

## Chapter 861

### Staring Out at the Dark

Rufus and Taika were handed dimensional bags filled with items, including recordings from Jason and Farrah. They each moved to the middle of a ritual platform and were slowly sealed inside egg-shaped conjured dimensional vessels. The brown ovoids spread from the platform up, and Rufus locked eyes with Gary until their line of sight was blocked.

Boris conducted a large-scale ritual, at the culmination of which the messengers and the two vessels all vanished. The onlookers departed, almost everyone having more than enough to do in the wake of the expedition's return. Farrah and Gary didn't rush off, instead taking an aimless stroll through the empty streets.

"Are we heading somewhere in particular?" she asked.

"Anywhere quiet."

"Everywhere is quiet here," she said. "What are..."

She trailed off as a divine aura announced the arrival of a god. Hero looked not unlike Gary's demigod form; a leonid too large for even Gary's hulking species.

"Thank you for waiting," Gary said.

"If not the ancient and immortal," Hero asked, "then from whom can you expect patience? In any case, Asano's invitation to this place was contingent on letting you make your goodbyes first."

"Excuse me, your godness," Farrah said, "but I didn't think deities could enter Jason's spirit domains at all."

"His control over his power grows," the god said, "and will only continue to do so. I had hoped he would use it to vouchsafe your life, Gareth Xandier."

"He gave me a choice," Gary said. "I chose."

Hero nodded.

"I know that you intend to hold my power a little longer. Please continue with my blessing, for as long as you can tolerate it."

"It's your blessing that got us here in the first place," Farrah muttered.

"*Farrah!*" Gary admonished.

Hero held out a restraining hand.

"She is not wrong," the god said, sadness tinging his voice. "I am sorry that this is all I had to offer you."

"Yeah, well, maybe come up with a less lethal miracle," Farrah said.

*“Farrah!”*

“I would like that,” Hero said. “But change is hard for my kind, and often comes with consequences we neither foresee nor welcome. We only have to look to Purity for that.”

“I am sorry for her disrespect,” Gary said. *“And so is she.”*

“It’s alright,” Hero said. “I would not act this way with every god, Farrah Hurin, but I am the god of heroes. I, of all, understand that actions, not power, are what makes one worthy of respect. And all I do is kill heroes.”

The sadness emanating from the god’s aura was on a divine level and Farrah felt caught up in it, as if struck by a tidal wave. Tears spilled from her eyes. She felt the god’s despair at his role, undeniable and sincere.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

The god placed a large hand on her shoulder as she bent her head. His voice became warm and paternal.

“Feel no shame in standing for a friend, child. Instead take pride in doing so, especially in the face of a god.”

“With respect,” Gary said, “I’m not sure you should be encouraging that behaviour.”

The god let out a laugh, startling the mortal and the demigod.

“You are fine heroes, both of you. And being a hero is more than just weapons and battlefields. I know of your project, Farrah Hurin. Working to connect the world. More good will come from that than any ‘glorious war.’”

Hero said the last two words as if they left a bad taste in his mouth.

“To be honest, I’m mostly doing it for the money,” Farrah said and the god laughed again.

“‘To be honest?’ You should not lie to gods, Farrah Hurin.”

Gary looked up as Gwydion Remore approached them, wandering down an empty street. The priest bowed before his god.

“Lord Hero.”

The god nodded his acknowledgement, then turned back to Gary. When he spoke, his paternal tone had once more become divine and imposing.

“I have permitted you to keep my power for so long as you can hold it, Gareth Xandier, but there is one order of business to be settled now.”

The god stepped back and Gwydion moved to stand before Gary. There was none of Gwydion’s normal amusement in his expression as he bowed before Gary, as deeply as he had for his god.

“Gareth Xandier,” he intoned. “You are a hero, to be sung through the ages. Your battle is done and your well-earned time of rest draws near. I ask that you bestow your relic upon my church, in testament to your deeds.”

Gary looked at Gwydion for a long time, the priest still bent over in mid-bow. Then he held out his hand, into which an enormous hammer appeared with a burst of golden fire. He held it out and Gwydion stood up. Despite his serious expression, Gwydion couldn't keep the mirth from his eyes as he read the words ‘Gary's Medium Hammer,’ etched into the weapon's massive head.

“Thank you, hero. I wish you nothing but joy in the time that is left to you.”

“I didn't do it to be remembered,” Gary said. “But there's not much point holding onto the thing. We both know that when you say my battle is done, I don't have anything useful left to do for anyone.”

“Gary—”

“Don't, Gwydion. I gave you my hammer. At least have the decency to not pay for it with a nice lie. I never wanted to be a hero.”

Gwydion looked at Gary in silence, his expression conflicted. He turned and left, carrying the hammer reverently, if somewhat unsteadily, away. Although the priest's gold-rank strength was enough to lift it, it still weighed many times more than he did. It was also large enough that he looked like a child making off with his father's weapon.

When Gary and Farrah turned to look back at the god, they realised he was gone, only his divine aura lingering.

“That's it, then,” Gary said. “No more obligations. Not until the end.”

Farrah gripped Gary's much larger hand and gave it a squeeze.

\*\*\*

The aftermath of the expedition to the underground was a mess. The Adventure Society and the Magic Society both wanted answers. The emergence of a new polity, deep underground, was a complication to their closest neighbour, and Yareh had enough problems already.

The appearance of the transformation zone had led the messengers to realise that the soul forge their astral king had put so much effort into was almost certainly lost to them. The truce with Yareh came to a violent end as fighting resumed for the first time since the messengers invaded.

Yareh itself was not the centre of the fighting, with its magical defences being the one thing left largely intact. Instead, skirmishes took place in the smaller population centres in the region. Not long recovered from the monster surge, the towns and villages

left alone for their lack of strategic importance were suddenly subjected to raids for no better reason than to slake an astral king's anger.

Yaresh and her adventurers struck back hard, repeatedly raiding the remaining messenger strongholds. With so many resources dedicated to rebuilding the city, they could not afford to besiege fortifications reinforced by advanced messenger magic. Even so, they forcefully struck back against the messengers.

Rather than dedicating the forces required to breach the strongholds, Yaresh and the Adventure Society deployed powerful champions to periodically hammer the enemy defences. Attacking with elites only saved on valuable manpower and avoided unaffordable casualties. Rather than successfully penetrate the defences, they bled the messengers of the resources required to repair their defences after each attack.

The messenger strongholds boasted magnificent protective magic, beyond anything found in Pallimustus. Diamond-rankers were the ultimate trump card, however, and while Yaresh had two, the only one on the messenger side had died invading the city. Not only did Charist and Allayeth punish the messenger defences but also pushed them to the limit. The messengers had to fully restore them after each attack if they wanted to withstand the next.

The skirmish was lasted for months, defined by logistical shortcomings. The messengers weren't allowed to withdraw, yet were no longer being reinforced or resupplied. Their astral king drove them to spend their lives on petty, inconsequential revenge.

Yaresh and the Adventure Society wanted to crush their enemy, but were unwilling to divert the requisite people and resources. With messenger attacks in the region ongoing and the city under reconstruction, the decision was made to let attrition end the messengers. If their astral king wanted to sacrifice them in dribs and drabs for nothing, her enemies were happy to let her.

The main casualties on both sides came from the messenger attacks on towns and villages. Despite the increasingly dire situation the messengers were in, they continued their pointless attacks against now mostly evacuated towns and villages. The adventurers became increasingly adept at predicting and countering their unevolving patterns of attack. By the time the transformation zone opened up, it was less a defensive patrol program than an exercise in messenger hunting.

It was clear that the messengers were done in the region. Their numbers fell too far and their resources dwindled too much to effectively defend their last stronghold. They

were beyond the point where they would have needed to spring a trap that revealed their poor tactics to be grand strategy.

In the end, the diamond rankers all but strolled in to eliminate the final defenders. The messengers fought to almost the very last, with only a few notable leaders absent when the fortress finally fell. That was a little more than a month after the transformation zone ended and the expedition finally returned to the surface. What was left of Jason's team even participated in the final raids.

The messenger war had ended for Yaresh, at least until another astral king found some reason to return. The celebration was enthusiastic but modest, as the aftermath was bitter. The astral king's ambitions had been destructive enough, but her spite in failure was worse for the pointlessness of it. She had let her own people die for no more reason than to scorch as much earth as they could. The reconstruction would be more daunting than the wake of any monster surge.

One bright light had been the growth chambers of the underground city. They had the capacity to sustain hundreds of thousands, yet had only ten thousand to feed. The ability to solve the region's food problem instantly was a massive boon for the brighthearts who were now faced with diplomatic relations for the first time in centuries.

Jason's team, like the rest of the expedition, faced weeks of debriefing meetings with the Adventure Society. Their insistence that they would not answer to any Magic Society representatives caused contention but was ultimately accepted. Danielle Geller did not have the reputation on this side of the world she did in her homeland... at first. That changed in direct proportion to the bureaucratic pressure applied to her son.

Danielle also teleported Farrah's parents in from Rimaros. Despite her desire to return to her personal project, Farrah and her parents joined Gary and his in what remained of Jason's soul realm. While the rest of their friends were dealing with one debrief after another, Farrah quickly fled to the tree city and didn't come back out.

Others had migrated into the tree city as well. Mostly this consisted of Carlos Quilido and a new research team he'd assembled. His previous assistants had returned to Rimaros while Carlos was underground, although many returned. The funding was not a problem due to the father of Gibson Amouz, the young nobleman in the care of Carlos.

Gibson had been trapped in a customised stasis chamber for around a year, rescued halfway through a conversion process meant to turn him into a zealot slave. Undoing the horrors visited upon him was the focus of Carlos' work. The Healer priest was hoping that success would lead to saving others thought lost forever to vampirism and related conditions.

Jason had set up a research centre in the tree city, the hope being that Jason's power to manipulate reality there would help advance the research while keeping the subjects alive. One of those subjects was Sophie's mother, Melody Jain. The zealots of the Order of Redeeming Light she had once led were the rest of the subjects. Some accepted being led into the tree city and some did not. Those who refused were confined in the brightheart city with the permission of Lorenn.

Also staying were former teammates Arabelle Remore and Callum Morse. Arabelle was a part of Carlos' research project, trying to keep the subjects sane while he kept them alive. Those subjects who had entered the soul realm had the influence controlling them turned off by Jason's power, like Sophie's mother. Arabelle's role would be to help them through their trauma.

As for Callum Morse, Arabelle wanted to help him as well. She blamed herself for failing to notice the deteriorating mental health of her friend. He had spent years searching for Melody with what became an unhealthy obsession. With Melody wanting to reconnect with Callum, Arabelle intended to do her best to help both.

