators*? That had surprisingly great practical effects for the Mandroid."

"Do you think the Reaper would be willing to take me back?"

"I'm afraid your wagon is hitched to this horse for good, buddy."

"That decision may have been made in undue haste."

Jason chuckled, but it trailed off as his thoughts returned to their earlier discussion.

"Do you think I should engineer some kind of public statement?" he asked. "Get ahead of public sentiment?"

"I do not. Such decisions are best left to Mrs Tilden, but people will believe what they believe. Unless you intend to engage in a massive propaganda campaign, the ethics of which I imagine you would not care for."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure you're right."

"I believe that your current course of playing the recluse is the best one, Mr Asano. This world has been shaken many times in recent years, and you are but one part of that. Take this chance to quietly spend time with your friends and family. If the world needs you, it will come knocking."

Jason drew a long, calming breath, then let it out slowly.

"Have I just become so used to there always being something going on that I don't know how to just relax?"

"Yes, Mr Asano. Which makes what I have to say next rather unfortunate."

"And what's that?"

"I believe the world is about to come knocking."

Lenora wasn't sure how she ended up as designated liaison to Jason Asano. She wasn't from any of the magical factions, intelligence agencies or other parties participating in the multi-national taskforce. She was with the Australian Government's assigned to administer Asano Village. Her job was meant to land somewhere between building superintendent and hotel manager, dealing with visitors from across the world. Instead,

she'd somehow become the neutral party keeping the taskforce members from each other's throats.

With the Governor General dissolving the entire government, Lenora had no idea if she'd retain her position, once the dust settled. For now, she was busy being the lubricant that stopped secret agents and shape-shifted ogres from coming to blows. Part of that was evaluating any information that potentially affected multiple taskforce members.

Her office was in what used to be the mayor's residence. Also in the room was the desk of her deputy, Barry Sinise. Barry was looking at a report that just popped up on his tablet.

"Nora," he said, drawing her attention from the toilet paper requisition she was working on.

"Yeah?"

"You know that thing the Network told us not to worry about?"

"The one we're definitely worrying about?"

"Yeah."

The Network had been looking for anomalous reading in the grid that indicated potential reality core farming. After weeks of nothing, multiple instances had occurred near instantaneously. Rather than in vampire territory, as had been expected, they were showing up in areas humans still held. The United Kingdom was relatively intact, compared to most of Europe, and Western Asia fell outside the border of the vampiric domain.

"What about it?" Nora asked.

"If the grid and communications are both being messed with, I'm thinking that whatever is going on is time critical."

"Yeah."

"I'm looking at the deployments from the taskforce, and they're focusing on core areas. Large population centres, Network strongholds."

"That makes sense."

"But the more regional areas might be in more urgent need of help. They're going to be the ones with the weakest essence user presence in the first place, but they're low priority for assistance."

"Barry, I know we've been roped into being glorified secretaries for spies and wizards, but I don't think they'll appreciate us making suggestions in the middle of a crisis."

"I know. But there is someone on the taskforce no one has reached out to yet, right?"

"You want me to reach out to Jason Asano and ask him to check in on people in a bunch of little towns out in the countryside?"

"Yeah," Barry said. "I do."

Lenora watched as a dark figure stepped out of the shadows. It was an ephemeral thing, made of darkness, but spoke with Asano's voice.

"What is it you need?"

"If I told you that some things are happening, but I don't have time to explain and people need your help, what would you say?" Lenora asked.

"Where?"

She nodded at Barry who walked up to Shade and held out a tablet showing a map.

"Nine locations across the UK, Ireland, Eastern Europe and Western Asia," Lenora said. "Can you reach them fast?"

"Shade?" Jason asked.

"Slovenia is well positioned for mainland Europe and Asia locations," Shade said. "I have a body in Wrexham, Wales you could jump to, and then I could use my vehicle forms to reach the other locations in six to eleven minutes."

"Why do you have a body in some place in Wales?" Jason asked.

"Time sensitive, Mr Asano," Shade scolded.

"Right, sorry. On it."

The dark figure vanished into the shadow of a pot plant.

"That was weird, right?" Barry asked. "Two guys in one body, having a conversation."

