

## Chapter 427

### Negotiations

Gold-rankers, silver-rankers and even a few bold bronze-rankers went storming into the dome as it broke down. Once it was entirely gone and the transformed area revealed for all to see, even more followed.

Gerling still stood patiently, observing. Usually, a transformation zone turned an area into a supernatural reflection of its original state, but the Slovakian farmland had turned into a town from an animated movie, with colourful cloud houses, flowers and trees everywhere. It wasn't even the same as it had been while Gerling was inside.

Even as Gerling observed, he sensed the bronze-rankers all turn back and leave the zone. Many of the silver-rankers were doing the same and Gerling moved to meet one returning to the American Network camp. Gerling led him into the prefab building that held the camp bar, went behind the counter and poured them a stiff drink each.

"Thanks, Jack," the man said and they both knocked back their glasses with a gulp. Gerling poured them another glass each.

"What did you run into, Clint?"

"I'm not sure," Clint said. "As soon as I entered that weird town it felt like I was trespassing. The sense grew as I didn't leave and there was this growing sense of dread. More than that, though, it was like I was, I don't know. Setting myself up for retribution? The worst part, the thing that got me the hell out of there, is that I kind of felt like I deserved it. That creeped me right out and I bailed."

"Like you deserved it? That retribution you felt coming?"

"Yeah. It's like... I'm not sure how to describe it. It was as if I knew that my own choices were wrong and whatever happened to me, I had coming."

"Like a sin," Gerling said.

"Yeah, that's it," Clint said. "I never grew up religious, but yeah. It's like trespassing on that place is a sin. How does that work?"

"Sin is one of Asano's essences," Gerling said. "He did that to you."

"I'm going to leave that guy to you," Clint said. "He's clearly above my pay grade, and my pay grade is pretty damn good."

Cleary opened the door and walked in.

"Wagner," he said, looking at Clint. "Why did you go in there, only to turn around and come right back?"

"It's dangerous," Gerling said. In a blur of gold-rank speed, he moved around the bar and interposed himself between Clint and Cleary. Cleary took a step back, still shaken from his last conversation with Gerling.

"We're missing our window."

Gerling tilted his head as he concentrated on his aura senses.

"The first silver-ranker just died trying to get back out," Gerling said. "The others are running for it but he went too deep."

"Died?" Cleary asked. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. It wasn't one of ours."

"Goddamn it," Cleary said, running a hand over his mouth. "Wagner, the place is really that hostile?"

"Just walking in there felt like a sin," Clint confirmed.

"Sin?" Cleary asked, sharing a look with Gerling. "Asano?"

Gerling nodded.

"He's clearly in control," Gerling said.

"Couldn't you have taken control while you were in there?" Cleary asked. "You're stronger than him."

"You may have noticed, Cleary, but Asano is neck-deep in mysteries. He had enough control from the start to be in control of whether we came or went. As much as I loathe to admit it, I wouldn't have gotten out of there without him."

"And now he's what? Built a magical town in the European countryside?"

Cleary shook his head with a sigh.

"Alright," Cleary continued. "I'm going to put a moratorium on our people going in until we learn more," Cleary said. "No point sending our people to die when we don't even know what's in there. In the meantime, could you get closer and see if you can glean any information about the place? Your senses are better than most of the tests our ritualists can do."

Gerling nodded.

"I'll go take a look."

\*\*\*

Jason sensed the two elders of the Slovakian family taking on sin afflictions and mentally removed them from the list of people being attacked by his spirit domain. It seemed that Nikoleta wasn't kidding about her grandparents thinking ill of him.

He could feel the intruders suffering the effects as they moved into the astral space. Some were turning back quickly while others only did once the ominous feelings they

experienced became necrosis eating away at their flesh. Only those who had charged in towards the pagoda and then ignored the damage they were taking suffered greatly and the silver-ranked ones amongst them turned back.

The silver-rankers had no trouble escaping if they left promptly and the gold-rankers could endure far more. Only the bold bronze-rankers who ignored the ominous feelings and kept going until the damage kicked in were killed.

It was only a matter of time before the multiplicate effects of the damage overcame even the gold-rankers, but they were an order of magnitude tougher than even silvers. While the defensive measures of Jason's domain ignored rank disparity, they were still silver-rank effects. The gold rankers would be able to hold out for a considerable time.

