

Chapter 285

The Complete Set

“Look at the way he moves,” said Nigel, the combat instructor of the Network’s Sydney branch. “That fighting style isn’t an extension of ordinary martial arts.”

A cluster of Network analysts and investigators were watching the footage Aram had captured of Asano’s rooftop fight. They had already seen it three times.

“It looks like stage combat,” Ketevan said. “Like the whole thing was choreographed.”

“His fighting style is designed from the ground up to incorporate superhuman capabilities and supernatural powers,” Nigel assessed. “I don’t think he learned that on our world.”

“You think this supports the outworlder theory?” Aram asked.

“I do,” Nigel said. “The category three is completely outclassed in terms of skill. He only won because of the vast gulf in power between categories two and three. Trying to jump categories at that level is dancing on a knife edge. When facing that kind of strength alone, you can’t make any slip ups. Let them outpace you, you’re done. Fail to counter one ability, to anticipate one move and you probably won’t get a second chance. Asano made one mistake and that was all it took to turn the tables, because a category three’s bare hands are stronger than most special attacks.”

“Alright, that’s enough,” Annabeth said as the footage finished again. “Nigel, work with the analysts, get me anything and everything from that footage I can use. Aram, get me an update on the search for that car. Ketj, with me.”

Annabeth marched out of the room, Ketevan in tow.

“Ketj,” she said wearily, “update me on the biker siege.”

“The police standoff with the survivors of the tollway fight is ongoing. Media presence is exactly as bad as we projected. We’re coordinating with the Cabal on resolving the outcome. Mr Vermillion has assured us that the bikers are all going to have a violent drug reaction and die very shortly, including the ones in police and medical custody.”

Annabeth took a short moment to play out the scenario in her mind.

“The story will be an undirected, mass reaction to a bad batch of drugs leading to tragic and violent outbursts,” she said thoughtfully. “We can work with that. It’ll play well with the conservative crowd; let them distract everyone with a crackdown on drug enforcement.”

“Mr Vermillion wanted to express that the Cabal takes responsibility for the problem. He also wanted to know where Jason Asano was.”

“Don’t we all. What about this vampire they claim is responsible for unleashing the Blood Riders. Are they any closer to handing him over?”

“Mr Vermillion says it will be by the end of the day.”

The biker battle footage was still being looped on the international news and now phone footage was cropping up depicting flagrantly magical events. Fortunately, the central figure was just as blurry and indistinguishable in those as in the news footage and the panicked, amateurish camerawork made it all the less clear. The problems stemmed from the few scraps of clear footage, along with eye-witness accounts gaining media coverage. Fortunately, the outlandish claims were being widely dismissed.

Then came the revelation that one the French branches of the Network had snuck a category three operative into the country without notifying them and kidnapped someone without any of the Australian branches being any the wiser. If Aram hadn’t been present, the operative could have spun any kind of tale as to why they arrived on the Sydney branch’s doorstep on the verge of death. If not for the Australia’s strongest healer being stationed in its largest city, the French agent would be dead.

Annabeth stormed into medical, looking for said healer. She found her sprawled on a couch in the medical admin, looking like she’d run a marathon. There were a few empty potion bottles lying on the floor, along with a pair that still contained mana potion. Gladys had an old lady name and an old lady age, but her category three powers gave her the looks of an Olympic beach volleyballer, with an athletic body, vibrant skin and dark, lustrous hair.

“Well?” Anna demanded.

Gladys forced her eyes open unhappily.

“It’s done.”

“Did you tell him you were too exhausted to fully heal him?”

“I am too exhausted to fully heal him.”

“Good. Just being collared doesn’t stop him from being dangerous and I doubt the shackles will hold him. Ket, have him moved to containment. Do not give him a spirit coin if he asks.”

Ketevan left and Annabeth turned back to Gladys, still laying back on the couch.

“He was really that damaged?” Annabeth asked.

“I’m amazed he survived long enough to get to us. I’m constantly astounded at the resilience of category three essence magicians, and I am one. I just never want to test that kind of trauma on myself. I completely tapped myself out keeping him alive.”

“What made it so hard?”

“For one thing, those conditions were too resistant to my abilities. I should have been punching down on category two magical ailments. The real problem, though, was the condition type. It was holy.”

