

## Chapter 390

### Prepare For The Rematch

The cloud house was in a vacant lot of an abandoned Austrian town. Inside, Farrah, Itsuki and the Asano sisters waited anxiously. The portal had closed right behind them and Jason's fate was unknown. Farrah had taken out some suppression collar skeleton keys she had made herself after seeing the crude ones Jason had made. She unlocked the collars around the necks of the others, then magically examined them for tracking magic. The cloud house should be more than capable of blocking it but she wanted to be careful.

Ten minutes after they arrived, the portal reappeared and Jason stumbled through, the portal sinking into the floor immediately after. Farrah immediately wrapped him in a fierce hug. Once she let him go, Jason opened his spirit vault, concerned about whether his mental state, the suppression collar or both had affected his family within.

Heading into the vault, he immediately spotted the differences. The colour seemed washed out of everything, from the drab flowers to the grey sky. Rain was falling, which was not something he had seen before in his spirit vault. As soon as he emerged from the portal in the central pavilion, his family rushed up to him from where they had been clustered together in a small sitting area, under the pavilion.

"Jason, what happened?" Erika asked.

"Come out into the cloud house," he said. "We need to talk."

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"What in the god damn hell?" Cleary asked angrily, sitting in the transport helicopter as it approached the Berlin Network headquarters. "Our own people betrayed us and let Asano get away."

"No, they didn't," Gerling said. "They let his companions get away but we got Asano. Him getting loose was on us. He clearly had some means to disable a suppression collar."

"He was searched," Cleary said. "Thoroughly. If he had a magic key jammed up his ass, our sensors would have found it when we checked him."

"Lack of intel, then," Gerling said. "It must be some ability."

"To ignore a suppression collar?"

"Who knows what abilities he learned in the other world? His aura was like nothing I've ever seen, both in power and control. Based on the aura surge I felt when he was escaping, it's probably related to that."

"How can you be calm?" Cleary asked. "He got away."

“My job was to catch him and I caught him,” Gerling said. “Containment was your area and I’m the talent, which means your head is the one on the block.”

“I’m going to kill those traitorous bastards,” Cleary spat.

“No you’re not,” Gerling said.

“Excuse me?”

“You shanghaied a bunch of the Berlin branch’s tac-teams, got half of them killed and sent the other half to die. Are you that surprised they screwed you? I would have. Now you want to what? Take them back to their branch and execute them in front of the rest? They will string you up.”

“Not with you there.”

“If you want to go after them, that’s all you,” Gerling said. “They’ve already demonstrated what they’ll do when you push them hard enough, even when I am right there. Frankly, I admire them for having the sack to go for it.”

Cleary scowled unhappily but fell silent, calming himself with deep breaths. Only once the helicopter was about to land did he speak again, the tense rage in his voice replaced with weariness.

“Did I hear you call yourself the talent?”

“I regretted it immediately,” Gerling admitted.

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In the cloud house, Jason’s family and other companions sat in morose silence. Emi was curled up against her uncle, clutching onto him.

“What about the bodies?” Ian asked.

“I’ll make sure they’re sent home, with respect,” Jason said.

In the frenzy of the moment, Jason had been moving too fast for the horror of what had happened to catch him. Now that he’d stopped still, it came on in force. The image of the dead bodies at the man’s feet was seared into his brain. He lost track of them in the fight, unsure even how intact they were after all the area attacks being thrown around.

“What about Dawn?” Akari asked.

“What was with us wasn’t really her,” Farrah said. “I don’t know how long it will take but she will be back.”

“Isn’t there something you can do?” Erika asked. “You came back from...”

She struggled to say the words.

“...Farrah came back. Isn’t there some way for Kai to come back too?”

“I’m sorry, Eri,” Jason said.

“The circumstances were very specific,” Farrah added and the group fell silent again.

“What do we do now?” Akari asked.

“First thing is we lay low,” Jason said. “That gold-ranker is still out there and the resources the Americans have at their disposal are not to be underestimated. We have to be extremely careful.”

He winced, his expression filled with sorrow and self-recrimination.

“The way we should have been already,” he said. “I should never have let you all participate.”

“It was our choice,” Akari said. “You think you are the only one with the right to fight for their world? That only you are doing this for the right reasons? Kaito, Asya and Greg weren’t just doing this to help you with a personal project, Asano. We all came into this understanding what was at stake and the price we might have to pay.”

