

## Chapter 281

### A Good Friend and a Very Bad Enemy

A sleep-deprived Annabeth Tilden was shotgunning coffee.

“More,” she demanded hoarsely as she finished, sending her assistant to replenish her supply. One of the side effects of being an essence user was an ability to resist the effects of caffeine, leading many coffee drinkers to ramp up their intake. This was bad enough at category one, but if she ascended to category two, coffee would not longer have any power to perk her up. As it was, she was adding stamina potion like a shot of whisky.

Annabeth was not in her office but in a conference room several floors down. Members of the Cabal were not just going to walk into the mystical defences of the top floor. She was slumped forward, elbows on the desk as she rubbed her temples, which did nothing to alleviate the stress headache.

The door opened to admit the Cabal representative, Vermillion. She had actually come to sympathise with the man over the course of the day, despite his organisation being the source of her current tribulations. Not only had he been caught up directly but also, like her, he had the highest-ranking members of his organisation dropping dissatisfaction onto him from a great height. Also like her, it was his job to somehow sort the whole mess out.

The footage had become an international news story. A violent gun battle on the streets of Sydney. A mysterious figure leaping from motorcycle to motorcycle amidst a hail of bullets, taking on a notorious biker gang by the dozen before vanishing without a trace. There were countless bizarre details, all of which were being overanalysed by media organisations around the world at that very moment.

Why did the rider seem impervious to bullets? Was their strange outfit some kind of body armour? What was the large, intimidating motorcycle they were riding? It was powerful, agile and did not confirm to any model of bike that anyone could find, meaning it was either heavily modified or completely custom.

The only thing that barely salvaged the debacle was that while there was a lot of phone camera recordings coming out, on top of the news helicopter footage, barely a few seconds of clear footage was captured. Be it the news camera or the phone cameras of the people involved, none of them were able to focus correctly on the enigmatic rider as he dealt with the bikers one by one. Aside from a few scattered moments, every record had strange, unfocused distortion.

This made the few clear images that anyone had managed to capture get all the more attention. The strange spectacle of a biker seeming to spontaneously combust, burning up from the inside atop his bike had been posted online and picked up by the news.

Another short scrap of phone footage was causing particular problems. By the time the news helicopter started recording, the rider's cloak was black, trailing out behind him. Someone in one of the cars, though, had captured several seconds of the cloak lit up with shifting stars before their recording likewise became distorted. It was the only clear image of the rider, their unusual outfit and their unique bike. Most importantly, it was the only clear image of the rider trailing a comet tail of stars behind them.

The inevitable comparisons to Batman were something Annabeth could live with, since it muddied the waters. After the footage of the cloak of stars appeared online, though, the figure was dubbed the Starlight Rider by the media. Immediate comparisons were drawn to the stories of an angel made of stars from just a few days earlier, the incident that became known as the Sydney Children's Hospital Miracle. With the connection made between the SCH Miracle and the rolling gun fight, Annabeth's job was made all the harder.

Vermillion not only had to work with her to try and keep a lid on things, but bear the responsibility of the Blood Riders instigating the latest and most public debacle. As much as she hated her situation, she was glad not to be in his shoes. This whole affair could – and probably would – get her demoted. She had heard stories about the ways that the Cabal showed their displeasure, and while they were only rumours, she did not envy Vermillion, whatever the truth. Her sympathy for the man did not mean she would let up in getting what she needed from the Cabal, however.

"Well?" she demanded of him.

For his part, Vermillion was having as bad an afternoon as Annabeth. A figure from the murky reaches of the Cabal's upper levels had arrived to take charge, reducing Vermillion himself to a glorified message boy. It left him off the hook for cleaning up the huge mess, but also without a means to redeem himself after what happened under his watch. He would be held to account for the Network being handed the very last thing the Cabal wanted them to have: a justification to interfere with the Cabal's affairs.

"A delegation of my people have agreed to come in to answer for the Blood Riders," Vermillion said.