\*\*\*

Jason's team was down several members following the underground expedition. Jason himself was a critical source of damage, but the absence of Rufus and Taika was also felt. They had been temporary members from the start, but how temporary had always been an open question. With how well they had fit in, bringing welcome power and versatility, their departure left a hole.

After weeks of unceasing questions, the team was extremely ready to move on. Especially when more and more answers began with "I don't know."

"I don't know, it was a weird Jason thing."

"I don't know why it was shaped like his head."

"I don't know. It looked like a bunch of magic carriages all stuck together to make a giant golem."

After a final visit to Farrah, Gary, and Melody in the tree city, the team prepared to leave. The destination was the city of Vitesse, in the nation of Estercost. When they left, it was with another temporary team member, to try and patch over the hole in their ranks.

\*\*\*

Team Storm Shredder was over. The surviving members were Rosa, the team scout, Amos Pensinata's nephew Orin, and Zara Nareen. Amos took Orin back to Rimaros and Rosa went with them. The scout had been shaken to the core, and Zara knew that she

would not return to adventuring soon, if ever. The silent Orin was as hard to read as ever and she had no idea how the trauma had affected him.

Despite being a latecomer, Zara had built a strong camaraderie during her brief but exciting time with the team. In the aftermath of its destruction, she was left shaken, alone and fragile. When she had been at her most lost, the team was the place she found. Her intentions had been foolish at first, but as her sense of belonging had grown, that belonging had become her purpose. Now, there was nothing left to belong to.

She had no place left. Her father had sent people to bring her home, and she had followed, but the messes she had left back home had not gone away. The political fiction of being cast out was still a necessity and it was not long before she returned to Yaresh. In the last days of the messenger war, she threw herself into the fight against the messengers. It was good work for good people, but it wasn't a purpose.

When the last messenger stronghold fell, Zara was once more at a loss. On the night of the victory celebration, she stood alone on the city wall, looking out into the dark.

"There's that look again."

Zara turned to find Sophie standing next to her. She hadn't snuck up so much as been moving faster than Zara's aura senses could detect.

"How do you move that fast without kicking up the wind?" Zara asked.

"The wind is kind enough to get out of the way," Sophie told her. "What's in your way, Princess? I saw you out there, fighting the messengers. You went hard. Harder than a lot of people like you I've robbed. But here you are, with the same look that was on your face when we came out of the hole."

Sophie's expression softened. She moved to the stone balustrade next to Zara and stared into the night.

"It's not easy losing people," she said. "I know that, and I've never lost anyone who meant anything to me other than my dad. But I have people that matter, now. Lindy, Humphrey... all of them. I don't know what kind of kick in the teeth that would be. I spent so long keeping people out. Now that I've finally let them in, I think losing them might break me."

"I'm not broken," Zara said, hesitant as she looked for the words. "The team mattered to me, but we weren't so close that..."

She closed her eyes, squeezing out tears.

"It hurts, but I'm not broken. I'm lost. I was starting to belong; to have a purpose. Being part of something; building it together."

“And you threw yourself into tearing up the messengers to push all that aside, if only for a little bit. I get that.”

“It was doing good for good people. But that’s not a purpose.”

“It’s purpose enough for me. But I’m just a thief, not a princess.”

“I’m not a princess anymore. And you’re not a thief.”

“But you can be a princess again. If you want it. Maybe not the Hurricane Princess, but there are worse things to be than ordinary, everyday royalty. I understand there are fewer decapitations if you don't stand out.”

“You know nothing about how royalty works, do you?”

“No, and I don't care. And as for thieving, I haven't entirely left that behind. Adventuring calls for it more often than I expected.”

“Do you think I'm playing at adventurer? Waiting to go back to my palace?”

“Nope. I’ve seen you bleed, Princess. Seen your team members drag you out of the fight for refusing to leave people behind. Even if you had to prove anything to me, which you don't, you'd have proven yourself just fine.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“I don’t know. I’m just talking. It’s not for me to tell you how to live your life. I guess, if I’m saying anything, it’s that good work for good people isn’t so bad. While you’re waiting for purpose to come along, you can spend your life staring out at the dark, or you can spend it doing some good.”

“The messengers are all dead.”

Sophie let out a chuckle.

“There’s plenty more where they came from. And if you're tired of dealing with messengers, there’s always good work to be done somewhere. I even know some good people, if you’re looking.”



## Chapter 862

### Vacation Days

In a section of central Australia, the landscape was flat and dry, the red dirt occasionally marked by scraggly yellow grass. There had been a town there once; a pit stop between nowhere and nowhere else. The last few residents had been evacuated when the monster surges hit and no one had bothered coming back.

Jason and Farrah had chosen the town because there was nothing worth coming back for. The buildings were falling apart, leaning like old men under the punishing sun. There had been an old footy oval that hadn't seen a game in forty years. Grass had long given way to dirt and gravel, only the old bar seeing use in the town's last days. They built a circle of standing stones, like a rune-carved Stonehenge, on the flat ground of the oval. Not long after, they vanished into it and no one on Earth had seen them since.

The pair had left a mysterious artefact behind in a world ramping into a magical arms race. The magical factions, governments and even corporations rushing to get in on the new world of magic all rushed to investigate. The Australian government made the most of it, extracting favours and contracts from every interested party in return for access. What was left of the old town was knocked down, the buildings not worth using. In their place, caravans, motor homes and prefab constructions popped up overnight.

That first investigation was wiped out by a wave of magic that gushed out from the circle. What little remained of the town was wiped away, along with everything that replaced it, barring Jason and Farrah's stone circle. Even many of the people had vanished, presumed dead. All that remained was a ring of standing stones in a circle of red earth, scoured flat.

In the wake of that event, efforts to study the stone megaliths were both better funded and more cautious. A ring of buildings was constructed around the standing stones. These were proper facilities, not a hurried research camp. The Australian government's presence was obvious, along with the magical factions, the UN, the US, and China. A few corporations had paid through the nose to secure a position, looking to exploit the new reality of a magical Earth. There was little cooperation, only sharing resources as was strictly necessary.

In the middle of the night, two low-level workers were in a monitoring station belonging to the Australian government. Each screen was fed by an extremely expensive camera, zoomed in on the stone circle, including a satellite shot and several covering light spectrums outside of the normal human range. The camera feeds were live, but the shift

between day and night was the only change they had ever shown since their installation. Even the weather stayed the same. The only season was the dry, endless summer.

Lenora Coleman had been excited to join the program right out of university, but a year in that room siphoned any of that out of her. Even in the middle of the night, sweat dripped off her as a standing fan ineffectually pushed around the hot air. She had her feet up on a desk as she read yet another book about pregnant werewolf men. Her supervisor, Barry, was far from criticising her inattention as he played a game on his tablet.

Lenora got up and grabbed a can of soft drink from the fridge.

“Want one, Boss?” she asked, holding it up for Barry to see.

“Any sugar-free ones left?” he asked, looking up from his game.

Lenora bent over and peered into the fridge, digging one out from the back.

“You’re in luck,” she said and wandered over to hand him the drink. She looked down at the game on his tablet.

“*Vampire Survivors?*” she asked. “Isn’t that in bad taste when there’s an actual vampire war going on?”

“It’s a video game, Nora. That doesn’t have any vampires in it, by the way.”

“It’s got ‘vampire’ in the name.”

“Maybe they already survived the vampires, I don’t know. I didn’t make the—”

Both snapped their heads to stare at the monitors as multiple alarms rang out. Alarms they hadn’t heard since their initial training for the monitoring station. An alert for motion on the cameras was paired with one from the system that monitored the magical grid, restricted to local events. In the year they had been there, no monster, essence, or awakening stone had manifested in the area, despite the high regional magic.

Lenora and Barry both stared at the monitors. There was a huge, vaguely sphere-shaped zone of rainbow energy floating over the stone circle. It lit up the night with kaleidoscopic brightness, strong enough to shine rainbow light through their window, kilometres away from the site.

“It’s throwing off a lot of heat,” Lenora said, glancing at the thermal monitor. “Around 80 degrees C. I don’t suppose this is just a normal magic manifestation?”

Barry tore his eyes from the monitor bank and moved to the systems panel for the grid monitor.

“The grid is registering this as an anomalous category-four incursion,” he said.

“Gold-rank,” Lenora corrected. “We call it gold-rank now.”

“Tell that to whoever updates the software; this says category four.”

“Whatever it’s called, how boned are we?” Lenora asked.

"It just says anomalous."

"You used to monitor the grid for the Network, right?"

"Yeah, but the grid isn't equipped for much more than pointing at magical stuff. My job was to make a phone call when it did, and that's as far as it went. Speaking of which, check that the messages were sent."

Lenora moved to a systems panel and looked it over.

"The automated notifications have all gone out correctly," she said. "We shouldn't have to do anything, right? This is all above our head."

"It might be worth making a call," Barry said. "If the minister doesn't hear about this promptly, I don't want us to be the people everyone between us and him takes his displeasure out on."

"Good idea," Lenora said.

Barry moved to the landline on the wall and hit one of the speed dial buttons.

"Put me through to the office of the Minister for Supernatural Affairs," he said. "Me? This is Barry Sinise at the monitoring station for the Asano Circle. No, *Barry* Sinise. No, there isn't any bloody relation. Just put me through!"

"Uh, Boss?"

Something in Lenora's uncertain tone grabbed Barry's attention. He turned to look at her, noting that rainbow light was no longer coming through the windows. He looked at the monitor bank where Lenora was pointing.

"Am I imagining things," Lenora asked, "or is that a host of angels?"

\*\*\*

No one needed to sleep during the battle in Jason's soul, but the rules included three mandatory breaks per day. No violence was possible during these breaks, but there was always a food cart waiting by the side of the road, along with enchanted training weights tailored to a silver-ranker. These went ignored by most of the great astral beings. The exception was the Celestial Book who merrily plundered each new food cart.

None of the great astral beings had proven interested in speaking with Jason during the breaks, which suited Jason just fine. He used the time to meditate or work out his body, creating an optimal balance for advancement. While he did, the cosmic entities stood around awkwardly, including the World-Phoenix and her monster army.

It was more than a month before any of them broke the unofficial embargo on speaking with Jason. He was floating just over the ground, meditating cross-legged when he opened his eyes to look at the Builder standing in front of him.

“You have provided me with a better vessel than I have chosen for myself in our previous encounters,” the Builder said.

“That wasn’t hard. You were scraping the bottom of the barrel with Thadwick.”

“I thought that we should talk, now that the others cannot stop us.”

“And how would they stop us?”

