

## Chapter 432

### I Need That Song to Play Out

The ute pulled up a little way from the pagoda, due to the level of destruction around it. The gold-rankers trying to dig up any treasures had focused on the pagoda itself, the area around it looking less like an urban street than a motocross arena.

Vermillion continued his discontented mumbling as he hopped out of the tray, while Anna got out of the cab, looking around. She was concerned that Vermillion may well be right about Jason's general receptiveness. She led the group in picking their way between the gaping holes and mounds of earth to reach the pagoda doors, which slid open at their approach.

They stepped into the atrium, their attention caught by the waterfall spilling into the pool in the middle of the floor. Shade was waiting for them.

"This way, please. The conference room is on the second floor."

As they walked down the hall, Dashiell Bexton, one of the two normals in the group, ran his fingers over the wall.

"What is this made of?"

"Clouds," Taika said.

"Clouds?"

"Clouds," Taika confirmed

"How does that work?" Dashiell asked.

"Magic, bro. Are you new?"

Most of the others had been inside cloud constructs before, although it was still an unusual experience. The ancient vampire, Spencer, was particularly unsettled. He came from a time when he was the dominant magical power and this was one more reminder that the world he had woken up in was very different.

They entered a room that, in design, was an ordinary conference room. The colourful cloud-stuff from which everything from the furniture to the walls was made gave it a slightly alien feel, however. One wall was a window looking out over the hacked-up streets.

"Please sit," Shade said. "Mr Asano is on his way."

"Ooh, I missed this," Taika said, settling into a cloud chair.

"This is startlingly comfortable," Dashiell said, turning to the other normal, Adam Cosgrove. "Adam, we should have looked your old friend up a long time ago."

"She's not an old friend," Cosgrove said. "We just helped each other."

“I’d like to think of us as friends,” Erika said as she walked into the room with Jason, Farrah and Yumi. “It’s very nice to see you again, Detective. Sorry, Mr Cosgrove. May I call you Adam?”

“Sure,” Cosgrove said. “It’s nice to see you too, Mrs Asano.”

“It’s Erika, please. Could you ever imagine we’d be here like this, the last time we met in that café?”

“We’re a long way from that day,” Cosgrove said. “The whole world is.”

“Very true,” Jason said, holding out his hand. Cosgrove shook it. “Thank you for helping my sister when no one else would.”

“Our interests happened to align. This is my partner, Dash.”

Jason shook Dashiell’s hand.

“Nice to meet you, mate,” Jason greeted him. “Why are you participating in this?”

“Adam, here, is a goodwill ambassador,” Dashiell said. “I thought it was a bit odd they wanted him just for his connection to your sister until your mate Vermillion started listing off all the stuff they did to you. It sounded like they needed all the goodwill they can get.”

“You’re not wrong,” Jason said. “Never picked up any magic during your time in the EOA?”

“All that human modification stuff sounded a bit iffy to us,” Dashiell said. “We were really in it to peek behind the curtain.”

“They wouldn’t have been accepted anyway,” Alexander Clerck interjected.

“Independent thinkers are always rejected. We want our powered people to be compliant. The process also seems to dampen intellectual creativity, as well. These two were much better as agents.”

“You seem to know a lot about us,” Cosgrove said.

“Because of your connection to Mr Asano, here, tangential as it may be,” Clerck said, turning to Jason with a smile. “And how have you been, Mr Asano.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ve been paying attention,” Jason said. “Do they even realise who you are?”

“They’re all suspicious, but I don’t think any of them have figured it out.”

“Why are you here?” Jason asked.

“My organisation wanted to get some information to you. I was aware this meeting was being arranged, so I presented myself to the fine people of the GDN who were organising it. I decided to deliver it in person because, to be honest, I wanted a look around. A spirit domain, Mr Asano? Very presumptuous.”

“Who is this guy?” Taika asked.

“This is Mr North,” Jason said. “First among equals of the EOA, if you’re willing to believe that horse pucky. How are you doing, Taika?”

Taika caught Jason in a big hug.

“All good, bro. You doing alright?”

“Oh, you know. Keeping busy.”

Taika let out a rumbling chuckle.

While Jason and the others greeted Akari warmly, most of the group was staring at Mr North. The revelation of his identity pushed even the presence of the ancient vampire temporarily out of mind.

“What?” Mr North asked innocently.

Jason and his companions joined the rest in sitting around the table.

“Introductions, first,” Jason said. “For those of us who haven’t met, I am Jason Asano.”

“They’ve seen you on TV, bro.”

“This is my sister Erika.”

Jason glanced at Taika.