“We don’t say holy, Gladys. We say luminous.”

“Stick your nomenclature guidelines up your arse, Anna. It was holy and it was brutal. I only have one power that removes holy conditions and I can’t use it in quick succession. I had to keep healing him between uses to keep him alive while I slowly cleared the conditions off in chunks. Even then, if the damage condition hadn’t been dropping off by itself, I’d have run out of steam before the job was done, even with mana potions.”

“What about cleansing potions for him?”

“He took one before he came, which is the only reason he got to us still alive. I shoved another one in him every time he could take it. What the hell did this to him?”

“You saw the news?” Annabeth asked. “The man knocking over blood servants like bowling pins?”

“It was that guy?”

“Yeah. I really want to get a hold of him, but our French friend had accomplices bundle him up and take him away. Answers are only the beginning of what I want from the Frenchman. I’m going to juice him like an orange.”

“Are you allowed to do that?”

“He didn’t even request entry to Australia, let alone notify us. I’m very much looking forward to discussing protocol violations with whichever French prick has the plums to pick up the phone and complain.”

“And the man who did this to him was taken away?”

“Yes,” Annabeth said unhappily. “We have people looking, but we don’t have a lot to spare while we scramble to clean up the original crap storm. I told the Steering Committee that letting the EOA get their hooks in the media barons was a bad idea. Anyone with a functional brain could see that, but them? No, they’re too clever to bother with a blatantly obvious threat.”

“You have an issue with the Steering Committee, Mrs Tilden?”

The cool, amused voice was a stark contrast to Annabeth’s increasingly wild ranting. She whirled around, trying to school her expression before giving up and letting the rage spill over.

“You know what, Keith?” she asked. “I do. I’ve got a list of emails so long you could deforest a national park and not have enough paper to print them all out. Every one of them is a warning about the problems we need to solve today so they don’t blow up on us

tomorrow. The EOA's influence in the media. The government weakening our position with our international partners. THE FRIGGING BLOOD RIDERS! I warned the committee about the Cabal playing fast and loose months ago, and do you remember what you told me, Keith?"

"Not precisely," Keith said, his amusement gone in the face of his unhinged subordinate.

"You said 'don't rock the boat, Anna. We don't want to cause trouble with the other factions, Anna.' Well, the boat's goddamn capsized, Keith, because I warned you yesterday, now it's today and everything blew the fuck up! And I know who's going to eat it for this, and it sure as hell won't be you, will it Keith?"

"Anna..."

"Keith did you come here to tell me what a terrible job I'm doing? To replace me? No, no you didn't, because you need a goat you can stake out to shoulder all the blame when the International Committee comes slaving for meat. You think I don't know that I'm done after this? You've got two options, you little prick. Kick me out now, or shut your face while I do my last job however I damn well please."

The young man in the sharp suit looked like he'd been blasted by a gust of wind, while Gladys was tiredly clapping from the couch, even letting out a feeble, laughing cheer.

Keith turned a glare on Gladys, who fired an insolent glare right back.

"Go on, little boy," she told him, getting up from the couch to stand next to Annabeth. "Try and tell me off. Then go explain to the Steering Committee how their category three healer heard about their intentions for my good friend Anna and we ran off to join the Fiji branch and live on a beach. I'm pretty confident they'll take us."

Keith frowned unhappily.

"You're right that people are watching, Anna," he said, "but you and I both know that if anyone can salvage this, it's you. Yes, if this goes wrong, I can't shield you. If you manage to get the lid back on the pot, though, this is your way up. Committee membership. A say in all those decisions you keep protesting."

A lot of the hot air deflated out of Anna.

"Are you blowing smoke up my arse, Keith?"

"Regardless of what you might think, Anna," Keith said, "there are those of us that believe you can be a valuable voice on the committee. I know you're having a rough day, but I need a little less conversation and a little more action, please. A seat at the big table is on the line and not every committee member is as accommodating as I am."

"If you say hysterical woman..." Gladys warned.

“Wouldn’t dream of it. I’m going to take one of the small offices until this thing is sorted. If you need any extra resources, come to me and I’ll clear it. Today, you get anything and everything you need. Just ask and I’ll make it happen.”

Anna looked a little sheepish at her blow up.