Jason stared at her with a deer in headlights stare, then gave the faintest of acknowledging nods.

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Things had not gone well at the Berlin branch, forcing the American contingent to hurriedly board their transport plane and decamp for the Ramstein Air Base in Germany's south-west. Despite Gerling's warning, Cleary had been startled at the Berlin branch's fury. If not for the presence of the gold-ranker, he realised that they may not have been allowed to leave at all.

“It's time to regroup anyway,” Gerling told him. “Asano is not going to continue his current approach. We need to consolidate our resources here in Europe before we get the whole continent up in arms because of how we're riding roughshod over their branches.”

“They'll do what they're told,” Cleary said.

“I think that you're overestimating how much crap people are willing to eat,” Gerling said. “You think most of the Network cares about reality cores that the vast majority of them will never so much as lay eyes on? That's the obsession of the few who will actually get to reap that power. Maybe you can't see it because you've been living through it, but those monster waves and these transformation events are terrifying to the people who don't have the power to fight against them. That's what the actual people who make up the Network care about, not which branch has the most category-fours for some pissing match.”

“Are you questioning our purpose here?” Cleary asked him.

“No,” Gerling said. “I'm just pointing out that it's *our* purpose. I hate to break it to you, Cleary, but however we end up spinning it, we're the bad guys. I'm on board with that and you need to be as well.”

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In Sydney, the steering committee of the local Network branch ended their meeting. All but one of the members shuffled out of the conference room, leaving Annabeth Tilden alone to exhaustedly rub her temples. Her brother, Terrance, came in after the committee members had left.

“Well?” he asked.

“We confirmed Asano escaped,” Anna. “He’s probably going to go on some kind of rampage.”

“I hope not. He’ll die, and if what he’s doing is important as he claims...”

“Yeah,” Anna said. “Ketevan has already made a formal request to Berlin for the return of the bodies to Australia. The bastards killed Asya.”

“What is our stance going to be?”

“Our steering committee is adopting a wait-and-see approach.”

“Meaning they’re going to chicken out until they find a bandwagon to jump on,” Terrance said. “Our people aren’t going to like that. Do you know how many of them have fought alongside Jason? Worked with Farrah on restoring the grid? Flew with Kaito or got a medivac to the Asano compound? If we lay down on this, we may have a rebellion on our hands.”

“You think I don’t know this?” Anna asked. “What do you think I’ve been trying to hammer into the heads of the steering committee?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t bother,” Terrance said.

“What are you saying?”

“The Network is fracturing, Anna. Maybe it’s time for a management restructure.”

“I’m hearing similar talk out of Europe,” Anna said. “The Berlin branch is furious about the International Committee forcing them to help the Americans and getting a bunch of their people killed. A lot of other branches are up in arms over the allocation of resources to fighting over reality cores instead of monster wave recovery. Now that we can monitor the oceans with the grid, there’s a lot of call for shifting priorities back to our traditional role.”

“That’s not going to happen. We’re out in the open, now. The leadership has been hiding their power and now they’re looking to flex in front of the whole world. They don’t care about stopping monsters as much as accruing political power.”

“That’s what worries me,” Anna said. “There’s talk of pressuring the International Committee to censure the US and China and force them to go back to the old priorities. That would be great except that neither one is going to roll over and show their stomach.”

“No, they won't. From their perspective, the International Committee serves them, not the other way around. It's just always been easier for them not to make a point of it. If the IC actually pushes it, the Network will fracture back into factions.”

“That may be inevitable. There has always been a disconnect between the leadership and the bulk of the Network's personnel, but now the leadership is throwing its authority around like never before. This couldn't have come at a worse possible time.”

There was a hard knock on the door and Michael Aram opened it and came in before waiting for a response.

“Anna, I've been contacted by Craig Vermillion.”

“We aren't exactly on the best terms with the Cabal right now,” Terrance said.

“He knows,” Aram said. “He knew you would trust me and asked me to set up a discreet meeting. I think you'll want to hear what he has to say.”

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Gerling had been assigned a pair of assistants to see to his needs. They were both young Network functionaries, iron-rank admin staff with no tactical training. One was David, a man who Gerling disliked for his annoyingly transparent ambition, but was enthusiastic about meeting Gerling's requests. Fiona was a plain but highly competent woman that Gerling appreciated for her ability to know when to be around and when not to be, compared to the stifling David.