Two gold-rank essence users and three vampires approached the pagoda through the air. One of the essence users was Chen, who Jason already knew, while the other was white, which meant American. Chen was flying freely, while the other essence user was held aloft by mechanical wings. Two of the vampires were standing on a cloud of blood mist, while the last was on the back of a giant raven that had no trouble beating its wings to hover in place.

They lined up in the air in front of the pagoda, where Jason and his familiars were lined up in turn. Jason pushed the hood back to reveal his face.

"Something I can help you with?" he asked casually.

"Mr Asano," Chen said. "How much control do you have over this place?"

"Mate, when was the last time you have a little tug-a-lug?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know, took a solo flight. Picked a pound of meat. Rubbed the lamp until the genie came out."

Chen took on an incredulous expression.

"Are you talking about...?"

"Yep," Jason said.

"Why would you ask that?"

"Based on how you kicked off this conversation, I thought that questions the other person definitely won't answer was the dynamic we were going with."

"Why bother letting this weakling prattle," one of the vampires said. "I will make him talk."

"No—" Chen said but the vampire had already leapt off the blood cloud at Jason.

Vampires lacked the magical senses of an essence user, so it hadn't noticed the invisible

bubble Jason had encapsulated the pagoda's roof in. It was a feature of his cloud constructs, just a normal wall with the transparency maxed out.

After it had already jumped, the vampire's gold-rank sense of touch realised the bubble was there from the way air was moving around him. He shifted to landed gracefully on the dome instead of smacking into it and immediately started hammering on the slightly squishy, invisible dome of cloud-stuff with his fist.

"Colin," Jason said.

Red strips of bloody cloth shot out from Colin, wrapping around the vampire's arms, legs and head. It pulled itself free easily and leapt back to the mist cloud, but savage welts marked its skin where the clothing had been ripped away.

"You can force your way through this barrier," Jason said. "While you do that I'll drop down through the roof, which you'll need to break through as well. Then the next one and the next one. How long do you think you can stick around for? You category fours are tough but surely you realise the damage is increasing exponentially."

"We would like to negotiate access to this space," Chen said.

"Because that's how the Vikings did it," Jason said. "They took their longboats, rowed over to England and negotiated the rape and pillage rights."

"This man blathers nonsense," the injured vampire said, even as its wounds closed up. "We should act together. The barrier isn't that strong."

"There are no treasures for you here," Jason said.

"You expect us to believe that?" the other essence user asked.

"I don't care what you believe," Jason said. "There's a whole town of stuff that doesn't help you at all but feel free to poke around for as long as it takes you to melt."

"The good stuff is obviously in this tower," the American said. "I'm coming around the vampire's plan. Let's smash our way in."

"If that is what you intend, then I wish you luck," Chen said. "I disregarded Mr Asano's warning once before and almost lost my life, so I will not participate."

He turned to Jason.

"Is there truly no room for compromise, Mr Asano?"

"If I didn't have the power to hold you off, you'd all be holding me upside down and shaking out the goodies," Jason said. "You come here to take my stuff, realise you can't, and then want to compromise? With the deepest respect, Mr Chen, go stick it up your arse."

Chen gave Jason a little smile that didn't reach his eyes.

“Then I will take my leave,” Chen said. “I can feel the power of this place affecting me more and more by the moment, so I shall withdraw. I recommend the rest of you do the same.”

Chen left, leaving the three vampires and the other essence user. Not trusting the vampires and not liking the odds, the essence user followed Chen.

“We will go,” one of the vampires told Jason. “The day will come when you will pay for your arrogance.”

“It usually does,” Jason admitted sadly.

\*\*\*

Shade’s plane form rode high over the skies of Italy as Jason relaxed. He’d managed to get away from his spirit domain using his portal ability, having scouted out potential portal destinations before arriving at the dome. He’d known going in that he would be surrounding himself with what were, if not enemies, at least unhelpfully avaricious magical factions and would need an exit strategy.

Before leaving, he had made contact with the Slovakian government, which the family of farmers had asked him to deliver them to. He could only assume that anyone else in the dome had died during the transformation, as they were not in the city and could not be found in the astral space. The astral space itself was a mixture of the environments that had been in his territories, but more integrated than the original concentric rings.

