

Chapter 282

Flavour Text

The art gallery displayed no more signage than a plaque beside a nondescript door. It was the kind of place that if you didn't know it was there, then you weren't meant to. For many years, the it had served as a money laundering operation for some of the Network's shadier revenue streams. Now that the government was secretly but wholeheartedly involved in the Network's activities, such clandestine operations were rarely necessary. The gallery was free to operate without dabbling in illegality.

Jason was strolling through, browsing the paintings. As he lingered in front of one, the gallery owner, Susan, approached. She was an elegant woman whom Jason judged to be in her late thirties or early forties. She cut an impressive figure of poise, grace and appealing but understated clothing choices.

"This is my wife's favourite piece," she said. "Is there something in particular that you're looking for?"

"I'm looking to make a very specific statement," he said.

"This piece is from Taverny's 'Seychelles Gothic' series, where he seeks to visually recontextualise the archipelago. This is a quintessential example of Taverny's use of framing and light contrast. If you told me what kind of statement you were looking to make, perhaps I could point you in the right direction. Only a fragment of the collection is on display, so I'm sure we can find something to fit your needs."

"My intention is to make a potent statement on the sanctity of family," he said. "I thought I would have more time to arrange things, but events are moving apace. Sadly, nuance must give way to blunt symbolism to make my position swift and explicit."

"I'm not sure that the Taverny sends that message," she said. "I have a number of works that touch on the theme of family and may interest you."

"It doesn't have to be depicted in the art," he said. "Show me something unconventional," he said. "Something whose very purchase makes it worthy of discussion."

Susan gave him an assessing look. His suit was sharp and flattering, but also slightly strange. The cut defied contemporary trends in tiny ways; a lapel angle here, a seam line there. The result gave the odd illusion of an arrow in flight. The man wearing it was young and Asian, probably mixed-race. His accent was Australian, clearly educated. He had sharp, handsome features and dark, penetrating eyes.

"I might have a work that interests you," she said. "I cannot guarantee I can sell it to you, however."

“Oh?”

“There is an unusual condition attached to this painting.”

Moving through to office tucked discreetly into the rear of the gallery, he stopped dead still, eyes transfixed on a painting. It depicted four uniquely-stylised pillars situated between two planets, on a background of stars. The content arrested his attention, and while it had no trace of magic, something about it left him completely convinced that it was not the work of an ordinary artist.

“The most enigmatic piece in the collection,” Susan said. “The artist is new and critical reaction is split. Some find her subjects prosaic, while others find her brushwork almost hypnotically beautiful. The two works in our possession were sent to us only days ago, by the artist herself.”

“Who is she?”

“The artist is as mysterious as her art,” Susan said. “We know almost nothing about her, not even her full name. She simply goes by Dawn.”

“How much?” he asked.

“There is no price,” Susan said. “The artist gave me two paintings, on the condition that this one be hung and given to the person who can name the four pillars depicted within it. I can sell you the other, which is...”

“Jason, Colin, Gordon, Shade,” he said without hesitation, not taking his eyes from the painting.

Susan was a woman of composure, but flashed a startled expression.

“That’s right,” she said. “How did you know that?”

“Because I’m the subject. Show me the other painting.”

Hiro and Taika walked out of the police station to find Vermillion waiting for them. They were nervous, but felt none of the bone-deep fear he normally induced. Since Jason had arrived, he had shown them nothing but politeness and respect, although he remained as mysterious as ever. Hiro spoke quietly to his lawyer, who quickly made himself scarce.

“Vermillion,” Hiro greeted. “Are you responsible for getting us out? I was worried once they put me in an interrogation room, but they let us out surprisingly quickly.”

“As far as the civil authorities are concerned, you were just one more victim trying to escape,” Vermillion said. “By the time anyone started recording the incident, the bikers were after your nephew and not us in the car. The lack of firearms or other contraband in your car saved many awkward questions and I barely had to step in to see things smoothly through.”

“I told you, boss,” Taika said. “Not having guns will solve more problems than having them.”

“As for less conventional authorities,” Vermillion continued, “I have convinced them to leave you be, at least for the moment. It’s Jason they want to speak to.”

“Do you know where he is?” Hiro asked. “Is he alright?”

“He’s fine,” Vermillion said. “I’ve been keeping in contact with him via unconventional means, so he knows what’s happening and he’ll meet us shortly. For now, he’s sending a car. The police are keeping yours, for the moment. Because of the bullet holes.”

“Speaking of which,” Taika said, “we need to have a talk about what happened. Why aren’t you all shot up? What was that you were saying about vampires?”