"When?" Annabeth asked.

“Our own investigation is ongoing. You will have answers when we have answers to give.”

“And how long will this investigation take?” Annabeth asked.

“We are confident we know who did this,” Vermillion said. “They have already been taken in hand and we are confirming the details now.”

“That quickly?”

“It was not a grand scheme. It was the ambition of a fool who did not realise what they were setting in motion.”

“And how do I know that you aren’t just drumming up a scapegoat?”

“As you know,” Vermillion said, “we do not like outside influence in our affairs.”

“You have always been fastidious about handling internal affairs internally,” Annabeth acknowledged.

“In this instance, however, we recognise that our internal affairs have significantly impacted the Network’s core tenets. I’ve been told that we’ll be handing the perpetrator completely over to you.”

“Perpetrator, singular? You expect us to believe that one person is responsible for all of it?”

“The person in question did try to rope in an ally,” Vermillion said. “As best we can determine, this person immediately saw how wrong it would go and was killed for trying to interfere. You don’t have to take our word for it, though. You can use whatever means are at your disposal to get the truth from the man in question.”

“Any means? You’re truly giving him up instead of just a supervised interrogation?”

“Normally, we protect our own,” Vermillion said, “but this man has violated our own core tenets. No one is happy about how these events have gone. You will not be expected to show this person the courtesy you would otherwise extend to our members. How you question him and what to do with him when you’re done is up to you.”

“And if we choose to give him back?”

“That would be one of the crueller choices,” Vermillion said.

The decision had been made to cut out the cancer and leave it to the Network, in hope of avoiding more painful procedures down the line. The man in question was never a Cabal elite, instead a relative made into a vampire from compassion. Without being turned, he would have died from a fatal medical condition.

Annabeth was satisfied with the Cabal’s gesture, at least until she actually got her hands on the man in question to learn more. She turned the conversation to another topic.

“Why did you just let these blood servants keep running around?” she asked. “You had to understand that depriving them of blood would make them dangerous and volatile. I’m surprised your people didn’t kill them.”

“It was discussed,” Vermillion said. “In the end, it was Cabal members who approached the gang with promises and offers. Even if the members in question were far outside what would have been permitted if they hadn’t operated in secret, the Cabal was nonetheless responsible. Killing these men for becoming the thing we made them was ethically unsound.”

“You’re going to talk to me about mercy?” Annabeth asked. “Even disregarding the dead bikers, we have six civilian fatalities and we aren’t even done counting the injured. This disaster has been broadcast to every corner of the globe, on my watch. Everyone from the Steering Committee to the Network Council to the god damn Prime Minister has crawled up my arse and set up a ‘punch Anna in the colon’ booth. That’s what your mercy has done.”

“Some violent lashing out would not fall outside the expectations of a known criminal motorcycle gang,” Vermillion explained. “If not instigated to this, it would have remained contained. I was already in the process of arranging to have them arrested so they could go through the withdrawal period in custody, where they could be locked up without hurting anyone.”

“That didn’t really work out, did it?”

“No,” Vermillion conceded. “Unfortunately, I was overruled on who should administer the winding down of the Blood Rider project. The ones who started it all were placed in charge of closing it all down. It was meant to save face and be a lesson.”

“That seems like a recipe for disaster,” Annabeth said. “And now it’s been cooked up, and a disaster is what we got.”

“Quite,” Vermillion agreed.

“What about this rogue essence-magician?” Annabeth asked.

“He is not opposed to meeting you,” Vermillion said. “I had already advised him to seek you out prior to this affair.”

“Out of the kindness of your heart, I suppose.”

“A weapon you are not equipped to wield is at least as much a danger to you as to your enemy,” Vermillion said. “I don’t know where this man came from, but he’s a naked edge, fresh from battle. A well-sharpened edge, at that. He went through them like a chainsaw through butter. Thirty blood servants and I don’t think he even saw them as a

threat. I think he was testing out different ways to kill them, to see what worked. As it turns out, all of it did.”