“When the other great astral beings ascended me to their ranks, they took precautions to control me. When they bestowed upon me the sanctioned authority of original Builder, they set conditions on that authority.”

“What kind of conditions?”

“They have the power to revert my mind to the state it was in during my last moments as a messenger. I keep my memories, but my personality reverts.”

“Weren’t you sixteen years old then?”

“Yes. Brash, impetuous, foolish. Arrogant to an unrivalled degree. I was a prodigy on a level previously unseen amongst my kind. Given the nature of messengers, you can imagine what this did to my judgement. You do not have to, I suppose.”

“I do not.”

“I have, over time, learned to maintain the wisdom of years instead of needing to rebuild it each time. Even so, they can still revert my mind for a time.”

“Can great astral beings even have personalities when they aren’t inhabiting a normal vessel?”

“Not as such. To have one imposed is a highly unnatural state.”

“That explains a lot of the behaviour I’ve seen from you. Why would they do that?”

“I know now that their intention was always to restore my predecessor at some stage, shifting the authority given to me back to him. They never truly considered me one of them. That is why I am building my own universe. Not from a seed but something different, belonging to only me.”

“By pillaging worlds. Stealing astral spaces.”

“Yes. It is so that when the others finally move against me, I am left with an option beyond a fight I cannot win. The universe I am building will be my astral kingdom.”

“You’re saying that you’ve been pillaging worlds for billions of years so you can become an astral king?”

“The greatest of astral kings, with a kingdom unrivalled in the cosmos.”

“Unrivalled in the cosmos, huh? Couldn’t you just become a regular astral king? The kind that doesn’t need to kill who knows how many people in the process? Billions at this stage? Trillions?”

“A necessary price. How could you expect being a normal astral king to be enough when I have forged universes? Such a thing is beneath me.”

“Well, congratulations,” Jason said. “I’ve officially met a worse person than Thadwick Mercer, so it makes sense that you and he were the same person for a while. Why are you here, fighting to restore the throne? What’s in it for you?”

“The great astral beings could only do what they have done to me because they have become unbound from their core purposes. If the throne is restored, they will be more restricted in their actions against me.”

“Yeah, that figures. I’ll say this for you: you’ve definitely restored my faith in you being an evil, selfish piece of crap. I’m going to go get a hot dog.”

\*\*\*

Boris did not like the way he was returning to Earth. Leaving had been easy enough. Earth magic and technology had been easily circumvented when he was on the Earth side and leaving alone. Returning, though, he had no access to the surveillance infrastructure watching the circle. Even if he did, there was no hiding the magical signature of messengers arriving by the hundreds. The only way he could arrive was in spectacular fashion.

Most of the hundreds of messengers were only months old, liberated from the transformation zone. They appeared in the air over the stone circle, along with two giant brown eggs. Those eggs dissolved almost immediately, dropping their contents to the ground. Rufus Remore recovered quickly and used his aura to float to the ground. It was a pale echo of what a messenger aura could do, but as a silver-ranker he could levitate himself slowly. It was enough to at least not fall on his face. Taika Williams fell on his face, hitting the ground like a boulder.

“That legit sucked, bro,” he mumbled into the dirt.

Boris didn’t bother to watch Remore moving to check on his friend. Instead, he extended his senses over the gathered human monitoring stations. There were some familiar auras in the Cabal section, currently being very surprised.

\*\*\*

“No, Minister, the monitors are accurate,” Barry said into the phone. “There is what appears to be an army of angels out there. As of yet, no one has—”

The door slammed open as a portly man in a moderately well-fitting suit burst into the room.

“Give me that phone!” he demanded and marched over to snatch it from Barry.

“Minister,” he said into the phone. “This is Gordon Truffett. I’m onsite and taking command of operations.”

Barry shrugged and moved over to where Lenora was working at a computer.

“Anyone muster up the balls to go over there yet?” he asked.

“Not yet, although I’m seeing a lot of activity on the Cabal side. That makes sense with what facial recognition turned up.”

“We got hits?”

“Two,” Lenora said. “Each promising to be its own special can of worms. One is Boris Ketland. Our database lists him as a Cabal executive, but a human, not a ten-foot-tall angel.”

“It’s not that shocking. Since when has any human member of the Cabal turned out to be an actual human?”

“Never. The next hit is on one of the two humans. Or the two that look human, anyway.”

“The ones that fell out of those egg things?”

“Yeah. The system pegs the big Māori as Taika Williams. Member of Clan Asano — the Australian Clan Asano — and known associate of Jason Asano. Also, one of the people killed when the circle sent out that magic surge that got us all stationed here.”

“He survived the magic wave?”

“Looks like it. Assuming that’s actually him, he’ll be the first survivor, right?”

“Yeah,” Barry said as he turned to watch Truffett talking rapidly into the phone. “I’m glad this isn’t my job to sort out. I wonder if they’ll let me take my vacation days.”

## Chapter 863

### I Would Like to Buy a Meat Pie

The two kilometre stretch between the ring of standing stones and the surrounding facilities was a flat expanse of magic-blasted ground. There was no trace of the town that had once occupied the space, only red barren dirt.

The standing stones had been inert since the blast that had wiped out the town a year earlier, until the arrival of Rufus, Taika and an army of messengers. The facilities were abuzz with activity as the various groups watching the circle were deciding on a course of action. The Cabal were the first to act, sending out one man in a four-wheel-drive. The vehicle was caked in red dust and looked forty years old, but solid, like it would still be running in another forty.

Boris and the messengers had been floating in the air since their arrival. Rufus and Taika had dropped to the ground with varying levels of grace. The pair wandered out of the standing stones to meet the vehicle while Boris floated down to join them.

“This could be complicated, bro,” Taika said to Boris. “I think us showing up will be a big deal.”

“I am unfortunately inclined to agree,” Boris said. “I know the man approaching. I will attempt to simplify our situation in the short term, although we’ll all have to face the ramifications in time.”

“Simplify how?” Rufus asked.

“Our first move needs to be reaching Jason’s territory. The major complication with that is his territory is on the other side of the planet.”

“I thought you said we were arriving in Jason’s homeland,” Rufus said.

“This is Jason’s homeland,” Boris said. “But, in his absence, politics have left it a less than welcoming place for him. Or, by association, us.”

“Will they know we’re related to him?” Rufus asked.

“Magic is new to this world,” Boris said. “When major magical events happen, Jason Asano’s involvement will always be in the top three guesses. You and I, Mr Remore, just emerged from Jason’s big magic circle with Jason’s big brown friend. There is little point trying to hide the connection.”

“I’m not sure I can be called big around a bunch of nine-foot angels,” Taika said.

The car pulled up and the driver got out. He was silver-rank and looked human, but his aura was not that of an essence user. He was large, not just tall but muscular, with a

loose tan shirt, khaki shorts and brown work boots. He had a wide-brimmed hat and a leathery tan that suggested a lot of time in the sun.

“Boris Ketland, you sneaky bugger,” he called in a thick Australian accent. “I don’t know if anyone won the pool on you. A bloody angel? Who’d guess that, you skirt-chasing sleazebag?”

Boris chuckled, holding out his hand for the man to shake.

“It’s good to see you, Bruce. I’m hoping your presence here can smooth things out.”

“I wouldn’t go pinning your hopes on smooth, mate. You’ve right kicked the hornet’s nest. Showing up with these two blokes and a divine host at your back? Some bloody powerful people just got woken up.”

Boris nodded.

“I guessed as much. Anyway, Bruce Montgomery, allow me to introduce Taika Williams and Rufus Remore. Taika, I’m sure you know of already. Rufus has yet to learn any Earth languages.”

“Yeah, facial recognition pegged Taika the moment he brushed the dirt off his face. Had bit of a rough landing, mate?”

“The trip was a bit rough,” Taika said as he shook Bruce’s hand. “What was that about a pool?”

Bruce laughed.

“In the Cabal,” he said, “none of the human members ever turn out to be human. There’s always a pool on anyone who hasn’t shown their true colours.”

“It’s generally not polite to ask,” Boris said, “but Bruce here is an ogre. Or so he says.”

“Oh, don’t you bloody start,” Bruce said.

“I think he rigged the pool,” Boris said. “I think he’s not an ogre but three humans in a big coat.”

“Where would I even get a twelve-foot coat?” Bruce asked. “And you’ve seen me in my real form. You bought me those stretchy purple pants, you cheeky sod.”

Boris let out a chuckle.

“Can you get us to Europe, Bruce?” he asked. “Or keep everyone off us until we get there?”

“Europe’s tricky, mate. All you’ll find there are vampires and Asanos, and I assume you’re not looking for vampires. People want to ask you all some fairly pointed questions, and I don’t know they’ll let you hit Asano territory before answering them.”



“Given the power at my command,” Boris said, “they’ll have to throw a lot at us if they want to force the issue. My gold-rankers can each handle any two of the ones they have here. And I can handle a lot more than two.”

“And you’ll fight if it comes to that?” Bruce asked.

“We are entirely capable of fighting our way across the planet,” Boris said. “It would, however, be something of a pain. That being said, I think my non-winged companions have had enough of uncomfortable rides. I imagine they would prefer an aeroplane over being carried halfway around the Earth like a mouse in an eagle’s claws.”

“Well,” Bruce said, “you’re at least five steps above me in the Cabal hierarchy, so if you say we’re telling everyone else to back off, I guess that’s what we’re doing. I don’t think they’ll push, but if you had some kind of bone we could throw the other factions, that would go a long way.”

“Promise them spirit coin farming techniques. That will be valuable now the magic levels on Earth are rising.”

Bruce let out a low whistle.

“Yeah, that’ll do it. Everyone’s been trying it, but only the Yanks have had any success.”

“Meaning that everyone but the US is going to be happy with us, and the Americans will hate us.”

“Yep. You’ve never done things by halves, have you, Boris? Even before you showed up with an army of angels.”

“We’re not actually angels,” Boris explained. “We’re called messengers.”

“Doesn’t ‘angel’ mean messenger in Greek or Latin or some such?”

“Close enough, but we’re definitely not the messengers of God, Bruce.”

“Who are you the messengers of, then?”

“The will of the cosmos,” Boris said. “It’s a load of crap. Religion mixed up with racial supremacy.”

“So... pretty much angels, then.”

Boris let out a groan.

“It’s definitely what they’re going to call us, isn’t it?”

“Yep,” Bruce said. “Magic has made things wonky enough when it comes to religion. You lot turning up might start a holy war or three.”

Boris let out a weary sigh, then set his shoulders with determination.