Without Vermillion’s aura pressing down on him, Taika’s exasperation about the strangeness he was caught up in came out.

“Jason has asked that I help him explain everything to you, given that there are certain gaps in his knowledge base,” Vermillion said. “There are still things to be done first, however. I’ve rescheduled the meeting with Victor Tollman; we’ll be going there directly from here.”

“Can’t that wait?” Hiro asked.

“No,” Vermillion said. “Today’s events are a riptide, creating dangerous waters that you can’t see unless you know what you’re looking for. Jason wants you out of those waters as quickly as possible, and I want the same for Victor. He’s become something of a friend and I believe you have the best chance of persuading him to get out of the water before he drowns.”

A black town car pulled up on the street. It had sleek and aggressive lines; clearly a luxury car but not one Hiro recognised.

“This is Jason’s car,” Taika said, having ridden in this variant of Shade in the past.

Hiro didn’t even recognise the manufacturer’s badge on the front, even after stepping up to examine it. It looked like a starry sky with a floating cloak containing a daylight sky. It didn’t belong to any car maker he was familiar with and he was familiar with most, at least at the high end.

He guessed that it was from one of the boutique companies that made short production runs of wildly overpriced custom cars. The license plate was in the thin, European style, white on black. He noticed the plate number, 5H4-D0W.

“Shadow?”

“What’s that, boss?” Taika asked. “Oh, right; the plates. I noticed that too. The numbers for letters thing is a bit naff though, right? It’s not 2004.”

Vermillion got in the back with Hiro, while Taika took the passenger seat.

“There’s no driver,” Hiro said. He had heard about Jason’s self-driving car, but it was still startling when the car pulled into traffic with no one in the driver’s seat. “Are we sure this is safe? I’ve heard these self-driving systems can go wrong when faced with unexpected situations.”

“I think you’ll find,” a voice came from the dashboard, “that this self-driving system is quite capable of handling any situation you can imagine, along with many that you cannot.”

“Boss, the car is talking,” Taika said. “It’s like *Team Knight Rider*.”

“*Team Knight Rider*?” Hiro asked.

“Yeah, Boss. It’s the best one.”

“It’s really not,” Hiro said.

“The best what?” Vermillion asked.

“It’s a TV show about talking cars,” Hiro said.

“I don’t watch television,” Vermillion said.

“Bro, you’re missing out. You know, if someone told me last week I’d be talking to you about *Team Knight Rider*, I’d have said they were crazy. You’re alright, bro. It’s a bit weird that you think vampires are real, though.”

“They are,” Vermillion said.

“You know any vampires?” Taika asked.

“I am a vampire.”

“The sun’s out, bro. If you were vampire, you’d catch fire or blow up or something.”

“It would be best, I think,” Vermillion said, “to wait until Jason is with us before we get into explanations.”

“This is too much,” Hiro said. “A few hours ago, there were people shooting at us from motorcycles. Now we have talking cars and people claiming to be vampires? I need time to stop and sort all of this out in my head. I need some time and I need some answers, instead of a constant deluge of new questions.”

The car stopped at traffic lights and Jason slipped into the driver seat.

“I’ll do my best,” he said.

Annabeth managed to carve out a few minutes to call her wife.

“I’m probably not going to be home tonight,” she told her.

“I knew that was coming when I saw the news,” Susan said. “I bet the conspiracy theorists are all over it.”

Annabeth groaned.

“You have no idea how annoying they are when they’re right,” she said.

“Well, it doesn’t match up to your day, but I had an interesting encounter of my own.”

“Oh?”

“You know that strange painting I told you about? Someone claimed it. He was a rather odd man. Very intense. He claimed to be the subject of the painting, even though there were no people in it.”

“Oh?” Annabeth asked, her instincts tingling. “Tell me about him.”

“His name is Jason Asano.”

The car took off again as the light turned green. Jason was in the driver’s seat, but was leaving control to Shade.

“Uncle, Taika,” he greeted. “Thanks for looking out for them, Craig.”

“Craig?” Hiro asked, looking at Vermillion.

“Sorry, Vermillion,” Jason said. “I’ll keep it professional, yeah?”

“I think the mystique went out the window when we started talking about Team Knight Rider,” Vermillion said.

“Ick,” Jason said. “Why they kept trying to use Mustangs instead of a Trans-Am is beyond me. I’m certain that’s why all the follow ups failed.”

“Could we please stop talking about Knight Rider?” Hiro asked. “There’s something somehow even less plausible we need to discuss.”

“There is,” Jason acknowledged, the amusement gone from his voice. “Shade is taking us somewhere we can have a talk, given that what I have to tell you is the kind of thing that requires proof.”