“So, he’s a maniac.”

“I told you, Mrs Tilden, he’s fresh from some kind of battlefield. His instincts are still to react to any threat with definitive force.”

“You think being bloodthirsty gets him a pass?”

“I think that if we can help him rehabilitate, he’ll be a valuable ally,” Vermillion said. “If we forcefully suppress him, on the other hand, we’ll make a profoundly dangerous enemy. I suggest trying to understand him before taking action.”

“Well, if it’s understanding I need,” Annabeth said, “I think I know where to start.”

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In a police station, Vermillion and Annabeth watched Hiro from the next room, through the interrogation room security camera. Hiro’s body language revealed none of the turmoil they could both read in his aura. From the moment he arrived in the police station, Hiro had played confused victim flawlessly. Once he found himself in an interrogation room, he had asked for a lawyer and said not another word.

“Hiro Asano has not been inducted into the secrets of our world,” Vermillion said. “By your own rules, that makes him hands off.”

“I’ll acknowledge that if his nephew kept him in the dark like you said, that’s a good sign that the boy can act with decorum,” Annabeth conceded. “Will he continue to do so after today, though?” Annabeth asked. “He’s certainly going to tell his uncle, now.”

“Of course he will,” Vermillion said. “But Hiro hasn’t been told yet. Is today the day to play fast and loose with the rules?”

“There is such a thing as discretionary power, Mr Vermillion.”

“Mrs Tilden. You, like everyone else, saw this man’s nephew take apart a magically empowered gang of hardened bikers like they were a nice, crumbly cheddar. What you didn’t see and I did was how he reacted when that situation began. He wasn’t scared when they came on us. He wasn’t worried, or even concerned. He was excited.”

“He killed a dozen people.”

“Easily, and without hesitation. I would be very careful about how you treat his uncle.”

“You need to bring him to us,” Annabeth said.

“I told you that I’ve already agreed to set up a meeting. We can discuss the terms of that meeting now, if you like.”

“Terms? He can’t go running using magic to kill people on television. He comes to us or we go get him.”

“Despite the nature of his power, Mrs Tilden, he isn’t one of your people. Somehow he gained the power that only your people wield without learning of your organisation before I told him about it yesterday.”

“Do you think I care? Do you think that the people I answer to care?”

Vermillion turned his head from the viewing window to look at Annabeth, his face softening.

“Mrs Tilden. Anna. We’ve known each other for a number of years and have, I think, a good working relationship. As such, I hope you take this advice in the spirit it is given: Do not provoke Jason Asano. I’ve seen only a little of his power and a little of his mind, but it has been my experience that he treats kind with kind. Show him courtesy and you’ll receive it in turn. Come at him with force and you’ll be smeared across a highway on the news.”

“The Network is not a gang hopped up on vampire blood, Craig. If we decided to deal with him, there’s nothing he can do to stop us. Even if he’s inclined to stand against us, he won’t try once he realises the magnitude of what he’s up against.”

“Perhaps,” Vermillion said, “but I don’t think so. He may have the blood of the Japanese in his body, but he has the spirit of Ned Kelly in his soul.”

“Ned Kelly made a stand against the authorities, getting friends, family and innocent bystanders killed in the process.”

“And became a folk hero, none of which invalidates my point. In case it sways your decision, it is the official position of the Cabal that Jason Asano’s liberty and independence be respected.”

“How did you get your people to agree to that?”

“I convinced them that a favour today will pay dividends tomorrow. I strongly recommend that you take the same attitude.”

“If the Cabal thinks they can use him to establish their own branch of essence magicians, they’re in for disappointment.”

“That kind of ambition is above my pay grade, Mrs Tilden, but if that is their intention, then I’m confident that you’re correct. I’m simply of the opinion that Jason Asano will make a good friend and a very bad enemy.”

Annabeth gave a weary sigh.

“Do you know where he is now?”