“Thanks, Keith. Sorry I kind of exploded on you.”

“Kind of?” Keith asked with a chuckle. “I get it, Anna. You were proved right about all the wrong things and now you’re the one stuck holding the bag. Now that you’ve blown off some steam, are you ready to get back to work?”

“Yeah,” Anna said. “I’ll get it done. Can you try and figure out who the hell sent this French operative here?”

“I’ll even try and figure out why,” Keith said.

“Oh, I know why,” Anna said. “The French caught their outworlder and they wanted the complete set before anyone could confirm what they were.”

“You’re convinced this Asano is an outworlder?”

“Go take a look at the footage Aram took of their fight,” she told him. “Talk to Nigel. He thinks the guy’s fighting is literally out of this world.”

“I’ll do that,” Keith said. “I’ll stop interrupting and let you get back to it. Just remember that some of us do have your back, Anna.”

He left, leaving Annabeth and Gladys together.

“Am I crazy, or did he quote Elvis in there?” Annabeth asked.

“Yep,” Gladys said. “I actually slept with Elvis. Young Elvis, too, not squishy Elvis.”

Annabeth gave her a sideways look.

“He was rubbish,” Gladys continued. “Now Marlon Brando; that guy knew his business. Turns out he was cheating on Rita Moreno with me, though, and then she went and slept with Elvis. She didn’t like it any more than I did.”

Jason groggily came to in the boot of a moving car. From the rough ride that finally shook him awake, he knew they were on a gravel road. He felt the familiar sensation of a suppression collar, which didn’t worry him. At this point he used them on himself for aura training.

Even a powerful version like the one the Builder had crafted and put him in was something he could negate for at least a few crucial moments. Short of a collar designed to suppress gold-rankers, he was confident that he could deal with it. His problem was that once he did, anyone nearby with aura senses would know about it, while he wouldn’t sense who was in the car until he pushed off the suppression.

He didn't know what condition the silver-ranker was in after their battle. He knew the man had to be in a bad state, but what healing did he have access to?. Even if he survived, it should have taken a powerful ally or significant resources to keep him alive. He might not be fully recovered.

Jason, on the other hand, felt physically in top form, to his surprise. Much of Colin's biomass had been destroyed and would need to slowly recover before restoring Jason's full regenerative power, which left a question of why. He would need his system interface back before he got answers.

He knew that the best time to act was while they were still on the move, when his enemies had limited resources in place to deal with him. When he made his move, it would need to be definitive. Once he did, his enemies would learn that suppression collars couldn't truly suppress him. That was not information he was willing to let out.

He pushed out with his aura, negating the bronze-rank suppression collar with ease. Immediately he sensed three bronze-rank presences in the car, but not the silver-ranker. Given that the silver-ranker had snuck up on Jason before, though, it did not mean he wasn't present.

With the return of his interface power, a system message popped up.

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- You have been afflicted with a massive dose of [Carfentanil].
 - You have resisted [Carfentanil].
 - [Carfentanil] does not take effect.
 - You have gained multiple instances of [Resistant].
 - You have gained multiple instances of [Integrity].
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Apparently they had tried to sedate him before putting the collar on, allowing his Sin Eater power absorb the affliction. That had given him enough stacks of Integrity to heal him up, explaining his current condition. Even after the collar suppressed the ability that bestowed them, the buff effects apparently continued to work, restoring Jason to full health.

He sensed the reactions from the auras in the front of the car as they became aware of his own. Shifting himself around, he got himself some leverage and pressed his legs against the lid of the boot. After only a few seconds, his superhuman strength was enough to force open the lock and the boot popped open. He conjured his cloak as he pushed himself out of the moving vehicle, which allowed him float into a gentle impact on the gravel road.

The car pulled to a rapid stop. It was night, with no lights in the middle of nowhere other than those of the car. The overcast winter sky blocked out the stars, the moon a

diffuse glow behind the clouds. With his ability to see through darkness, he could clearly make out the three people in the car, one for each of the bronze-rank auras.

The silver-ranker was not present. For the moment it didn't matter if he was dead or just absent, so long as he wasn't around to pose a threat. As for the three bronze-rankers, Jason was about to fill the final moments of their lives with misery, torment and fear.