

## Chapter 286

### More Valuable Than a Life

The building looked like any of the other industrial warehouses around it. The inside, however, was an operations centre for the Cabal. Three reinforced security doors lay between the exterior and a set of concrete stairs leading down to a square, concrete room, behind a fourth, even more secure door. The room was empty apart from a cot fixed to the wall and the vampire sitting on it. His hands were held in alchemically-treated handcuffs while his legs were chained in similarly treated manacles.

His clothes were bloody and bedraggled, although the injuries that left them in that state had already been healed by his vampiric regeneration. The effort of doing so had left him hungry and only blood fresh from the source could slake vampiric thirst. They had only allowed him to feed on a live goat which, compared to human blood, was like drinking raw sewerage.

The door opened to admit Vermillion. He had a folding chair that he opened up and placed so he could sit facing the prisoner.

“Hello, Clinton.”

“You must be loving it,” Clinton said, sneering at Vermillion. “Seeing me like this.”

Vermillion sighed.

“You think any of this is good for me?”

“You have the satisfaction of seeing a rival brought low.”

“Rival?” Vermillion said pitying look. “That’s what you think? Clinton, before you perpetrated this spectacularly woe begotten disaster, I never gave you a second of thought any time you weren’t standing right in front of me. Is that what this is all about? Trying to prove that you’re better than me?”

“My lineage alone makes me better than you,” Clinton said. “My uncle turned me, and you know who he is. We don’t even know who made you into one of us.”

Vermillion shook his head.

“The Cabal doesn’t care where we came from, Clinton. We each have to prove our worth. You gave the Cabal your measure, yesterday, and this is where it’s gotten you.”

“My uncle won’t stand for this.”

Vermillion shook his head, not bothering to respond. He stood up, left the cell and walked up the concrete stairs. Another man was waiting at the top with a grave expression.

“Craig,” the man greeted.

“Franklin.”

“Sorry again about all this.”

“It is what it is,” Vermillion said. “Instead of complaining about what we can’t fix, we need to get on with fixing what we can.”

Franklin nodded soberly. He made his way down the stairs and into the cell.

“Hello Clinton,” Franklin said, claiming the seat left by Vermillion. Franklin’s features had a vague resemblance to Clinton, but Clinton’s appearance was middle-aged, while Franklin looked no more than thirty at most.

“Uncle Frank, you have to get me out of this.”

“I tried to keep you from getting into it,” Franklin said. “You never met the requirements for the clan to consider making you one of us, but I convinced them to be compassionate. The only reason they let me tun you was that without it, you would have died.”

“I’ve proven myself.”

“Yes,” Franklin said. “You’ve certainly made your value clear. Your ambitions have outstripped your abilities at every turn. The unrelentingly disappointing results of every task assigned to you has demonstrated the value of the clan’s recruiting policies. Getting involved with the Blood Riders was very nearly the final straw and I had to fight to give you the chance to clean up your own mess. I warned you that this was a final chance for you, and what did you do? You caused a disaster.”

“It’s just a few dead bikers.”

“Innocent people are dead, Clinton. The Network is on the warpath. We’re burning political capital like kindling to stop this from permanently hurting the Cabal’s position in this city. This entire country. The world is watching and not just the magical world.”

“It wasn’t my fault. If people didn’t show so much favouritism to Vermillion, I never would have needed to make such bold moves.”

“Bold? It is that what you call the most idiotic act of self destruction I can conceive of? Did someone put you up this? I know your not smart enough to be a conspirator, but if someone used you, then they found a fine tool indeed.”

“It was Vermillion that pushed me to this!”

“Vermillion? I suppose I can see that. He draws favour because he’s competent; cautious and meticulous, with excellent foresight. A poster child for everything you lack. He might be careful and patient enough to set you up for this without it being tracked back to him, but he’s smart enough to know that this has a million unseen ways to go wrong. He’s in the doghouse now for failing to stop you before you caused this debacle.”

Clinton sneered, only to be startled as Franklin slapped him hard across the face.

“You’re happy? Do you have any idea of what I owe him, now? You’re my responsibility, which means the blame for your actions falls on me. I’m in a worse position than Vermillion because of this. So now I have to make a gesture to prove my loyalty and contrition, both to the clan and to the Cabal.”

“What kind of gesture?” Clinton asked warily.