“You may have seen her on TV too,” Jason continued. “This is Farrah Hurin and my Grandmother, Yumi Asano.”

All eyes went to Yumi, who looked no older than Jason.

“Grandmother?” Dashiell asked.

“It’s just shape-shifting,” Jason explained. “She’s really an old lady.”

Yumi rapped Jason on the arm and he flashed her a grin. The grin faded as he turned back to his guests.

“Now, if someone would care to explain what the head of the EOA and an ancient vampire are doing here, that would be appreciated. I recognise that you haven’t come here with hostile intent, so I’m at least willing to hear you out.”

“It’s about the vampires,” Anna said. “It’s no secret that they are ramping up for a play at global dominance while the opposing magical factions have made less than stellar progress towards unifying against them. You sent us some details of the operations in Venice and this was, as we’ve discovered, only a tertiary program.”

Jason turned to the vampire, Spencer.

“I assume your unexpected presence is to shed some light on this?”

“Yes,” Spencer said. “Not all of the Arisen, as we call ourselves, want to participate in this plan for global dominion. For one thing, vampires are increasingly territorial by instinct as we grow stronger. Working together does not come naturally.”

"Which is most likely why the vampires haven't made a move already," Vermillion said. "The ancient vampires are instinctually competitive with one another while their attitudes cause friction with the non-vampiric portions of the Cabal. The Cabal was always a loose collection of factions and, like the Network, has fragmented. Some have broken off to form a non-vampiric new Cabal, while others have joined the Global Defence Network."

"There are those of us who do not wish to participate at all," Spencer said. "We recognise that the world has changed and that we are no longer the dominant force on it. While most of the Arisen are blind to the new world and the dangers it presents to them, those of us that do see realise that the vampires cannot overcome all the forces arrayed against them. Even if they are scattered now, a common enemy will unite them. The only questions are how long a war takes, how much damage it does and what comes after."

"So, you're looking to stay alive once the vampires as a whole have lost," Jason said.

"Yes," Spencer agreed. "We have no altruism or desire to help humanity. We simply recognise that so long as we are accepted, there will be power and influence for us to hold, even if we are not rulers. I will take some power over death, and there are others amongst the Arisen who have chosen the same. For most, however, they cannot overcome the inherent desire for dominion."

"Well," Jason said. "I'm not going to sit here, in the middle of my personal magic realm and claim that dominion is not intoxicating. I understand that you make for powerful allies, both in personal capability and the information you bring to the table. My question is: what does any of this have to do with me? I'm not opposed to facing off against some vampires when the opportunity appears, but I have larger concerns."

"Larger than a world ruled by vampires and filled with unliving ghouls?" Spencer asked.

"Yes," Jason said, meeting his stare.

"Mr Spencer and... Mr North," Anna said, "have brought critical information to us that warrants action. That is where you come in."

"Oh?" Jason asked, turning to face her.

"Spencer has revealed the location of the vampire's primary logistics operations. They've created a secure location in which they are producing enhanced blood, lesser vampires and ghouls."

"Lesser vampires?" Erika asked.

Jason turned to Vermillion.

"Craig, could you explain the difference, just to make sure everyone is on the right page."

"Sure," Vermillion said. "At the top of the food chain you've got the greater vampires. That's me and dust-bucket over there. We went through a voluntary process of transformation and started weak, growing stronger over time. You can accelerate that process by drinking powerful blood, but there hasn't been a lot of that floating around. Also, if you start preying on the Cabal or the essence users, you end up dead, rather than powerful."

"It was easier in the past, when the Cabal was a series of fractious groups," Spencer said.

"Probably one of the outside pressures that pushed the Cabal to unite," Jason surmised.

"Next," Vermillion continued, "we have the lesser vampires. These are the ones turned against their will. They start with whatever power level they had before being turned, although they lose their original powers. Unlike greater vampires, they do not gain bloodline powers to replace them. They're also more subject to control by greater vampires."

"The powers aren't lost," Farrah said. "They're sealed. Lesser vampires are vampires in body, but not in soul. It's why they can't grow stronger. It's also why the process can be reversed if you get to them fast enough."

"Lastly you have ghouls," Vermillion said. "These depraved mockeries are what happens when you try and create a lesser vampire that's stronger than the person you're trying to turn. Ghouls are harder to wrangle and significantly less intelligent, but if you want greater power from lesser materials, that's your option. You can make ghouls directly, or turn lesser vampires into ghouls."

"And that's what the vampires are doing," Jason said. "Turning Europe into a factory for ghouls and blood enhanced by reality cores."