Jason sent the family to their government representatives via portal, arranging a future meeting at the same time. Jason had, after all, essentially annexed twenty-six square kilometres of sovereign state. That subsequent meeting had not gone well.

“It’s time, Mr Asano,” Shade said.

Jason grinned, not getting up from the chair he was reclining in.

“This is nice,” he said. “It’ll be good to jump out of a plane when I’m not racing off to fight were-dinosaurs or take out the guys who blew the plane up. I can just enjoy it.”

“Shall we, then?” Shade asked.

“Go for it.”

The plane turned into a cloud of shadow that was absorbed by Jason as he arced through the air. He didn't even break his pose at first, legs cross and arms behind his head. Eventually, he tilted his weight to flip himself over and look at Venice sprawled out below. Eventually, he conjured his cloak and directed himself to where he had left the cloud boat in which Farrah and his family were hidden, landing lightly on the deck. He went inside to an industrial clamp hug from his niece and greetings from the group relieved to see him.

“They’re speculating on the news that someone kidnapped you,” Erika said. “They still don’t know who attacked the meeting with the Slovakian government.”

“It was the government themselves,” Jason said. “When the Network split, the various Governments ended up working with different Network factions or turning to the Cabal or EOA. The Slovaks ended up with Network’s leadership faction.”

“They’re calling themselves the True Network now,” Farrah said.

“Whatever they call themselves,” Jason continued, “they don’t have gold-rankers like China and the US. They’re caught between them and the vampires, looking down the barrel of irrelevance. They thought I could help them tilt the scale. Actually had the nuggets to try and make a deal after I...”

He glanced at Emi sitting on a couch next to him.

“...dealt with their tactical teams.”

\*\*\*

Jason shared a sanitised version of his experiences with his family and then the more thorough version privately with Farrah. With her, he didn't skip over the elements like his death and what Dawn had told him.

“We have decisions to make,” Farrah said. “It would make sense to move your family at Asano village from the village to this spirit domain of yours. With all the complications that would entail, though, that may be trouble.”

“That occurred to me as well, but I don’ think it’s worth it. There are eyes on the village and the spirit domain, and while we can get around them, it would be logistically challenging. There have been family members reporting to the factions from the beginning. What happens when the spirit domain sees them as hostile? Kick them out? Let them in anyway? Plus, who knows how many would want to take that leap. Asano village has been a haven as the world goes mad and I’m sure a lot of them wouldn’t want to leave.”

“All that would be time-consuming to deal with,” Farrah said.

“I didn’t fix the transformation perfectly,” Jason said. “I stopped the end of the world from happening more or less immediately, but the clock is counting down faster than ever. I’d like to move the family but I can’t afford that kind of delay.”

“Magical manifestations have begun happening in the lowest-magic areas,” Farrah said. “It’s mostly just lesser monsters and a few iron-rank ones but people are panicking. The Network factions are tracking them using the grid and there won’t be any more monster waves, but now monsters are just turning up places.”

“So that’s it,” Jason said. “The non-magical world I left is now magical. People are going to start stumbling across essences. Monsters can show up anywhere.”

"It was never really without magic," Farrah pointed out.

"It was to most of us," Jason said.

"The other thing to be aware of is the vampires. They're taking over more and more places, mostly here in Europe and in South America. The US have theirs largely contained and China seems to as well, although it's hard to tell with their media blackout policy. No one is sure what's happening in Russia, but the rumours are that the vampires and the rest of the Cabal have all but gone to war."

"If the vampires and the rest of the Cabal split like the Network did, that's good for team anti-vampire apocalypse," Jason said. "We need to get back to fixing the link between the worlds before the vampires make any large, collective moves."

"Indications are that it's close," Farrah said. "If even the public news knows that, war is probably imminent. What about our plan to raid the blood-enhancement site here in Venice?"

"We'll go ahead with it. That blood and those loose reality cores will be of use to us."

"That leaves the question of how to track nodes, now that we don't have proto-spaces to use."

"That, I think I can manage. My time inside the dome cost me a life, but my understanding of astral forces and how they relate to node space was advanced quite a lot. I may be able to track nodes faster and more reliably than our old methods."

"That's good to hear," Farrah said.

"There's something we need to sort out first, though," Jason said. "I picked up some loot while I was away."