“A sacrifice. After all the trouble you’ve caused me, you will finally demonstrate some worth. Like everything else about you, it’s only your relationship to me that gives you any value at all. The Cabal and the clan are both severing ties with you. You’re being handed over to the Network. My facilitation of this is my show of loyalty and contrition. One of many that will continue until long after you’re dead.”

“You can’t.”

“It’s already done, Clinton. You were never going to get out of this with a clean death after killing Julius. He had some actual potential, which is why we had him riding herd over you. We wanted him to see what not to do, but you taught that lesson too well. Then, true to form, you mess up disposing of the body. I mean, bloody hell, boy. If you’re going to saw a man into pieces, get some garbage bags or a plastic sheet or something. I mean, pillow cases? You can’t even fail properly. You are the worst vampire in the world.”

“My actions were decisive and ruthless,” Clinton argued. “Those are the things a vampire should be.”

“In control is what a vampire should be, Clinton. That was never you. I should have refused my sister. I apologise for not letting you die the death of a normal man. You would have died quietly and been remembered fondly.”

“Surely there’s something that you can do,” Clinton begged.

“I will be paying for your sins for a long time, Clinton. I have neither the ability nor the desire to absolve them. Even before this, you were baiting the EOA into making a move on Vermillion. That is an act directly in contravention of Cabal interests, in service to your personal ambition. If Vermillion hadn’t defused the situation, you’d have antagonised the Network, the EOA, our own people and a potentially valuable ally all in one fell swoop. Thankfully – and true to form – you failed. But for some inexplicable reason, this was the one time that you didn’t let one knock back stop you and did what it took to aggravate them all anyway. You even went above and beyond, throwing them into a frenzy. At least you can die knowing that your actions left a large footprint.”

“You can’t hand me over,” Clinton said angrily. “I’ll tell the Network every clan and Cabal secret I know!”

“I know,” Franklin said sadly. “As much as I hoped that time would temper you into steel, I knew from the beginning that you were pig iron. This is why you were never inducted into our greater secrets. You can’t give the Network information they don’t already know, although I expect they will be very thorough in checking.”

Franklin got to his feet.

“This is the last time we’ll meet, Clinton. Anything you have left to say, say it now.”

“Uncle, it wasn’t my fault...”

“I meant something new, Clinton. I’ve heard that many times before.”

Franklin made his way back upstairs, where Vermillion was waiting for him.

“That can’t have been easy,” Vermillion said.

“It was a long time coming,” Franklin said. “All of our problems today can be laid at the feet of my mercy. How bad is it?”

“Bad,” Vermillion said. “Magic came within a hair’s breadth of being revealed today, and the Network are on the warpath. The big question mark is this man Asano. I don’t know what he’ll do after what happened.”

“Didn’t the Network take him?”

“I believe the answer to that is complicated,” Vermillion said. “Not least by the question of whether or not they can hold him.”

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“I don’t like that Sebastian isn’t with us,” Luc said. He was in the front passenger seat.

“You think any of us like it?” Paul asked. He was driving the car along the gravel road, through the open landscape of the Australian Bush. The dark sky hid the panorama, forcing him to drive carefully.

“You saw the condition Sebastian was in,” Paul said. “I’ve never seen anyone more in need of healing.”

“That’s exactly my problem,” Luc said. “We all saw what the target did to Sebastian. What if he wakes up?”

“He’s not going to wake up,” Nicolas said from the back seat. “With what we pumped into him, I’m amazed he’s still alive, category two or no. When he finally comes to, I won’t be shocked if we need to get the brain damage healed.”

The three Frenchmen were driving along a rural back road in rural New South Wales, heading for a largely disused airstrip. With an overcast night sky and an absence of population centres by design, the headlight of their car was a lonely ship in a sea of black.

“What I hate is that we have to fly back out,” Paul said.

“Nothing to be done about it,” Nicolas said. “You can’t force someone through a portal, even if they’re out cold.”

“What about Sebastian?” Luc asked.

“What about him?” Paul asked. “He told us to go without him.”

“I know he said that, but are we really going to just leave him?” Luc asked.

“You’re damn right we are,” Nicolas said. “At this point he needs to be extracted diplomatically, not tactically. It’s out of our hands. Our job is to get the target home without the locals pinning us down. Sebastian left us his phone so that none of us...”

He looked pointedly at Luc.

“...would be stupid enough to try and make contact.”

“Is the target going to stay unconscious all the way to France?” Paul asked.

“I have some top-ups to keep him out,” Nicolas said. “He’s not waking up any time soon.”