“That’s tomorrow’s problem,” he said. “Right now, the priority is getting our travelling companions to safety. I don’t want any of the silver-rankers getting caught up if some

golds decide to attack us. Jason Asano will not be happy if anything happens to them, and he is not a man to cross, regardless of how much power you have.”

“Is he showing up too?” Bruce asked.

“Not anytime soon,” Boris said.

“He and the grim reaper are fighting a giant space bird,” Taika said. “It’s going to take a while.”

“What?” Bruce asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” Boris said. “Right now, we need to get to somewhere secure. One of Jason Asano’s domains will do for a start and I’d appreciate it if we got moving before the other factions try something foolish.”

“Yeah, fair enough,” Bruce said. “It’ll take me a bit to sort out the plane, but I think we can fit you all in the Cabal cafeteria.”

“That’s a big cafeteria, bro. Let’s go; I haven’t had a dagwood dog in a year.”

“You actually eat those things?” Boris asked.

“Yeah, bro. You’ve got to have a daggy every now and again.”

\*\*\*

The Cabal managed — more or less legitimately — to secure two massive passenger jets. While doing so, they also negotiated to have the other factions to leave the group alone, at least for the moment. The negotiations went smoothly for the most part, aside from one small incident.

A gold-ranker from the United States arrived via portal and was arrogant for exactly as long as it took him to sense Boris’ aura. Seeing a gold-ranker scamper away with his tail between his legs successfully quieted the others, although Boris knew it would lead to problems down the line. If he and his people were seen as a threat, the world powers would eventually attempt to eliminate it.

For the now, however, they were allowed to go on their way. The silver-rank messengers shrank down to fit human-sized plane seats while Boris and the other gold-rankers flew alongside as escorts. The planes landed at a joint operations military base outside of Nitra, Slovakia.

The region was one of the few footholds of non-vampire power in Europe, due to the presence of Jason’s domain. As with the other domain in France, the one in Slovakia was the centre of a zone high in magic. This affected the sunlight, making it more dangerous to vampires.

The military base featured actual cooperation between the various magical factions and government allies. In most places that was political fiction, but the people fighting the

war understood that the vampires were the real enemy. The base abutted Jason's domain, even partly existing within it. The boundary was marked by numerous warning signs and an actual black and yellow line painted onto the concrete.

Rufus and Taika disembarked the planes first, joined by Boris and the other gold-rankers hovering just over the ground. They were met at the painted boundary line by two people. One was a bronze-rank woman with Eastern European features and a prim business suit. The other was a middle-aged Japanese man with dark green fatigues and a sword at his hip. He was silver-rank and, like the woman, had an aura marked by monster core use.

"Keti," Taika greeted. "What are you doing here?"

"My Network branch in Australia was broken up," Ketevan Arziani said. "I was offered a position assisting the Asano clan matriarch."

"Yumi hired you?" Taika asked. "She always was smart."

"Let's go see her, then," Ketevan said. "She's waiting for you."

Taika shook hands with the Japanese man before they set out.

"Good to see you, Shiro."

"And you," Shiro Asano said. "You got strong."

Taika grinned.

"Bro, you have no idea."

\*\*\*

Boris, Rufus and Taika sat across from Yumi Asano, Jason's paternal grandmother. She had come to magic late in life but her flesh warping powers had restored her youth, giving her the same mid-twenties appearance as the people sitting across from her. She was flanked on one side by her son, Hiro, who looked twice as old as his mother. On the other side was Ketevan. Yumi turned her gaze to Rufus.

"I recognise you from my grandson's recordings, Mr Remore. Before we begin, let me thank you for being a teacher and a friend to him when he was in desperate need of both. I'm told that you can understand me, even without speaking my language."

"I am use translation magic," Rufus said. "It is wobble when not soul."

"Translation magic that's externally applied instead of an inherent power isn't excellent, I'm afraid," Boris said. "He'll grasp the basics, but it would be best to keep our speech simple so he can follow effectively."

"I am thank nice for your mouth noise," Rufus said.

"He'll pick up the languages here very quickly," Boris assured Yumi.

“I have no doubt,” Yumi said. “Our silver-rankers have excellent memories, so I’ve had them all learning multiple languages. It’s been very useful. Now, tell me about my grandson.”

“He gave me a recording,” Taika said. “A bunch of them, actually, but this one is for you.”

Taika took a recording crystal from the dimensional pouch at his waist.

“Do you have a projector?” he asked.

Yumi nodded at Ketevan who got up and went to a panel on the conference room’s wall. Cloud stuff rose from the table and formed a small recording crystal projector.

“This is cloud palace?” Rufus asked.

“Jason’s domains have inherited many properties from his cloud palace,” Boris said. “A welcome side effect of binding the palace more closely to his soul until it became a palace itself.”

“You seem to know a lot about Jason,” Taika said, giving Boris a suspicious look.

“I’m part of a magical faction on Earth,” Boris told him. “Finding out about Jason Asano is at the top of all our to-do lists. I just happen to be better at it than everyone else.”

Taika’s narrowed eyes lingered on Boris for a moment before he turned back to the task at hand. He placed the crystal in the projector and a recording of a haggard Jason shimmered into being above the table. He was on the balcony of a tree house in a cloud chair, a forest panorama spanning out behind him.

“Hello grandmother,” he said. “I know you won’t let anyone do anything until you’ve wrung answers to all your questions out of them, so let me tell you what I’ve been up to since we last met.”

\*\*\*

In a luxurious guest suite, Rufus listened to an oddly non-magical recording device.

“Hello,” a woman’s voice came from the device. “I would like to buy a meat pie.”

“Hello,” Rufus repeated. “I would like to buy a meat pie.”

As the recording repeated the sentence, Rufus plucked a lolly from a huge bag of them and popped it into his mouth. He was sitting on the floor in front of a coffee table scattered with language-learning materials and a five-kilo sack of mixed lollies.

“I would like to buy a meat pie,” he mumbled while chewing on the sugary goodness.

There was a knock on the door and Rufus pressed on the tablet to make it stop. Deciding he’d probably got it right, he went to the door and opened it. On the other side was a bronze-rank woman and Rufus saw a resemblance with Jason.

“Hello, Mr Remore. I recognise you from my brother’s recordings. I’m Erika Asano.”

“Hello,” the recording behind him said. “I would like to buy a meat pie.”

Erika raised her eyebrows as Rufus turned to scowl at the tablet.

“Help?” he asked.

He moved out of the door and she stepped through. She walked over to the coffee table and tapped the tablet to pause the language program.

“Thank you,” Rufus said and waved her into an armchair while he took another.

Like all the buildings in Jason’s domain, this one was comprised of cloud material masquerading as other things. The furniture didn’t hide it very well, having the familiar impossible plushness.

“How is my brother, Mr Remore?”

“Call me Rufus.”

“Alright, Rufus. How is my brother?”

“Good,” Rufus said. “Was bad. Very bad. Got help.”

“I understand your mother is his therapist?”

Rufus creased his brow, not understanding.

“There-a-pissed?” he asked.

Erika thought it over a moment.

“Mind healer,” she said and realisation dawned on Rufus’ face. He nodded.

“Jason is fragile,” he said, tapping his temple. “Up here. Comes back stronger, though. Different, but stronger.”

“Yes, he does,” Erika said. “But he’s alright now? I’m told he’s off fighting some war with the grim reaper?”

“With the Reaper, yes. Strange things. Jason things. We all would like to help, but sometimes Jason things. Not easy to accept.”

“No,” Erika agreed. “Not easy to accept. I’m also told that you are here to what? Train my daughter?”

“Yes,” Rufus said. “Learn language first.”

“You’ve come a long way for someone who didn’t speak any English two weeks ago.”

“Thank you.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m going to let you take over my daughter’s education. Why should I even consider doing that?”

“My family runs a school.”

“A school for warriors. I don’t want my daughter to be a warrior.”

“Not warriors. Teach to fight, yes, but also teach to not fight. Your child will have power. Those with power can choose peace, but peace not always choose them. Will not train warrior, but will teach. Will make ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“For everything.”

\*\*\*

Jason’s domain in France covered most of what had once been the city of Saint-Etienne. Each of the two domains contained an astral space, and each astral space contained a wondrous magical city. Like the new brightheart city, these had far more space than population to fill them.

After using the portal linking the Slovakian domain to the French, Rufus and Taika took a second portal into the French astral space. In the populated part of the city, Rufus felt oddly at ease. Most of the population were refugees from around the world who had been affected by transformation spaces. No longer human, they were a multiplicity of other species that reminded Rufus of home.

They took a small dirigible from the massive docking tower the portal left them in, the airship flying itself into the city. It landed atop the arena-sized main training facility for the Asano clan.

“I’m a little nervous,” Rufus admitted. “I’m not sure my English is good enough.”

“Bro, let me take you to a pub back in Australia. Then you’ll see your English is just fine.”

Taika led them into the building and down several sets of stairs. They went into a gymnasium-sized room with all manner of exercise equipment set out. It ranged from mundane gymnastic setups like parallel bars to obviously magical devices with floating components.

There was one occupant in the room who dismounted from the uneven bars at their entry, making a smooth landing. She was in her early teens, wearing tracksuit pants and a faded Airwolf t-shirt. She jogged up to them and hugged Taika.

“This is him?” Emi asked, looking Rufus over.

“This is him,” Taika said.

Emi continued to look Rufus up and down, finally nodding as she made some kind of internal decision.

“I think you looked better bald,” she told him.

## Chapter 864

### An Empty Chair

The Asano clan held two astral spaces, consisting of cities cut off from the surrounding wilderness by massive defensive walls. The cities were mostly empty, as they could hold far more people than the population living there. To avoid them feeling like ghost towns, specific sections were regulated by the Asano Clan, with shops, residences and other facilities all assigned to the occupants and proprietors, free of cost.

That was especially important when the residents were all transplanted from elsewhere. The Asano Clan was mostly Jason's extended family, brought over from Australia. Their association with him not only disrupted their lives but put them in danger from those who would exploit them. Most of the residents were refugees from transformation zones around the world. Magically removed from the human race, they had to deal with not just a new place, but new selves.

There were a few residents who didn't fit into those groups, with a few other families brought into the Asano Clan. Like Jason's family, their connection to him made them targets for exploitation and harm. This included the families of those who had fallen into Jason's orbit, such as Greg and Asya. Jason's dead friend and lover were both examples of the dangers that came with being involved with Jason.

There was also Chloe Baudrillard, the epidemiologist Jason befriended, along with her family. As they were French, they had been displaced by the vampire occupation. Most of the European civilians had been evacuated to other continents, but some had been taken in by the Asano Clan, mostly people close to the two spirit domains in Nitra and Saint-Étienne.