“Shade?” Hiro asked.

“The car,” Jason said. “I’m assuming you were talking about Knight Rider because he spoke to you.”

“Jason, what’s going on?” Hiro asked.

“Well, you know those things I said I didn’t want to tell you about? It’s time to tell you about them.”

“Because of the people that attacked us?” Hiro asked.

“Yes,” Vermillion said. “The public nature of the attack has kicked the hornets’ nest. Although the attack didn’t involve the EOA, they’re going to approach things differently in the current climate. When they move in on Sydney’s underworld, they’ll be less tolerant of the resistance Victor is looking to put up. I want you to help me convince him that his efforts are futile.”

“At which point Vermillion will handle Victor’s next move, and I’ll see to your safety. For now, I’ll get you out of Sydney. Today. You too, Taika, now you’re caught up in this. We can organise the details of the handover to the EOA later. For now, I’ll explain what’s going on and then we’ll go see Victor.”

Vermillion’s phone rang and he pulled it out to check the caller.

“I have to take this,” he said, then answered the call.

“Mrs Tilden,” he greeted.

Annabeth’s voice came angrily through the phone without preamble. Jason’s bronze-rank hearing was easily able to make it out.

“Do you know where your friend Asano was while we had his uncle in custody?” she asked.

“He was laying low after what happened,” Vermillion said. “I would have thought you would appreciate that.”

“I don’t suppose you know where he was laying low.”

“I don’t,” Vermillion said.

“My wife’s art gallery! At the very moment you were convincing me to treat him respectfully, he was standing next to my wife.”

“Ah,” Vermillion said. “Jason, did you threaten my counterpart at the Network’s wife?”

“He’s there?” Annabeth asked. “Where are you?”

“Hand me the phone,” Jason said. Vermillion gave Jason an assessing look, then passed it forward.

“Mrs Tilden,” Jason said into the phone. “This is Jason Asano.”

“What do you hope to accomplish by threatening my family?”

“I’m not threatening anyone,” Jason said cheerfully. “Susan’s great, by the way; you did well there. I merely wanted to make it clear that while I don’t have the resources or personnel to protect my family from an organisation like yours, anyone who tries to use them as leverage will start a wave of reprisals that stains Sydney Harbour red with blood.”

Hiro and Taika looked on, wide-eyed as Jason cheerfully threatened to slaughter people’s families.

“You think it’s that easy?” Annabeth asked.

“Of course not,” Jason said. “When the time comes for us to meet, I simply want to avoid the tedium of explaining why trying to use my family against me is a Very Bad Idea.”

“Why are you treating us like an enemy, Mr Asano?”

“Because I’ve dealt with forces more powerful than myself before, Mrs Tilden. They have this habit of thinking they can get what they want from me without repercussions. Disabusing you of that notion now will be less costly for us both than doing so later.”

“Category two is powerful, Mr Asano, but we have stronger just here in Sydney, let alone around the country and the world. We’ve been building up for twice as long as this country has existed, and you think you can stand up to that with what you picked up in a year and a half?”

“Mrs Tilden, Australia has been inhabited for more than 60,000 years. It doesn’t impress me that your organisation has been around since before white people got here. I’ve faced an enemy more powerful than you can comprehend and it’s 2-1 in my favour. Your group isn’t a potential enemy, Mrs Tilden; you’re flavour text. If we can get along, maybe even do some work together, that’s great. But I don’t need you and I don’t fear you.”

“Are you quite done with the monologuing Mr Asano?” Annabeth asked.

“It felt good, I won’t lie,” Jason said. “Maybe I’m wrong and your organisation will spank me like a baby. You don’t want to test me and be wrong, though, Mrs Tilden.”

“You need to come in and talk to us about what happened today.”

“I really don’t, but I’ll let my new friend Craig set something up. In the meantime, I have some affairs to attend to, so I’m going to go. Congratulations on Bella getting the lead role in the play, though. That niece of yours is a real go-getter.”

Jason hung up the phone and handed it back to Vermillion.

“Can they track that?” Jason asked.

“No,” Vermillion said. “I thought you didn’t know anything about the Network.”

“I didn’t,” Jason said. “After I arrived, I did something to draw them out and started having their people followed. That was some good work, Shade. Nice and thorough.”

“Did you just threaten that person’s niece?” Hiro asked.

“I’m just keeping them from threatening my family,” Jason said. “I’m not going to hurt anyone else’s. It’s why I need to get you out of the EOA’s path. If they see you as a part of my family, rather than an independent obstacle, they won’t come after you.”