

Chapter 904

Vast Cosmic Power Types

Compared to most of Yaresh, the district containing the Magical Research Association campus was heavy on stone and light on trees. It certainly had none of the towering glass of the central district. Located right across the road from the campus was the Alchemy Association's main research centre. The urban planners in charge of rebuilding Yaresh wanted to centralise the places most prone to unexpected explosions, inadvertent poison fog and accidental fire titan summoning.

Both organisations had argued that such stories were — mostly — overblown, but it had made no headway with the planners. Not only did they put the two buildings together but also surrounded them with the blandest district in Yaresh. There were only a few scattered trees, and none of the thick varieties used as part of the buildings. The buildings were all heavy, magically reinforced stone.

There were no houses or shops, only long-term storehouses and other low-traffic facilities that minimised collateral damage risk. That made it one of the least interesting districts for Danielle and Jason to take their walk through. The buildings were largely square and dark grey, with only a few lonely trees to break up the monotony.

While the footpath was made of familiar flagstones, the road, like others in Yaresh, was sealed in some manner of brown concrete. With nothing more interesting to catch his eye, it was what caught Jason's attention. He crouched beside the road to run his fingers across it.

"It looks almost like tree bark in colour, but it feels like regular asphalt concrete."

"Regular?" Danielle asked. "This seems like unusual road surfacing, to my eye."

"Regular for Earth. We don't have a lot of stone-shapers in civil engineering, so this is normal there. I haven't seen a lot of concreting in Pallimustus. This looks more like it was laid the Earth way, though."

He stood up and they continued their way down the footpath.

"Is civil infrastructure an interest of yours?" Danielle asked.

"Sort of. My father is a landscape architect, and you pick things up. I know more about grass than you'd imagine. He did a lot of work in front of government buildings, so he dealt with a lot of driveways. He'd love to see what they've accomplished with Yaresh."

"Then show him. You can take people there, so surely you can bring others back."

"It's not a matter of ability. I intended to bring them last time, but..."

He sighed.

"It didn't work out."

"You're concerned about complications on your return."

"Yeah, but isn't it always like that with family? Especially after a long time away with no communication."

"I suppose so," Danielle said. "Things are a little different in my family. We have essences, to extend our lifespans, and expectations of duty."

She scowled.

"Expectations are very big in my family, which can be a point of pride. But while they can drive someone like Humphrey to greatness, they can crush others beneath them. Your family was unused to the power and longevity that comes of magic, were they not?"

"They weren't," Jason confirmed. "I took them halfway around the world, leaving them with a handful of essence users, a stockpile of essences and a couple of magical cities to live in. Then I disappeared on them. No communication for over a decade. I was able to send them Rufus, but not much else."

"Magical cities? Like Rexion?"

"Yes. They've been living in cities built from my power. Not just *with* my power, but literally made of it. The streets they walk and the houses they live in. And, like in Rexion, there are children who grew up hearing my name but never seeing me. I was a distant and abstract figure, spoken of, but never present. Yet my power was everywhere, like some ancestral ghost. And that power was not always consistent. I had to hide it for a long time, trapping the clan in astral spaces."

"But they are out, now? And you're in contact with them, using your avatars?"

"Now, yes, but most still haven't seen me. And that's not a normal way to encounter a person. Popping in and out of existence, reshaping the world around them on a whim. I'm lucky they didn't see me deal with the vampire city that was over their heads for a decade."

"You don't know how to act when you return properly."

"No, I don't. Magic is still relatively new to Earth, and my power is like nothing else on it. No one knows how to treat me, and I'm unsure how to act. I suppose things were very different for you, coming from a big adventuring family."

"Yes. For mine, power is long established. The trouble it brings comes from the expectations that power brings. Only a fraction of the family become adventurers, and only a fraction of those become high-rank and famous. But there's a pressure on all of us as children, to at least potentially become one of those few. To maintain the family legacy. We're all expected to strive for that until we prove ourselves. Or prove ourselves inadequate. There's little consideration for anyone to want something else until they've

been branded a failure at what matters most. I had a sister who... suffice to say, I am proud of our family and its name, but I do not care for some of the culture we've built up trying to maintain it. Sometimes I wonder if Humphrey wouldn't have been better off as a soft-hearted labour manager in a spirit coin farm."