Suddenly all three felt an aura sweep over them from the boot of the car.

“That’s not possible,” Nicolas said. “Even if he did somehow wake up, he’s collared.”

“Maybe there was something wrong with the collar,” Luc said.

“You think they sent us all this way without checking the collar?” Paul asked.

“Pull the car over!” Nicolas ordered.

As they argued, they heard the boot spring open. Paul pulled the car to a rapid stop, throwing up gravel as he braked hard and the three piled out of the car. They saw the open boot and looked around in the darkness.

“I can’t see a thing,” Luc said.

“He’s going to be a pain to track down like this,” Nicolas said. “Paul, give us some light.”

As they peered out into the black, Paul raised an arm above his head and a large, flaming sphere appeared, floating in the air and shedding a red light. Shockingly, it revealed that the group was surrounded by figures of inky darkness, almost on top of them.

They all reacted immediately. Luc transformed his body into solid stone, while Paul summoned a whip made of fire. Nicolas conjured an assault rifle and started wildly spraying bullets all round them. As bullets were directly conjured into the gun, he was not forced to pause and reload, feeding his mana into it as quickly as the conjured weapon would take it. The muzzle flash caused a blinding strobe as he swept the gun back and forth, spewing bullets in every direction. When Nicolas finally stopped and the blast of

gunfire was replaced by eerie silence, the dark figures were gone, as if they had never been.

“What were those things?” Paul asked.

“You think I know?” Nicolas asked.

“I think you killed them, or drove them off,” Luc said. As he did, blue and orange lights lit up in the distance, drawing the attention of all three. Focused on the distance, they only noticed the shadowy figure moving behind them in the red light when they turned after feeling the sting of a blade slicing along their skin. Nicolas and Paul both received cuts on the neck, but Luc’s bubble shield briefly flared into visibility. It intercepted the attack before it even reached his stone flesh.

The light that had distracted them had dimmed into nothingness.

“Not much of a wound,” Paul said, patting his neck. “I’ve had plenty worse.”

“I bet Sebastian had too,” Nicolas said. “This prick uses poison, genius.”

“Should we start searching?” Luc asked.

“Forget that,” Paul said. “We knew going in that this mission had a high failure chance. I’m not fighting the guy that did that to Sebastian in the dark.”

“Agreed,” Nicolas said. “Let’s just get in the car and go.”

As their short debate over what to do came to an end, the blue and orange lights appeared again. There was one larger light, with four smaller ones orbiting it. Two of the smaller lights broke away from the others and started flying towards them. They were not slow, but did not match the speed of a bullet or even an arrow.

“Block or dodge?” Luc asked, even as the other two were scrambling out of the light’s path. The two lights made a direct line for their car, merging together just as they impacted it. The resulting explosion blasted Paul and Nicolas, even having fled, although they were only sent tumbling with minimal damage.

Luc was closer but also barely hurt. His bubble shield absorbed enough of the blast, which seemed poorly suited to penetrate the magical shield. The sheer power of the blast did make it collapse, but what little force remained splashed against Luc’s stone body, leaving small cracks in it. Luc felt a flicker of panic, realising that the blast was clearly more effective against his stone body than the magic shield, but it was a spent force.

The car, unlike its former occupants, was far more than superficially damaged. It had been torn open like someone with fat fingers and no coordination had tried to split a sandwich with someone by pulling it in half. It was certainly no longer driveable.

Lying in the light scrub off the side of the road where he had been thrown by the explosion, Paul yelled out in fresh pain. Nicolas scrambled to his feet as Luc went to check

on him, only for a shadowy figure to appear behind Nicolas, lashing out several times before vanishing as Nicolas echoed Paul's exclamations.

"What's going on?" Luc asked in a panic as he helped Paul to his feet. "This shouldn't be possible! He's meant to be collared!"

"What do we do?" Paul called out to Nicolas, but Nicolas had no answers. He stared at the wreckage of the car under the bloody illumination of the fiery orb, the car's own light having died. The only answer came from a voice as cold and dark as the black winter night.

*"Bleed for me."*

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Luc had strong defensive powers, with his magical shield and his earth form powers. His means of attack were powerful but simple, and he generally relied on his teammates to pin down the enemy for him to finish off. His teammates had died around him, however, without his catching more than a glimpse of their attacker. There had only been the merciless voice chanting sinister incantations as Paul and Nicolas fired powers wildly into the dark to no discernable effect, until they succumbed to death.