Jason had a habit of triggering internal strife in ancient Japanese families, and ousted leadership and their loyalists had joined the clan. This included members of the Japanese Asano Clan and the Tiwari Clan. The old leaders of both had helped Jason, and both had paid for it by being forced out of their own families. Yumi Asano had been sure to repay that aid as best she could, offering homes and safety.

One of the advantages of only opening parts of the city was that space was not at a premium. There was no need for dense housing and they had chosen open, highly walkable parts of the city. The least congested residential section was the Park District, which was a combination of low-density housing and botanical garden. Within that district was a secluded grove, ringed by flowering hedges and bisected by a stream running through it.

In that grove was a very small cottage belonging to a very large woman. Raina Williams was very far from her native New Zealand. Five months after Rufus arrived on Earth, he was one of several people seated at the picnic table outside of Raina's house.

"You eat up now," Raina said as she spooned another heap of tartiflette onto Rufus' plate.

"Mrs Williams, I couldn't," Rufus said.

"That's what your mouth says," she told him. "The way you're eyeing that plate says something different."

"Maybe just a little more," he said.

"Boy, don't come here telling me 'a little.' I do not know what they're feeding you in that other universe, but my Taika got skinny as a rake over there and you're even worse."

"Skinny?" Hiro Asano said. "I know magic turned a lot of fat into muscle, but he's still as wide and brown as a station wagon from the eighties."

Hiro reached for the dish of garlic bread and got a rap on the knuckles for his trouble.

"Garlic bread is for polite young men," Mrs Williams scolded.

"I'm fifty-eight," Hiro complained. "I *can't* be a young man."

"Then you're old enough to know better," Mrs Williams said, earning a helpless look from Hiro that made Emi giggle.

"You shouldn't talk back, Boss," Taika warned Hiro. "Not if you want to keep eating."

It had been several years since Taika had worked for Hiro in their criminal days, but some things just stuck.

"I really should go," Rufus said, but made no move to do so as he continued demolishing the food on his plate.

"You've done really good work with the refugees, Rufus," Hiro said. "We were having a lot of trouble with all these traumatised people who suddenly found themselves not human anymore. As someone who grew up in and around people who weren't human, you've been a settling presence."

"I haven't done anything special," Rufus said. "It's just joining in group therapy sessions and telling people about home."

"Well, it's very nice," Raina said. "It's starting to feel like a real community around here. I scooter into the community centre a few times a week."

"You have a mobility scooter?" Hiro asked. "Does it do alright without a sealed road?"

"Mobility scooter nothing," Taika said. "She has a stand-up scooter. Some carbon-fibre monstrosity that reaches highway speeds. It isn't safe."



“Oh, you know I don’t run it that fast,” Raina said. “I just need something with the power to transport a full-figured lady. And I always wear my safety gear.”

“We’re inside a magic realm,” Taika said, “in a continent occupied by vampires. Where did you even find motorcycle pants in your size?”

“Good news, everyone,” Raina said. “It looks like there’s extra dessert to go around because my son doesn’t want any.”

“What? Mum, no...”

\*\*\*

Hiro took Emi home after lunch while Rufus and Taika headed for the sprawling community centre complex. It included the medical and food distribution centres along with other key facilities. The heart of the place was a large recreational lounge that served as a gathering place and central hub for the rest of the complex. It offered easy access to everything from the medical centre to child-friendly play areas and a large bar.

There was a cheerful mood when Rufus and Taika arrived in the central lounge. A gathering of people was celebrating the first child conceived amongst the transformed. Rufus smiled and laughed alongside everyone else until he heard the happy couple mention the name of their doctor. Not being the centre of attention, it was easy enough to slip away.

Moments later, he was storming through the nearby medical centre. He found the office door marked ‘Dr Velius’ and barged in without knocking. The doctor looked up from the laptop on his desk.

“Something I can help you with, Mr Remore?”

“It is you,” Rufus said. “Why are you here? *How* are you here?”

“I’m the prime vessel of the Reaper, Mr Remore; I’m very well-resourced.”

Velius brought out what looked like a car fob and pressed the button on it. The door swung closed and a brief shimmer indicated a privacy screen settling around them.

“What are your intentions?” Rufus asked.

“Benign, I can assure you,” Velius said. “While I could fend off the defences of Jason Asano’s territory if I were hostile, doing so long-term would be quite the chore. Especially in this astral space where his power is stronger.”

“What are you doing here?” Rufus demanded.

“Helping, Mr Remore.”

“Why?”

“You are aware that what has befallen this world stems from how the original Builder created this world and yours?”

"I am."

"I won't go into the full context, but that was an unfortunate consequence of a decision the great astral beings made long ago. One that your friend Jason is currently fighting to undo. As for you and I, we find ourselves surrounded by people who've had their lives, and even their very bodies, transformed in to something they no longer recognise."

"Why do you care?"

"That, Mr Remore, is rather offensive. I may be immortal and my position rather lofty, but I'm still a person. The concept of compassion is not alien to me."

Rufus frowned. He took a deep breath and slowly let it out. His body lost its tenseness, the anger in his expression falling away.

"You're right," he said. "That was offensive and I apologise. Let me ask the question I should have: Why would the Reaper have someone as important as you here, doing this?"

"Normally, a disaster like this is where the local gods start earning all that prayer and devotion, working to rectify things. Unfortunately, it will be centuries before this world has enough magic for gods to start manifesting."

Velius smiled.

"You presumably dashed in here after recognising my name," he said. "Presumably, Asano told you about my recruiting him to his current task."

"Yes. And one look at that aura told me I was right. You tailored your aura mask so the locals wouldn't see through it, but someone like me would."

"Yes. There are things that need to be done here, but the people of this world aren't ready for some of the higher truths behind them. Like the first servant of the Grim Reaper being their obstetrician. So, hopefully, you and I are going to quietly help certain things along."

"You still haven't told me why. You might be at the very boundary of mortality, but you're still one of us. I can understand you wanting to act out of sympathy for these people. Why is the Reaper letting you?"

"You're aware, obviously, that I recruited Jason Asano for his current task. Do you know what he asked for in return?"

"That's why you're here? Jason asked you to help these people?"

"No," Velius said. "Your friend didn't ask for anything at all. It never even occurred to him. Once he understood that it needed to be done, he just decided to do it. In light of this, it was decided that a reward was warranted, asked for or not. The great astral beings decided to step in where the gods normally would."

“And they sent you? To do what?”

“Not just me. We’re here to discreetly help things along. I know from personal experience that if you fail to effectively set things in place in your homeworld, things can get messy. Being forced into extreme choices early can have severe repercussions in just a few centuries, let alone millennia. We’re here to smooth out the process of Asano’s family establishing themselves as a power on this world.”

“By being a fertility healer?”

“By bending a few rules before your friend stops that from being possible anymore. That’s what he’s doing, ultimately: putting the old rules back in place that stops the great astral beings from getting creative in their roles.”

“What kind of rules are you looking to bend?”

“Nothing overt. Not unless you know what you’re looking at, anyway. But the people here will find a lot of luck coming their way for a few years.”

“Alright,” Rufus said. “Assuming I believe all that, why you? What can the Reaper do for these people?”

“As you’ve noted, I’ve taken on the role of a fertility doctor,” Velius said. “The Asano Clan matriarch went to some lengths to recruit an expert medical team. The changes people go through as they rank up are one thing, but the bulk of the population here has non-human physiology. I arranged credentials for my assumed identity so that I would be accepted.”

“How are made-up credentials going to help anyone? And what does that have to do with the Reaper?”

“Through the Reaper, Mr Remore, I have access to the medical expertise of everyone who has ever died in any universe. Ever. My credentials are so profoundly understated that I’ll probably advance this planet’s medical knowledge a century or more by accident.”

“That’s why you’re here? Because you have that knowledge?”

“That’s part of it. The more specific reason is that the first generation born to the transformed people here will have an incredible impact on them and this planet as a whole. They and their children will face profound challenges if they ever seek to be anything more than a strange little collective, hiding in an astral space. If they are going to do anything other than die out within a few generations they need to be remarkable.”

“And you intend to make them remarkable?”

“I’m rather hoping you will, Mr Remore. My part is to give them the potential you will help them live up to.”

“And how are you going to give them this potential?”

“By providing something that this new generation could desperately use: old souls.”

\*\*\*

When Gary became a demigod, he was a vision of physical might, wreathed in divine power. Almost a year later, the divine power was wrapped around a haggard, skeletal figure that hobbled about when not carried in a floating cloud chair. The golden light of Hero's power danced around and through him, his body barely able to contain it.

“It's time,” he told his parents, his once-booming voice a thin echo.

His parents nodded, accepting. They had watched their son wither away, knowing that although he said it was time, it was well past time. Jason had set his realm such that neither pain nor death could affect Gary's body. But there was no stopping pain that went soul deep. It had gotten too hard for him to hide some time ago, but he had held on. Only when his parents were eager to see him released from it, rather than continue their time with him, did he finally make the choice to let go.

Gary had made the rest of his goodbyes long ago, and several times over. His friends had come by time and again, chain-portalling across the world to see him. One such visit had come from Gwydion Remore, bringing bittersweet news.

“Hero has decided to sanction himself,” Gwydion told Gary. “It's something that he has been considering for longer than any of us have been alive, but he's finally going to do it.”

“Isn't sanctioning dangerous?” Gary asked.

“Yeah,” Gwydion said. “But he's not going to be as drastic as Purity. He wants to give himself another miracle option. Something less powerful than the Cup of Heroes, with less of a price. For millennia, our church has been collecting the relics of heroes who have drunk from the cup. The relics can only be used by the demigods to whom they belonged and they are all dead. That makes the relics nothing but a remembrance, despite their power. But Hero wants to make them usable again, if only for a short time. To let the stories of heroes past live on in heroes of the future.”

“That's a nice sentiment,” Gary said. “It would have been nice if he'd come up with that a year ago.”

“You inspired him, in part. It's not a decision made for any one reason, but you are one of them. He tried to give you a path to survival but, right or wrong, you chose not to take it. And the cup will still be there when needed. It would have taken more than a relic for you to accomplish what had to be done.”

Gary thought of that visit and every other he'd had over the last several months. He smiled through the now constant and severe pain; all worth it for the memories. With his

parents beside him, he floated in his chair along the walkways and rope bridges of the tree city. It had been a fine place to spend his final days, but now those days were over. It was time to give the god back his power and find out what came next.