Jason laughed at the image.

"He'd be such a soft touch as a boss."

"This issue with your family. Not knowing how to act. Am I correct in guessing that this is only peripheral to what you really wanted to discuss?"

"Yes."

"You want to know how to act on a larger scale. Not just with your clan, but with the whole world."

"Exactly. What do I do when I'm the most powerful person on the planet? Turning up with a collection of gold rankers who could conquer the place in a week is extremely political, whether I like it or not. And I am not as adept at politics as I thought I would be before I actually involved myself in them."

Danielle chuckled.

"I remember your antics back in Greenstone. You have a political mind, Jason, and see through more than most. But when it comes to your own designs, you get impetuous. Distracted by ideas that appeal more for their cleverness than their practicality. That is when you get blindsided by consequences."

"Oh, I remember, and I can't afford that this time. This isn't messing with some shady local bureaucrats and a dodgy indentured servitude contract. This is world leaders being scared of a potential tyrant."

"And people take drastic steps when they feel scared and powerless. If I recall correctly, that is kind of your thing as well."

"No kidding. With Earth, I'm heading into a situation that can't really hurt me. If people start declaring war on me or something, though, a lot of innocent people could get caught in the crossfire. Back in Greenstone, I had you and Emir to bail me out when I got it wrong. This time, I'm the high ranker, and the responsibility stops with me. I'll have my friends with me, but it's my world."

"And the power you bring will reshape it, simply by existing."

"Yes. Even if we hide it away and never use our power, people will react to its very existence."

"This is a complicated issue, Jason. A lot more than we could cover on a short stroll, even if I did have an understanding of your world's politics. Which I do not."

“But you understand diplomacy. You understand the kind of power that Earth is only just coming to grips with. Most importantly, I can trust you. The people who already know Earth politics are all on Earth, and most I wouldn’t trust to burn if I threw them in a volcano. Which I’m hoping it won’t come to.”

Danielle laughed.

“You said most you wouldn’t trust. Suggesting there are a few you would.”

“Not many. There’s someone who works for my grandmother now. She would be an asset, but I’d really like to recruit a woman she used to work for, to cover the knowledge of Earth politics I don’t have.”

“The way you’re attempting to recruit me know?”

“Not exactly like this. I thought it might be best to let other people make the pitch to her.”

“There’s contention between you and this person?”

“It’s complicated. The first time we met in person, I broke into her house in the middle of the night.”

“Why?”

“To make a point. I’d just been kidnapped by some associates of hers and I was worried about people targeting my family.”

“So, you escalated by proving you could target hers?”

“I did say I wanted help with diplomacy, right?”

“I’m starting to see how good an idea seeking out assistance might be for you.”

“Yes. I asked everyone if they wanted to come along on this trip, but for most I just wanted to give them a chance to expand their horizons. That’s the best part of being an adventurer, right? My intentions for you are a little more selfish, though, yes. I was hoping you might take a role as a political advisor. Not just for the trip, but in the time leading up to it. I need to be preparing now, not just heading for Earth and winging it. Diplomatic training. Strategising over what approach to take. I’ve already discussed this with Dominion, but I wanted to contrast that with a more grounded perspective.”

“What did he suggest?”

“That I either become their king or their god. Neither is a surprising take, given the source, but he made some compelling points.”

“How often do you talk to gods?”

“Not that much. Way less than priests, I imagine. And I doubt the clergy have those really tense standoffs, like the one you saw with Undeath. That guy sucks.”

“That would be the encounter where you threatened the gods of undeath and destruction.”

“I didn’t threaten them. I even gave Undeath that gobbet of corrupt energy to get rid of. I just suggested that maybe they want to choose their enemies with more care.”

“Their enemies are everyone and everything, Jason.”

“Which is an extremely careless approach to take, I think you’d agree.”

She shook her head in a very motherly display of exasperation.

“I’m not sure I can help you on the level you operate at, Jason.”