Luc broke down as his companions ended their screaming, leaving dark carcasses of blackened flesh with the unnerving stillness of death. More lights lit up on the empty road, this time not blue and orange but the silver pinprick of stars. The night sky, hidden beyond the dark clouds of winter, had taken the form of a man. Luc remembered the stories of the starlight angel that had been on the news. He knew that for him, this was no angel of mercy.

He didn't fight back, merely watching the approaching figure with defiance. He wasn't even thinking of it as the target anymore. It was more like a monster, born of the dark. It moved slowly, finally appearing before him, all darkness and stars. It moved over Paul's body, then over Nicolas. It reached up and pulled a suppression collar from the impenetrable dark of its hood. The collar then vanished from its hand and it turned its attention to Luc.

"You're going to tell me the things I want to know," came the hard, ruthless voice.

"I don't care if you collar and torture me," Luc said. "Even without my powers, my body can take the pain."

"I believe you," the voice said as Luc felt something crushing down on his aura like a fist around an egg.

"Can your soul?" the voice asked.

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Jason discovered that the advantage of holding a person's soul in his hand was that the person was quite incapable of lies and evasions going undetected. He didn't feel good about executing the man in cold blood after exhausting his knowledge. Being honest with himself, he didn't feel all that bad, either. The ability to negate the effects of suppression collars was a trump card for Jason's most vulnerable moments, as his current circumstances neatly demonstrated. The secret was more valuable than a life, at least the life of a man that had kidnapped him.

Before he died, the man filled in many important details for Jason, both about why the men had come for him and about the Network. For centuries the Network had been a series of independent secret societies and apparently old games of competitiveness and resource hoarding continued through to the present. It was a more fractious organisation than Vermillion's description had led him to believe, although Vermillion was an outsider and total accuracy was not to be expected.

This did not automatically mean that the local branch would be an ally, rather than an enemy. Given what the man had revealed, he hoped they would be. The most important thing he had learned from the Frenchman was that the Network branch in Lyon had the other outworlder in its custody. Jason hoped that the factional conflict was sufficient that the local Network would help him take the outworlder from the Lyon branch, as he knew that trying it alone was suicide.

Jason failed to learn anything else about the other outworlder as the Frenchman knew nothing about them. He suggested that their leader, Sebastian, might, but he had gone to the local Network branch for healing. The man Jason questioned suspected that the local branch would detain Sebastian to squeeze some concessions out of the French, given that they were not meant to be in the country at all.

He opened his map ability to check his destination. He could get back to Sydney in a couple of portal jumps, as he had visited places in his range in the past. He was even within range of his uncle's farm, where his mother grew up. He could use some time to think; to consider what he'd learned and weigh his options. He had Shade take a car form and take off back toward Sydney.

His demolition of the biker gang and what he did to his attackers, even the one that most likely survived, demonstrated the kind of threat he presented to those who chose to provoke him. Now was the time to show that he wasn't just a mad dog and could be reasoned with. He'd shown plenty of big stick and it was time for some juicy carrot. He needed to test the waters with the local Network branch and, if possible, ask Sebastian some pointed questions. It was time for a meeting with Annabeth Tilden.



As he sat in thought, Shade taking care of the driving, Gordon manifested in the seat next to him. Unlike normal vehicles, Shade was able to contain Gordon's incorporeal form without him passing right through. Gordon's floating eyes looked at Jason expectantly and Jason nodded, pulling out his phone.

Jason had looted it from one of the bodies before he had Colin and Gordon annihilate them. Their bodies were not sufficiently composed of magic to dissolve into rainbow smoke, but his power did save him rifling through their pockets. He had retrieved his own phone, plus theirs and the key to the suppression collar around his neck.

He had crafted some single-use keys that probably would have worked, but he wasn't entirely confident that his self-made product would work. He also didn't have a lot of them.

After the bodies were disposed of, he had Gordon break the car down into chunks of scrap he threw off into the scrub. It was possible someone could use a GPS record to track the spot, but there was nothing left that could cause him any problems.

Getting rid of the bodies sent his thoughts drifted to his own corpse, left behind in the astral space. It probably did dissolve into rainbow smoke, at least partially. He had known for a long time that he was no longer a human, but thinking about his body dissolving like a monster brought it home in a fresh way.

He had used a precious droplet of crystal wash to prevent his phone from picking up a corpse smell. He loaded up a movie, which Shade was able to project onto the windscreen.

"This one's called Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory," Jason told Gordon. "It's a good one."