"The body was an interdimensional shadow alien, Barry."

"Yeah, like I said: weird. Someone should go tell the Network people what we just did, right?"

"Yes, Barry, they should."

"I call not it."

"You can't call 'not it,' Barry."

"Except I just did. Can you get me a diet cream soda while you're out doing that?"

"You know I'm your boss, right?"

"Right, sorry. Can you get me a diet cream soda while you're out doing that, Boss?"

Delia wanted nothing more than to lay down and close her eyes. Her clothes were ragged, her skin marred by bloody lacerations. Her right hand was missing two fingers and her left arm hung limp at her side. The System, usually a boon, was flashing stamina and

mana bars that were all but empty. The little silhouette showing her health had every body part marked in warning yellow or dire red.

She burned most of her scant remaining mana to boost her speed, barely escaping the path of the dented but intact iron lion. Three were dead, better than she'd imagined, but she didn't have the mana left to conjure a fresh gun, let alone fire it. The mana deficit left her head feeling like a spike had been rammed through it. Her body was screaming at her to stop and rest, but she couldn't afford to even slow down.

Only a couple of traps remained untriggered. She dashed right through one, a lion on her heels. The trap ignored her but triggered on the monster, cables erupting from the ground to bind it. It would have been an easy kill, if she had anything left. The other lions flanked her circled like sharks. They knew she was done, even if she refused to accept it. She tried to make a break for it but only the spirit was willing. Her legs gave out and she fell to the ground, landing amongst dirt churned up with shards of detonated tree trunk.

The lions snarled at each other, each trying to assert dominance. One finally cowed the others and moved in to claim the kill. Delia's consciousness drifted away, her eyes closing as the beast coiled to pounce. In the delirium as she passed out, she thought it odd how the creature's aura changed, suddenly descending like a wrathful god. Her last thought was that it hadn't felt like that before.

As a girl, Delia DeWitt had watched on television as a man fought monsters. Despite his dark powers and shadowy visage, she had known him from the first moment as a hero. She regained consciousness, having been certain she never would again. Standing over her was a dark figure, wrapped in what looked like the night sky. She jolted awake as a loud metallic crash signalled an iron lion smashing to the ground, looking like it had been in a car compactor. Five more followed in short order.

A hand was held out to her.

"You did good," Jason told her.

Chapter 990

Monstrous on the Inside

Delia looked up at the alien eyes looking down at her from within the dark hood. He held his hand out to her as his uncanny cloak vanished to reveal his face. His eyes dimmed, turning from strange nebulae to dark brown. She clasped his hand and he helped her to his feet. That she needed the assistance was startling, not having felt weak in years.

“Drink this,” he said, holding out a glass vial containing purple liquid. “It might taste a bit funny — my friend Jory has been experimenting with local ingredients — but it’s good.”

Delia pulled out the cork and swigged it down without hesitation. The taste was awful, like cheap salami coated in sugar, but the effect was immediate. She felt magic flood through her body, stronger than her own. The lacerations scoring her body closed, and her battered muscles were soothed.

“Was that a gold-rank potion?”

“Told you it was good. How are you holding up?”

She looked herself over. Through the rents in her clothes, she could see scars left behind where her wound had been.

“I don’t think it healed me right,” she said.

“It healed you right. We can talk about that after, though. We need to go get your people.”

“Are they alright?”

“No. I’m afraid they’re not.”

Eleven vampires dangled in the air over the cathedral’s carpark, held aloft by Jason’s aura. Four of them were snarling and thrashing like animals, flailing at the air. The others were calmer, their expressions ranging from fearful to calculating. Standing under them was a clone of Asano, but with solid red orbs for eyes.

“They’ve turned them,” Delia said, her voice shuddering as she stared at her team.

“The four are yours?” Jason asked.

“Yes.”

“The good news is, they’re not too far gone. *Feed me your sins.*”

Red light started shining from within the feral vampires, the representation of their life force. What should have been a bright, clean light was dim and murky. The taint immediately started to flow out of the feral vampires, floating through the air like smoke on a breeze. As the stain left the vampires, their life force regained the normal, healthy red

glow. Their wild thrashing turned to confusion, then exhaustion, until they finally passed out. Jason gently lowered the four to the ground, leaving the others dangling in the air. Delia dashed over to check them over.