The portal leading out of the soul realm was in a central area at ground level, close to the facilities being used by Carlos and Clive. Clive was off somewhere with the team, and Gary didn't disturb Carlos. He was an acquaintance and an ally, but not a friend. He did call in on Sophie's mother and Callum Morse. He was a friend and she had become one, albeit with a 'cool aunt' feel to the relationship. They both understood what Gary was about at a glance and did not keep him long.

Finally, Gary descended on an elevating platform made of wood and rope. At the bottom was a wide open area, a grassy space between distant trees. The portal leading out of Jason's realm stood in the middle of it.

One of Jason's avatars was waiting where the rope elevator reached the ground. Most of the soul realm's avatars looked like Jason but were blank-faced automatons. They spoke in a monotone and had only the knowledge, skills and influence over the realm required for their assigned tasks. The avatar waiting for Gary was the only exception.

This avatar was the one with almost no knowledge or skills, to the point of being a little clumsy. What it did have was a subdued but recognisable facsimile of Jason's personality. It was still a little uncanny valley, but only unnerving instead of outright creepy. This made it much easier for the residents and visitors of the tree city to interact with. As this was its primary task, it had taken to calling itself 'the Concierge.'

"Is it time?" the Concierge asked.

"It is," Gary said.

At Gary's words, mist started rising from the ground. The space between them and the portal was soon engulfed in fog, obscuring their view.

"I thought you couldn't change things like this," Gary said to the Concierge.

"Yep," the Concierge said. "The boss set this up to trigger on the day you... he set it up for today."

The fog created a long, wide tunnel of cloud substance. It ended at a wall, around where Gary judged the portal to be, but it wasn't in sight. The walls became smooth, shifting from blank white to a swirl of colours. The colours swiftly resolved into moving images, each one a different scene featuring Gary.

"My true self can do many things in this place," the Concierge said. "Even some that are normally impossible, such as reading a mind. But if others let him, he can do that here. This hall is comprised entirely of memories from your friends and your family."

"Mum?" Gary asked. "Dad? You knew about this?"

"We didn't spend a lot of time with your friend Jason," Gary's mother said, "but he seemed like a sweet young man. We liked this idea very much."

"I'm not the person I look like," the Concierge said, "so I will not offer you an empty farewell in his stead. The best I can do is leave you be. This place belongs to you, for as long as you want to stay."

The Concierge stepped through the wall, briefly disturbing the image of Gary as a child, watching his father make soup. Gary looked around from his chair, his parents beside him. He saw himself hammering on steel, the orange glow of the forge casting his grin in a sinister light. There were dozens of little moments scattered across the walls of the long hallway.

He started telling the stories of each memory to his parents, or talking about memories they shared. The closest images mostly came from his parents, featuring Gary as a young and often difficult child.

As they slowly made their way forward, it moved onto Gary becoming an adventurer. Meeting Farrah and Rufus in the wild panic of a burning zombie town. The three of them running across a field as a flour silo exploded behind them. Making his way through a cultist blood chamber with a skinny, wild-eyed man.

"Gods," Gary said with a laugh. "I forgot how big his chin was back then."

All the way to the end, there were no images of Gary as a demigod or battling Undeath's avatar. Only a handful of the scenes showed combat or action at all. The hall was dominated by moments of friendship and camaraderie. Handing Jason the sword he had made for him. Grilling meat while surrounded by friends. Stealing food as a cub. He noticed, looking around, that a lot of them seemed to involve food.

The tunnel formed a rough timeline, but not a strict one, and the occasional memory would pop up way out of sequence. Gary and his parents watched little boy Gary's ill-fated attempt to pilfer his uncle's hammer, the tool larger than Gary at the time.

"Such a rascal," his mother said, almost managing to not have her voice break.

They made an extremely slow passage down the hall, barely moving forward before stopping again. They didn't count the hours as they watched memory after memory play out. Gary told the stories of friends made and good times shared. His parents pointed out that his recollections of childhood were never quite the way he remembered them.

By the time they finally reached the end, it felt like they had laughed and cried so much that there was no more of either left inside them. On the wall at the end of a hall was an image of Gary, Rufus and Farrah, lazing in the shade of a tree. There was no telling

what they were chatting about from the silent image. Gary couldn't place the memory; it could have been any of a thousand days and he realised that was the point. There were too many good times to remember them all.

Gary sat and stared at the image for a long time. He watched himself and his friends talking, neither knowing nor caring what they were saying in the silent projection. What mattered was the happiness. The laughter. Just being together.

"I'm ready," he said.

"Good," Farrah's voice came through the wall. "I had to use ritual magic to keep all this warm without it going bad."

The image vanished and the cloud wall it was on dispersed, revealing Farrah waiting by a table full of food.

"Your timing is awful, by the way," she said. "I had an important test scheduled today, but instead I had to come here and cook a last meal for..."

Farrah's voice broke, unable to maintain the jovial fiction. She rushed around the table and hugged Gary in his chair.

"I love you so much, you big hairy bastard."

\*\*\*

Gary emerged from the portal in his cloud seat, Farrah and his parents right behind. His parents each took one of his hands as the golden light around him drifted up and away. Rainbow smoke drifted up with it, leaving three people standing around an empty chair.

## Chapter 865

### Suspicious

“Formation interactivity is a fascinating magical specialty,” the projection of Clive said. “I very nearly pursued it myself, but there was very little material on the field where I was trained, and a surprising plethora on astral magic. Which may not be as much of a coincidence as I thought, I realised after talking to Boris. You may have met Boris by now, in which case you should try and get him to reveal some of his knowledge because—”

“Clive...” Farrah’s voice came from out of shot.

“Sorry,” Clive said. “Where were we? Right, formation interactivity. If you’re looking to specialise in it, which I highly recommend, there are a variety of essence combinations that are appropriate, depending on what else you’ll be getting up to. If you want to mix in some adventuring, you’ll want something with some combat options, while—”

Emi shut off the projection as there was a knock on the door. She got up from her bedroom floor, picked up the projector and set it on her desk. When she opened the door, her father was outside.

“Rufus will be here in about half an hour,” he said. “Make sure you’re ready to go.”

“I was ready an hour ago, Dad.”

“Okay, Emi. What are you watching in there?”

“The magic instruction recordings Farrah sent me.”

“Not the recording your uncle sent you?”

“No, Dad,” she said with a scowl. “Now that I’ve finally picked my essences, I have so much to learn.”

“You’ve made the final decision on your essences?”

“Yes.”

“Again?”

“Shut up Dad!”

He laughed, the grin slowly morphing to a look of concern.

“Your mother made me ask about the recording,” he said. “But she’s not wrong, Sweetie. Watching it over and over won’t make him come home any faster.”

“I said I wasn’t watching it!”

“Okay, okay,” he said, holding up his hand in surrender. “Taika is taking you for training today. I’ll call you down when he gets here.”

Emi went back into her room, grabbed the projector and plonked onto the floor, setting the device in front of her. She reached to resume the playback but her hand



stopped halfway. After hesitating a moment, she took out the recording crystal and returned it to the carousel of them on her desk. She then took out the very first crystal, slotted it into the projector and tapped it to start. Jason's haggard face shimmered into being, with a forest panorama behind him.

"Hey, Moppet," he said wearily. "I'm sorry I'm not there to give you this in person, but the Grim Reaper has recruited me to fight a giant space bird. Like the spaceship in *Battle of the Planets*, kind of, but I'm going to turn it into a person. It's going to get real cranky when it figures out why."

The projection of Jason let out an evil chuckle that turned into a tired wheeze.

"I know I'm not looking my best right now, but I promise you I'm fine. It's just been a rough few months and this body is..."

Jason shook his head.

"All you need to know is that I'm becoming immortal. Proper immortal, so literally nothing can take me out. The bad news is that this means I won't be coming back to see you as soon as I'd like. The good news is that I'm definitely coming back. No power in the universe can stop me, and I've basically checked at this point. Before that, though, I have to go through a whole transformation sequence. Not a magical girl one, although I can't rule out inappropriate nudity. I'm going to be kind of a god for that angel-type folk you've probably seen by now."

He groaned and rubbed his temples.

"I don't have a lot of time right now. But since we won't be seeing each other for a while, I'd like to spend some of it telling you all the crazy stuff that's happened since I last saw you. So, settle in and let me tell you what I did on my holidays."

\*\*\*

As he rode in the zeppelin over the city, Rufus watched a handful of messengers flying about in the distance. It was night and their wings seemed especially good at catching the moonlight. Not good for stealth, he mused, but certainly pretty.

Almost all of the young messengers from the transformation zone had chosen to stay in Asano Clan territory. They had been living with Jason's aura infusing the very land around them for most of their lives, and his spirit domains gave them a sense of continuity when faced with extreme change.

The locals had also taken some time to adapt. They had been through some profound changes in recent years, from monster surges to astral spaces to their home being surrounded by hostile vampires. Even so, having hundreds of angels as new neighbours was one of the more surprising quirks of Asano Clan living.

Rufus moved to run his hands over his head; an old habit that was no longer possible. His once bald scalp now sported a neatly trimmed afro and he ran his hands along the side of it instead. It was nothing like the ridiculous hair his brother had been sporting the last time they met. That mess looked like a topiary jester's cap.

His mind dwelled on an upcoming meeting with Velius. Rufus hadn't spoken to the man in most of a year, since he informed Rufus of Gary's death. He had quietly investigated the man, though. In his identity as a fertility doctor, Velius was one of a slew of experts recruited by the clan to help the transformation zone refugees.

The experts were mostly experts in medicine and, as much as was possible on Earth, magic. Jason's spirit domain had filtered out those with ulterior motives, no few groups having attempted to slip in spies. Rufus' concerns about Velius were not that, the Reaper's servant far above such petty concerns. His fear was that Velius had an agenda beyond what he claimed.

From everything Rufus could find, Velius was earnest and diligent in his work. He was in a role normally carried out by the Church of Fertility and he seemed to know all of their magic that didn't require divine influence. Rufus had been surprised that the prime vessel of a great astral being could spend so much time on Earth, the main source of his concerns about some greater motive. His worries had been allayed by, of all people, Jason's precocious niece.

\*\*\*

Emi knew more about Jason's activities on Earth than anyone bar Jason himself. While Jason had omitted the more gruesome details, she had eagerly devoured knowledge about his adventures and especially the magic involved. This extended to Farrah and, while she was with them, Dawn.

The result of this was that Emi's overeager and meticulous interrogations had given her a better understanding of avatars than most. She knew telltale physiological differences between an avatar, an essence user and a normal person. Anything from how often they blinked to how their skin reacted to sudden temperature changes could be an indicator.