"At first it was of limited concern," Vermillion said. "Even considering all the newly-appeared Arisen and the existing Cabal, there were only so many greater vampires. There is a cost to creating minions, even for those with the ideal bloodlines, and the scale could only be so big."

"Those of us preparing to switch sides," Spencer said, "were gathering information for when we did. Bringing a gift to the table would get us a better seat, after all. We discovered that operations were scaling up to a far greater degree than should be possible."

"How?" Jason asked.

"We couldn't find out everything before we were forced to make our move as the others grew suspicious," Spencer said. "We discovered two critical factors. One was that there is an alternate means for ghoulish creation, requiring far less from each vampire per ghoulish created. Second was that there is now a method for strengthening lesser vampires. It makes their behaviour more feral and ghoulish-like, but they retain most of their intelligence."

"I've seen the results in Venice," Farrah said.

"Those smaller-scale operations are appearing across Europe," Spencer said. "We couldn't find out how these processes were developed."

"Which is where I come in," Mr North interjected. "I believe you know, Mr Asano, about a joint research operation from decades ago, involving the Cabal, the EOA and the Network."

"It's where you developed the first magically-augmented humans," Jason said.

"Just so. There were many projects involved with that operation, including the animation of the dead."

"Necromancy," Farrah hissed.

"There was a researcher from that operation. We believed he was long dead, until the events at Makassar. We believe he was unable to resist so many dead as a test platform for whatever he has been working on in the intervening..."

Mr North trailed off as he felt pressure bearing down on him. Jason's aura had blended with that of the entire room and was boiling over with fury. Cosgrove and Dashiell opened their mouths in silent screams, while even the more powerful people went off-colour. Only the gold-ranked Spencer and Mr North were able to fend off Jason's aura with their own and even that was a struggle.

"JASON!" Erika yelled and the moment passed. Everyone but Jason slumped in relief, with even Spencer and Mr North having lost their equanimity. The two normal-rankers had fallen out of their chairs and were throwing up on the floor. Jason stood up and walked to the window, looking out with his back to the room.

"I apologise," he said. "I should not have lost control like that."

"No kidding," Mr North said. "There's a reason you aren't meant to have a spirit domain."

Anna tried to get the meeting back on track, despite her pale, bloodless face.

"This man that North is talking about," she said. "Using information given to us by the former Mrs South, the Network has been looking for him since Makassar. We had some indications that he was with the Cabal but that's where we dead-ended."

“Concealing information has long been the Cabal’s greatest strength,” Vermillion said.

“Is this man in France?” Jason asked, still gazing out the window.

“How did you know?” Anna asked.

“Because you would only come to me if you needed something. What can I do that no one else can? I can enter a sealed astral space, like the one in Saint-Étienne where Adrien Barbou sent Farrah.”

“You’re right,” Spencer said. “We never discovered how the process was developed, but we did discover where. After the Arisen took France, the astral space was used as a secure location for the main hub of the operation. That’s where they develop the infrastructure for the satellite operations, as well as produce more empowered lesser vampires, ghouls and enhanced blood than anywhere else. We also believe that they’re stockpiling enhanced blood there, as an emergency reserve.”

“So you want me to go there and put an end to it,” Jason said. “That place is probably crawling with gold-rank vampires.”

“No,” Spencer said. “As I said, we are too territorial. There will only be a few. Two, maybe as many as five. They will likely be stronger than most, though.”

“And you expect me to beat them how?”

“Don’t act like you haven’t already decided to go, Asano,” Mr North said. Jason turned around to face him.

“There’s a price,” Jason said. “I want Adrien Barbou.”

“Revenge, Mr Asano? Aren’t you above that kind of thing? You let Gerling skip off out of your transformation zone.”

“Gerling can fight vampires. Barbou isn’t that strong.”

“It’s my revenge,” Farrah said. “And I’m definitely not above that kind of thing.”

“The answer is no,” Mr North said, not breaking his gaze from Jason. “You’re going to do this because it needs doing, Mr Asano, whether I give you Barbou or not.”

“And what is to stop me from holding you here and melting you in chunks until you give him up? Jason asked.

“The fact that you invited me here in good faith. You are going to let me go because you aren’t willing to be the person who didn’t. Of course, if you prove me wrong, that’s exciting too. I’d be willing to give Barbou up to see that.”

Jason turned his gaze from Mr North, his face twisted in a frustrated snarl. Mr North laughed.

“And there he is. Be wary of your principles, Mr Asano. I might use them to be assured that you enter that astral space, but someone was already playing them like an instrument before I found you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, I’m not going to tell you that. Like the World-Phoenix, I need that song to play out. We all do.”