“You don’t have to worry about the high-end stuff. When it comes to the vast cosmic power types, it seems to be a do-your-own-thing situation. What I need help with is operating without harming the people who someone like me could hurt without even noticing. I don’t like the idea of putting myself above people, but pretending I don’t operate on a higher level than most will only cause more harm.”

“I need to think about this, Jason. You’re asking me to take on a lot of responsibility, here.”

“Of course. We have some time, although the more of it I use to prepare, the better.”

She nodded.

“Tell me more about this person you want to recruit on Earth.”

Getting information out of Europe had been difficult for years, but whatever happened in the old Asano territory had kicked a hornet’s nest. Vampires were moving on a scale they hadn’t been in years. Based on new capture and kill numbers, there were more of them still hidden away than anyone realised.

That, fortunately, was not Anna Tilden’s problem. Her problem was representatives from the UN member nations beating down her door about what was going on in Europe. Every nation with a spy plane or observation satellite had been watching the vampires gather in the old Asano territory, only for those observation tools to all get interfered with by an intense magical field that extended into orbit. In the wake of the mysterious event, the vampires had become extremely agitated.

It was bad enough when people were coming to Anna because it was her job. Now, it had gotten around about her having an off-the-books observation team on the ground. Instead of assistants of assistants of deputy liaisons knocking at her door, she had to deal with people she couldn’t just brush off. Her blanket denials were starting to wear very thin.

“I’m sorry, Senator,” she said into the phone. “Even if there were such a team, any information I could get from them would only arrive when they checked in after the fact. If they existed, they could very easily have died in the incident and we would never know.”

It took a while longer to finish the call, continuing to blank wall him like she did everyone trying to strong-arm or wheedle information out of her. Despite taking a grim satisfaction that her claims of not knowing anything were true, she was halfway to hunting down Nigel Thornton herself and choking him to death.

She left her office, which was novel. She’d been sleeping on the couch for five days and having her staff cycle the same three suits through the dry cleaners. She made her way down to the garage, declining the offer of a driver. An office driver might turn around and bring her back, if ordered to by her boss. Inevitably, she got a call halfway home, and while tempted not to answer, she accepted the call by tapping the screen on her dash.

“Secretary Lin, what can I do for you?”

“I need you to come to my office.”

“Sorry, Secretary, but I’m already on my way home.”

“Then I need you to turn around.”

“With all due respect, Secretary, if I go through another weekend without going home and seeing my wife, I’m going to quit and let whoever you get to replace me handle whatever crisis just blew up.”

“Anna—”

“Don’t ‘Anna,’ me, Shu-Chen. Don’t think I missed that word got around about my people in Europe roughly four seconds after I told you about them.”

“That’s what we need to discuss. You have to give us more information on—”

“I gave you the information I have, Shu-Chen. If I get more... well, I’ll probably keep it to myself. You’ve got a big mouth and it’s not technically — or legally — part of my job. This was a team I put in the field, on my own. No department funds, no department contacts.”

“Dammit, Anna, people are thinking Asano’s back.”

“He might be. I don’t know.”

“Anna, I’m hearing dangerous things. Rufus Remore announcing that Asano was coming back and would more or less do whatever the hell he wanted with the planet left a lot of people spooked. Powerful people. The things I’m hearing range from nuking France to strange magical crap I don’t know whether to believe.”

“At this point, it’s safer to believe. Look, I’m hearing things as well, but I genuinely don’t have anything more to add. To be honest, it’s looking increasingly likely that my people got caught up in whatever it was, and we’ll never hear from them.”

“Then your information is out of date. Satellites are operating over France again and I have visual confirmation of Nigel Thornton and his team liberating a blood farm and bringing the people back to territory that appears to be once again under Asano control.”

“Well, they haven’t reached out to me.”

“We know. We’ve been monitoring all your communication channels.”

“God dammit, Shu-Chen. Are you trying to get me to quit?”

“You know you won’t, Anna. You’re too driven to try and make things better, despite all the ugly politics. It’s why you left the Network for us. Who is going to give you a better seat at the table than we can?”