Her assessments had the precision of a polygraph machine, meaning none whatsoever and any accuracy was basically luck. Nonetheless, as the princess of the Asano Clan, she found herself ignored off to the side in rooms with many of the clan's most important people. When she found someone who kind of creeped her out and she couldn't pinpoint why, she knew what to look for.

At first, she quietly freaked out. She was fourteen years old, knew magic was real but not what the limits were, and had a list of people she suspected were secretly puppet people for some unknown force. In the absence of her uncle or Farrah, she was uncertain of who to take her suspicions to. At that stage she had been uncertain about Rufus, yet to build the connection she had with Farrah.

As for her family, she wasn't sure they would believe her. In the last few years, magic had turned out to be real, there had been a monster apocalypse and now they were living in a city made of clouds in France. Despite all that, her family were all too often stuck in what she thought of as 'Earth sensibilities.'

Earth sensibilities were what she considered thinking predicated on a pre-magical world. Things were changed now, forever, and old people were utterly failing to realise that. It's like they hit thirty and were incapable of accepting new ideas. Emi was aware that every teenager ever had considered their parents wildly wrong and out of touch, but she was the one that was right. If only they could just see it.

In the end, she had gone to Taika. He, in turn, immediately dragged her to the modest cottage Rufus had chosen for himself. When she started talking, Rufus didn't dismiss her as a teenager. He didn't talk over the nervous and rambling explanation that didn't sound convincing to even her own ears as it tumbled out of her mouth. He sat and listened, his unnervingly direct gaze never flinching from her face. She wanted to look away but couldn't turn from his dark, compelling eyes.

When she was done, she felt like a defendant awaiting the judgement of a court. Rufus sat without response, finally breaking eye contact as he considered her words in silence. Taika, a comforting presence beside her, gave her shoulder a comforting squeeze. Finally, Rufus spoke.

"That makes a lot of sense," he said.

"It does?" Emi had asked, as if she hadn't been the one to bring the whole thing up. Rufus laughed, his eyes seeming to see right through her.

"Yes," he said.

Rufus then explained about great astral beings, in a way that was less colourful but made more sense than anything her uncle had told her. His explanations were easy and clear, like a good teacher. He told her about their relationship with Jason and the linked worlds, all knowledge she had touched on but never really known. Then he told her about what the great astral beings were doing with the clan, helping the transformed people.

"It makes sense that they are using avatars," he said. "I had been worried about such important people spending so long here on Earth, doing this."

“Because it would suggest they’re here for more than what that doctor said to you?” Emi asked.

“Exactly,” Rufus said. “But if these are just avatars doing a side job while their real selves are out doing whatever it is they do, it means this isn’t some Jason-style cosmic nonsense about to start up.”

He let out a long breath and gave her a warm smile. Suddenly, he wasn’t so intimidating.

“I haven’t told anyone this,” he told her. “Taika knew some of it, but your family isn’t ready to deal with things on this level. They don’t understand what level it’s on, and I fear they would try to do something about it. Which they cannot. So, I’ve been keeping the activities of these avatars quiet. If they’re benevolent, it’s all for the good. If they’re not, only Jason could do anything about it, and he’s busy.”

“I understand,” Emi said solemnly. “Earth sensibilities.”

“Earth sensibilities?” Taika asked.

Rufus laughed again.

“She’s right. The people here are still too caught up in how they’re world used to work. The problem with having older people in charge is that they are slow to adapt.”

“Exactly,” Emi said.

“And the reason they’re in charge anyway,” Rufus said pointedly, “is that young people lack the wisdom that comes with experience.”

“And part of that wisdom is knowing when to keep a secret,” Taika told her. “What we’re talking about here is proper adventurer stuff. Hidden knowledge of the universe. Rufus is trusting you with this, and that’s trust your uncle earned for you. Now, you have to prove you deserve it all on your own.”

Emi couldn’t stop grinning as she walked away from Rufus’ cottage.

“You seem happy,” Taika said.

“He didn’t treat me like a kid. No one but Farrah and Uncle Jason do that.”

“What about me?”

“Yeah, people treat you like a kid too.”

“Hey!” Taika exclaimed in fake outrage as Emi laughed maniacally. She stopped when they reached his car.

“Can’t we fly?” she wheedled.

“Why would I fly you home when I then have to come back and drive my car back?”

“Aren’t you strong enough to carry the car? I’ll get in and you fly back holding it.”

Taika tried saying no in the face of innocent puppy eyes he knew hid the face of an evil genius. Instead, he let out a defeated groan.

“Your mum is going to poison my food for this.”

## Chapter 866

### Not All of Them Have a Plan

Much of Emi's nervousness about her soon-to-be-claimed essences had faded away. She only realised after the fact that a lot of that had been thanks to the daunting but capable mentor who would be conducting the ritual. His lessons were excellent but she found him intimidating, not connecting with him the way she had with Farrah.

After Jason and Farrah left Earth, the whole family had grown strangely protective. While they were still on Earth, Emi had been trusted. Important, even, as Farrah set her to essential magical tasks. She may not have had her essences but she was a wizard, with greater command of ritual magic than most people on Earth. Once Jason and Farrah left, she had suddenly gone from wizard back to teenager, like Cinderella after midnight.

Things changed after Taika forced her to go see Rufus and explain her concerns. Not with her family, but once again there was someone who treated her with respect instead of protectiveness. Once that happened, she went from nervous to excited about finally getting her essences.

Once the anxiety had gone, another troubling emotion reared its head: guilt. She knew she was a special case. All the clan members had access to magic and training superior to that of the magical factions. Even the secretive US and Chinese Network training programs were not a match for Asano Clan resources, especially following the arrival of Rufus. And within the clan, no one was inundated with as much support as Emi.

Only Boris and his people had the off-world experience of Taika and Rufus, but the messengers weren't essence users. While the two adventurers trained all the young clan members, only Emi received regular, one-on-one attention.

Because she was Jason's treasured niece, she had unfettered access to essences and awakening stones. The rest of the clan had to claim those resources through a contribution system. Contribution points could be accumulated starting at age sixteen, with an initial allotment based on school grades, training achievements and other actions beneficial to the clan. They could also be traded, and with food and lodging being provided by the clan, contribution points were a valuable commodity.

Points could be spent on essences and awakening stones. As the clan was in its early days, this mostly centred around parents looking for the best opportunities they could give their children. They settled for cheap essences for themselves, or forewent essences altogether as they saved for more desirable essences for their children.

Emi's great-grandmother was the clan matriarch, the now young-seeming Yumi Asano. The only authority above her was Jason, who had made it clear that she was in charge. Even if he hadn't been absent, he had neither the interest nor the skill set to manage the clan. He had left certain directives, though, both before his departure and in the messages he sent with Rufus and Taika.

Before he left, he made it clear that no expense was to be spared in the development of Emi's magic. In the recordings, he stated that Rufus was to be in charge of directing that development. Erika had not welcomed her brother trying to control parts of her daughter's upbringing by fiat, but had found Rufus much more respectful.

Rufus had proven highly accommodating to the wishes and limits of Erika and her husband in his approach to Emi's training. That did not always endear him to his trainee who had her own ideas about what was appropriate. This tension had been the beginning of Emi's now-resolved uncertainty about him.

It had never been easy making friends for Emi. She'd always gotten along better with adults than children, being heavily indulged when she was younger. But with each passing year, her more adult intelligence seemed less remarkable. Now she was a teenager, she oddly found herself treated more like a child. It was easy to dismiss the opinions of a teenager.

Her first real friend had been made only after the full-time move to Saint-Étienne. It had been a time when her uncle had been at his most dangerous, like a live wire dangling over water. What little remained of his old persona felt like a tattered mask over a volatile and menacing creature that no one wanted to provoke. He was killing people, not just monsters, and she still remembered his nightmare that had invaded her mind. She didn't remember the specifics, but the sense of inescapable dread still haunted her.

Moving to Saint-Étienne after they stopped travelling with her uncle, Emi had found herself around people her own age for the first time in a long time. Lina Karadeniz was a cousin of Jason's girlfriend, the one who had died along with Emi's Uncle Kaito. Lina had been hostile at first, with her family only joining the Asano Clan out of necessity. The Karadeniz family had been wealthy people living good lives in the days before magic. They laid the blame for losing that and the death of Asya at the feet of Emi's uncle.

Time had changed things, at least for Emi and Lina. Two whip-smart girls who couldn't seem to get along with anyone else, they kept finding themselves together — especially in the face of increasingly interested boys. Many of the young boys in the clan were relatives, but there were still plenty that weren't and the pair started drawing

attention. Against her better judgement, and often to her annoyance, Emi found herself with a social life.

After her nervousness passed about her soon-to-be essences, she became excited and started talking about them more. That was when she realised things started getting awkward. Her new friends had always understood who her uncle was, and that her great-grandmother ran the clan. But when she started talking about choosing her essences and being shown into the essence vault, they all started to realise the difference between them.

Emi's new closeness with Lina became tense as wider family issues began to intrude. The Karadeniz family saw Emi and the privileges her uncle had mandated as an indication that the Asano family were turning themselves into oligarchs within the clan.

Treated more like a tool of politics than a person, it started to poison her new friendships and she was soon isolating herself all over again. She was torn not just by the people trying to use her but also with a fear that they were not entirely wrong. She enjoyed advantages that her friends did not. Opportunities she was freely given were things their parents struggled and strived for. She knew it wasn't fair but, at the same time, did not want to give them up. She had large ambitions, and the advantages her uncle had given her were the launching pad for them.

Her father found her sitting on the balcony of their townhouse, legs dangling through the wrought iron railing. He sat down beside her and slipped his legs through the bars as well.

"You seemed happy there for a little bit," he said. "I know it's not cool to talk to your dad, but I think we both know you were never cool, so how about you give it a try?"

Emi gave him a withering look but couldn't hold it, cracking up in spite of herself.

"It's not fair," she said. "The things I get, just because of Uncle Jason and Nana Yumi."

"Don't let her hear you call you that," he said in a warning that was mostly a joke.

"Dad, if you aren't going to take this seriously—"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry, sweetie. You know, it's very mature of you to think about what you have that others don't."

"Dad, I'm not a child."

"I know. I know, I really do. But I'm going to be honest with you, Emi: You've always been hard to parent. You thought you were smarter than me by age seven, and by age nine you were right. And I'm not an idiot."

"You're kind of an idiot."

He scoffed, putting a hand to his chest in mock offence.



“I’m considered quite intelligent, I’ll have you know,” he told her. “I’m a doctor.”

“So you tell people,” she muttered.

He gave her a scathing look, her feigned disregard lasting only seconds before a laugh escaped her lips.

