

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.