“You turned them back?”

“Forcible turnings usually result in a ghoul or a feral vampire. There’s a window, before the change fully sets in, where the vampiric curse can be purged. Anyone with a sufficiently powerful curse removal power can do the same. They’ll take time to fully recover, though. Healing magic doesn’t work on spiritual damage.”

“Spiritual damage?”

Rather than answer, Jason floated the four recovering bronze-rankers over to the grass.

“Colin, ask the vampires why they’re here. Take them somewhere that Delia won’t see or hear what happens to them.”

Delia finally looked at the copy of Jason. Although their features were identical, it was clear they were different people. The copy was looking at the vampires with a hunger that sent a chill down her spine.

Jason sat on the grass next to her unconscious subordinates and she did the same.

“You feel weak, right?” he asked her. “Like the energy that’s always been there, ever since you became an essence user, is suddenly gone?”

“What happened to me?” she asked.

“The same thing that happened to me a long time ago. There’s a village in the other world, at the foot of a small mountain, out in the desert. It has a waterfall that shoots out from a portal inside the mountain. Gorgeous little place, and the first one I ever visited in that world. Well, there was this English-style manor house in the middle of the desert where a bunch of cannibals lived, but doesn’t really count.”

“I would love to hear every story you have.”

“There’s some crazy stuff. More than one about this village, in fact, but let’s stick to this one for the moment. I ended up going back to the village later, while passing through the area with my companions. We were on a training tour, preparing to rank up. A monster spawned, far too much to handle. I took it on anyway, distracting it from the villagers scrambling to evacuate. I couldn’t win, of course, but every moment I could buy meant lives saved. I had a desperate hope that someone would come and save me, but I was pretty sure they wouldn’t. I imagine the story is sounding familiar.”

“Too familiar,” Delia said with a shudder.

"Like you, I ended up passing out, thinking it was the end. Then I woke up, not quite the same. That was how I got my first and, to this day, still largest scar."

Delia looked down at her arms and torso, seeing the scar tissue revealed by the rents in her clothes.

"It wasn't that the potion didn't heal properly, is it?"

"No."

"Scars. I didn't think we could get those anymore."

Jason pointed to the small scars on his face, bisecting one eyebrow and leaving a thin hairless line in his beard.

"I thought they were from before you had magic. That's the general opinion online."

"I can see why that would be a surprise, then. I haven't used the internet much over the last couple of decades, but I assume it's still a place where people are painstakingly careful about the integrity of information they put out."

He wagged his eyebrows comically and she couldn't help but laugh. Then, like a dam bursting, all the emotion came flooding out. Laughter turned to tears, her body shaking as she sobbed out the fear and panic, desperation and relief. Jason waited patiently for it to pass.

"I'm sorry," she said after settling down.

"Don't be. It's better than bottling it up, trust me."

She leaned back in the grass, looking over at her people.

"Are they really going to be alright?"

"They're going to need a lot of therapy, but yes. You will too."

"I'm fine."

"I just watched you have an emotional breakdown."

"I... have nothing to say to that."

He let out a chuckle.

"I'm not kidding about you seeing someone. I know some specialists in the field. You've heard of Rufus Remore?"

"Of course."

"I brought his mother back with me. She's basically a wizard therapist. She helped me through a lot."

"I really will be okay, breakdown notwithstanding."

"I know. But those new scars run deeper than you think. It wasn't the lions that left them there."

"But the lions left the wounds."

"It doesn't matter happens to your body. Anything you live through, magic will heal, scar free."

"Except that I do have scars. As do you."

"Do you know how the soul affects the body for essence users?"

She shook her head.

"Basically, the soul is a blueprint for the body. Our self-image defines our physical representation, more and more with every rank. People don't grow more attractive with rank just because imperfections are being removed. We move closer with each rank to the way we see ourselves, or perhaps the person we want to become. I had a difficult relationship with my brother, but with every rank-up, I find myself looking more and more like him. We made amends before he passed, but on some level, I still want to be him. Or the imaginary version of him that has been imprinted on my mind since we were kids."