“Now who’s not taking this seriously?” he asked. “But really, Emi, I didn’t know what to do with you. You were a child, yet so like an adult in a lot of ways. I didn’t know how to handle that. I’m not sure I ever figured it out. And now you’re a teenager. Not a child anymore, but not an adult either. And you’re so accomplished, with all your magic studies.”

He leaned over, briefly reaching out to give her a side hug.

“But for all that you’re special,” he continued, “you’re also a normal teenager. You’re going through the amazing and terrible process of figuring out who you are, but I’m going to let you in on a secret: I am too. Still, at my age. There’s this illusion that adults have figured it out and gotten their lives together. And I have done that in a lot of ways. I became a doctor and married a woman far too good for me. But there’s always something fresh and confounding to deal with. Going from husband to parent. From doctor to magical healer. Life always has new things to throw at you. You figure out one thing and along comes the next. You don’t have to live in a magic town in France for that.”

“Is this meant to be encouraging? It doesn’t sound encouraging.”

He let out a long sigh that turned into a laugh.

“It doesn’t, does it? What I’m trying to say is that it’s okay to feel overwhelmed. You don’t have to figure it all out today. I know that your mother and I aren’t always doing the things you want us to. Sometimes we’re going to get it wrong, and I’m sorry for that. But sometimes we’re going to get it right, and you aren’t always going to like it.”

He leaned his head against the railing, enjoying the sensation of cool metal against his forehead.

“Emi, our first job as parents is to prepare you for the world you’re stepping into. But the world is changing, maybe faster and more drastically than it ever has before. Magic is like the renaissance and the industrial revolution happening at the same time, in fast forward. We don’t know how to equip you for that, and it terrifies us. Because we love you more than anything in the world.”

“I love you too, Dad. But I’m going to be honest; you telling me you have no idea what you’re doing doesn’t fill me with confidence.”

He laughed as he wiped a tear from his eye.

“Well, you’re a teenager now, sweetie. You’re on the path to becoming an adult, and the first lesson is that none of us know what we’re doing. We’re just better at faking it than kids are.”

“So, you can’t help me then.”

“Well, I didn’t say that. Adults do figure some stuff out before moving on to the next anxiety attack, so there’s experience to draw on here. You said you were worried that you’re getting better treatment than your friends, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, how about this: We turn down the free stuff your uncle said to give you.”

“I kind of don’t want to, though.”

He let out a belly laugh.

“I can see why you wouldn’t. But you don’t have to lose out on the essences you want. Your mother and I are pretty high up in this whole organisation, you know? We’ve accumulated a lot of contribution points, so we can get you the essences you want. It’ll come out of our points, the same way everyone else does it.”

“You realise that I’ve chosen some expensive essences, right?”

“I know, sweetie. You change your mind every few days, but you always seem to go for the expensive stuff. But, believe it or not, your mother and I have a lot of clan contributions. We can afford it. You might have to wait a little longer on the exact awakening stones, if you keep going for the rare stuff. And you’d better believe that we’ll be dipping into your points when you start racking them up, miss master wizard.”

“Is that okay?” Emi asked nervously. “Doing it this way? Do you think that’s fair?”

“Fair is a hard thing, Emi. I don’t think any system can be completely equitable. All we can do is our best with what we’ve got, and try to make it a little better for whoever inherits it from us.”

“Well, no one’s inheriting anything from me,” Emi said. “I’m going to live forever.”

“See, I knew there was an age-appropriate thought somewhere in that head. All teenagers think they’re going to live forever.”

“Yes, but not all of them have a plan. I’m going to reach diamond-rank.”

“That’s higher than silver-rank, right?”

Emi gave her father a flat look.

“Did you not read all the documentation on ranks and advancement?”

“I’m only bronze-rank, Emi. That high-rank stuff doesn’t apply to me. And it’s a lot of material. All those binders.”

“You know there’s a digital copy, right? I can’t believe you skipped the reading. Were you like this in medical school?”

“No!”

“I feel sorry for the people who come to you, thinking you’re a doctor.”

“I am a doctor!”

\*\*\*

Emi, Ian and Erika entered the gymnasium, the nervous girl walking between her parents. She looked around at all the people in the stands, their low chatter an unsettling susurrus. They stood at the doorway and looked around.

“Where’s Taika?” Ian asked.

“He’s just getting something for me,” Emi said, a little too innocently.

“Did you change your mind on your essence combination *again*?” Ian asked.

“No,” she lied.

“Emi...”

“Yes,” she sullenly admitted.

“You can call it off,” Rufus said as he approached them. “There’s no rule that says you have to do it the moment your body will accept essences. We can put it off until you’re absolutely certain.”

“No!” Emi half shouted, drawing more attention from a crowd already watching them.

Emi’s face crinkled up in a blushing wince.

“No,” she insisted quietly. “I’m doing it today. Who came up with this idea of doing these rituals in public?”

“I don’t know, but it’s a good idea,” Rufus said. “Becoming an essence user in this world is no small thing. It means being a notable figure, and they need to adjust to that. Starting here, surrounded by friends and family, is a good way to ease people into it.”

“As an alternative suggestion,” Emi said, “how about we do it with no one around?”

“You’d tell all these people to just go home because nothing’s happening?” Ian asked.

“Or you could do it,” Emi said.

“No,” her mother said. “If you want to not have your ritual in front of all these people, you have to tell them. You also have to tell your great-grandmother.”

They all turned to look at Yumi. She was sitting with Emi’s paternal grandmother, Nana Evans, in the front row of the stands. They had a prime position, right in front of the ritual circle Rufus had set up.

“I guess we can do it like this,” Emi said.

“Good choice,” Rufus told her. “But again, you can wait until you’re certain about your essence selection.”

“I am certain.”

“As you have been about every combination you’ve been picking out twice a week for the last year,” her father pointed out. “There’s no shame in patience.”

“We’re doing it now,” Emi insisted. “Even if it does have to be in front of all these people.”

“Very well,” Rufus said. “As soon as Taika gets back from the vault.”

“While we’re waiting,” Erika said, “have you given any thought to what you want to do for your sixteenth birthday?”

“Fight a monster,” Emi said immediately.

“Nope,” her father said.

“No,” Rufus told her.

“Absolutely not,” Erika said. “You can fight a monster when you’re old enough to make that decision for yourself.”

“I just did make that decision for myself.”

“Oh, Daughter,” Erika said. “You are a very clever young woman who is right about a lot of things. But when you are wrong, you are so very wrong. You take after your uncle in that way. You are not going to fight a monster for your birthday. Better yet, you could fight no monsters ever. You can use monster cores, like your father and I. Once you turn sixteen, you’ll be allowed to earn your own contribution points to buy them. All that ritual magic you know will be very useful for that.”

“I am not using monster cores. You can’t get to diamond-rank like that. I’m going to fight monsters.”

“Not at sixteen, you’re not,” her father said.

“How old then?” Emi asked.

“Forty-eight,” Ian told her.

“Dad...”

“She’s right, Ian,” Erika said. “Don’t be absurd. Sixteen is out of the question, but this is important to her, so let’s be sensible.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

“She can decide for herself when she’s twenty-one.”

“Mum! Five years? Rufus was really late fighting his first monster, and he still did it by nineteen. In the other world, lots of people my age are fighting monsters.”

“And lots of people your age die,” Rufus said. “Mine is a brutal world. You saw what it did to your uncle. Be grateful that your civilisation isn’t watered with the blood of the young.”

“Thank you, Rufus,” Erika said. “For your reasonable — if horrifyingly grim — support.”

“You are very welcome, Mrs Asano.”

“I know you have concerns about your daughter’s safety,” he said. “My priority will always be to keep her safe. Her birthday is very near, but the day I am satisfied she’s ready to face a monster is not. It will be far longer than she wants before I am satisfied she is ready to face a carefully chosen monster under carefully arranged conditions. Only then will we even start to properly discuss the possibility. If nothing else, I won’t let her just jump in when she’s chosen a combination not built for combat.”

He looked at her with suspicion.

“Taika is bringing back a non-combat combination, right?” he asked.

“Yes,” Emi said. “Not that it matters. You told me yourself that every combination can fight. Look at Mum and her knife powers.”

“What combination did you choose?” Erika asked her daughter. “If you picked three legendary essences, I’m not sure even we have the contribution points for that.”

“Of course I didn’t,” Emi said, failing to meet her mother’s eyes.

“It’s two legendaries and an epic,” she mumbled.

“Uh, we can afford that, right?” Ian asked.

“Yes,” Erika said, her voice not that much higher in pitch than normal. “You’re the medical director and I’m the food logistics director for the whole clan. We can afford it. Probably. What essences specifically did you pick out, my sweet girl?”

“Vast, Myriad and Harmonic,” Emi said. “It produces the Unity confluence.”

Rufus nodded.

“One of the combinations Farrah suggested,” he said. “Good choice. You’ll want to be careful with your awakening stone choices, though. We can save those discussions for later, though.”

“Okay, that’s not too bad,” Erika said. “High rarity, but none of the truly exotic ones. It could be worse.”

“You could still give them to her for free,” Rufus said. “The way Jason intended.”

“It’s too late for that,” Erika said. “Grandmother has already started using the fact that we’re using contribution points like everyone else. She wants to forestall any tension

between us and the other families. It's inevitable that they'll think the people who share a name with the clan will get special treatment, and she wants to head that off."

"Uncle Jason would have wanted it like this anyway," Emi said.

"He's the one who said you should get it all for free in the first place," Ian said.

"Yes, but he'd prefer it be fairer once he thought about it. Sometimes he can be slow on the uptake."

"Sometimes?" Rufus muttered under his breath, earning a grin from Emi.

\*\*\*

Yumi Asano made a ceremony of the whole affair, taking the chance to do a little politicking. She made a speech about the future of the clan, fair treatment and the unprecedented challenges that the upcoming generation would face. Other members of the clan's ruling council did the same, Yumi being the only one to speak from the Asano family.

In the end, the rite Rufus conducted to grant Emi her essences was almost an afterthought. It was the simplest of ritual magic and he had her absorb all three essences at once. She absorbed her confluence and then bolted for the bathroom, her face turning a sickly yellow.

The onlookers laughed sympathetically. Many had gone through the same experience or watched friends and relatives do so. They were all familiar with the violent body purge that came with reaching iron rank. When Emi emerged from the bathroom, looking rather wrung out, she was met by thunderous cheers. Her parents and Rufus hurried up to her, huge grins on their faces. Her parents hugged her and Rufus solemnly shook her hand.

"Welcome," he told her. "You've joined a larger world than you can possibly imagine. It's only the beginning, but you're walking the same path as me, Farrah and your uncle. You're one of us, now."