He stared into the distance with sad eyes and a warm smile, then turned his gaze back to Delia.

"Our souls are who we are. What we are. And the more our magic grows, the more thoroughly our bodies represent that. For most people, power comes with confidence and self-assurance, and that is reflected in our bodies. That's also why you occasionally come across someone who doesn't look like they just walked off the set of a teen drama where all the actors are twenty-seven. Insecurity or self-loathing can make a person's body reflect how ugly they are on the inside. It doesn't happen much, though. I've seen people who were monstrous on the inside and drop-dead gorgeous to look at."

"Are you saying that the scars aren't on my body, but on my soul?"

"I am. The scars are just a representation. What matters is that you were faced with a truly defining moment, and you made a choice. Souls change all the time, but those changes are usually slow and gradual. When the change comes fast, and cuts to the core of who you are, it leaves a mark."

He reached out to tap her lightly on the shoulder, and a System window immediately appeared.

-
- [System Administrator] has expanded your system access to include information on conditions affecting your soul.
-

The window vanished after she read it and a new one took its place.

New Title: [Resolute]

- The damage you suffered in your stand against a much more powerful enemy has marked your soul. Your resistance to the suppressive force of higher-ranked auras is increased.
 - Your aura signature has changed. Your unflinching resolve can be detected if your aura is examined by an aura sensing power or when projecting your aura.
-

"Title?" she asked.

"It's a video game thing. Kind of like unlocking an achievement."

"I don't really play video games."

"It's how the system represents things that impact your soul strongly enough to have an affect on your magic."

"And you let me see that. Because you're the system administrator?"

"Yeah."

"Like the guy who blocks websites on the office internet so people don't look up celebrity feet at work?"

"That's a fairly specific question."

Delia glanced over at one of her unconscious team members.

"Bethan is a good fighter, but not a great employee, if I'm being honest."

They sat in silence for a while, him leaning back and looking to the blue sky with a smile. She looked over her people. They'd put up a fight, from their injuries, but not much of one. Three of the seven vampires Jason had left to his familiar had been silver-rank.

"Why did this happen?" she asked. "We're on the far edge of nowhere, what is here for them?"

"This was one of a series of simultaneous attacks around the periphery of vampire-held territory. The humans have been hitting Europe hard over the last few weeks. This might be the start of the vampires hitting back, I don't know. My friends and I were asked to intervene in places that were lower priority and harder to reach quickly; we aren't deeply involved. I imagine we'll learn more as people report in. Speaking of which..."

He looked up as his red-eyes clone came down the path from the cathedral, passing under a brickwork archway to enter the parking area. In one hand was a napkin he was using to dab at the side of his mouth. In the other was a severed arm.

"Colin!" Jason scolded, getting to his feet.

"What?" Colin asked, then looked down at the loose arm as if surprised to find it there. He quickly tossed it over the fence and put on an innocent expression. Jason rubbed his temples, letting out a groan.

“Colin, remember the talk we had about the vampires actually being victims and we should respect their remains, even after we’ve killed them.”

“He’s not dead,” Colin said. “I kept them all alive even when they begged me to—”

“What did you find out, Colin?”

“They don’t know much. They were ordered to come here, turn the essence users and have them massacre the population. They didn’t ask why, and don’t seem to care much.”

“What do we do now?” Delia asked.

“Keep an eye on the town until backup arrives,” Jason said. “My shadow familiar is patrolling around. I’m just a hired gun on this one; the humans are running the show. Once that’s done, I need to go. I have a long-awaited guest I need to talk to.”

Jason arrived on the space station that orbited the main planet in his personal solar system. The space station served a variety of functions, one of which was a place for cosmic visitors to arrive. His astral kingdom was now fully realised, occupying a space within cosmic geography that others could visit.

Jason watched through an observation window as a dimension ship arrived. It was a transparent sphere that seemed to contain a sandstorm churning wildly within it. Rather than an airlock, a bridge of rainbow light extended from the space station to touch the vessel. A woman walked through the wall of the ship as if it was an illusion and strode down the bridge. Jason met her at the door, which slid open at her approach, greeting her with a nod that she returned.

“Hello Jason.”

“Hello Raythe.”