Gerling was walking through an aircraft hanger to meet Cleary when his assistants approached him.

“We've found an elf for you, sir,” Fiona told Gerling.

“We have?” David asked.

“It turns out that one of the early reactions of people transforming into strange new species is—”

“Rich people paying to have sex with them,” Gerling realised.

“Precisely,” Fiona said. “Brothels are opening up like mushrooms after rain in the transformation zones and we have contracted someone who has quickly come into high demand, despite her considerable rates.”

“Excellent work.”

“Contracted?” David asked. “I thought we were just going to grab some elf.”

Gerling and Fiona both turned on him with disdain.

“Do you think I'm a rapist?” Gerling asked.

“You kill a lot of people,” David said uncertainly. “I thought you did what you wanted. Isn't that what power is for?”

“And you think what I want is to rape people? Fiona, get this guy replaced.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You just said that you wanted us to get you an elf!” David whined.

“I assumed not raping people went without saying,” Gerling said. “Fiona, make sure the next guy understands that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, and how did you go with getting the people I asked to have sent from the States?”

Fiona checked her watch.

“They should be wheels down in about seven hours, sir.”

“Thank you.”

“Sir...” David said.

“Make sure the next person isn’t like this idiot,” Gerling said to Fiona, gesturing at David. “Is he someone’s nephew or something?”

“His father is the Director of Tactical Operations in New York.”

“Ah. Probably just fire him, then, rather than fire him out of a cannon.”

“We don’t have a cannon, sir,” Fiona said. “I can probably find someone who can conjure one.”

“What?” David asked as Gerling chuckled.

“That’s fine,” Gerling said. “Just reassign him to someone who’ll appreciate a sycophant.”

“Very well, sir,” Fiona said. “Is there anything else?”

“Not unless you have anything else for me,” Gerling said.

Fiona waved her hand and a portal appeared. She reached in and pulled out a can of beer. Gerling laughed as he took it.

“You want to come work for me permanently, Fiona?”

“I would very much like that, sir.”

“Oh, come on,” David complained.

Gerling left his assistant and former assistant behind as he made his way to the office that Cleary had appropriated in the hangar. Cleary was standing over a desk with a monitor set into it, poring over a map on which transformation zones were marked. He looked up as Gerling came in without bothering to knock.

“You requested a training team be sent here from the US?” Cleary asked.

“That’s right.”

“You asked specifically for people that trained with Asano and Hurin in Australia. You want to learn more about them from people who know them?”

“No,” Gerling said. “Those people learned the techniques taught by Hurin and Asano and then brought them home. I want to learn about how they fight and how to fight like them.”

“You beat them both.”

“I should have annihilated them both. You don’t understand how much more powerful than them I am. My old instructor always said that I was coasting on the power of my attacks but I never listened and now Asano and Hurin made me look like a fool. Feel like a fool. You concentrate on finding them; you don’t need my help for that. I need to prepare for the rematch.”

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“Interesting choice of venue,” Anna said. She was in the townhouse that was previously the home of Jason’s Uncle Hiro, now apparently owned by the vampire, Craig Vermillion.

“After the EOA purchased all of Hiro’s assets, I quietly picked this up off them through an appropriate series of cut-outs,” Craig said. “I like to have an off-the-books spot with the little comforts.”

They sat down in the lounge.

“Before we begin,” Craig asked, “is it true about Asya?”

“Yes.”

Craig bowed his head.

“These are dark times, Anna.”

“What do you want, Craig? I have enough on my plate to be going on with.”

“Oh, it’s worse than you think. You are aware that the Cabal has been coming out on top in the contest for the reality cores.”

“I genuinely don’t care.”

“You should. The Network is not the only one threatening to fracture over the behaviour of its most powerful members.”

“Oh?”

“Do you know how vampires grow more powerful, Anna?”

“Time, right? But then you get too powerful and the ambient magic can’t sustain you.”

“Yes,” Craig said. “The old ones have all been slumbering since they reached what you call category four.”

Anna’s eyes went wide.

“Reality cores,” she whispered in horrified realisation.

“Exactly,” Craig said. “It’s not as simple as handing over a core but some of the Cabal’s upper echelons are working on imbuing blood with that power, which should be able to start waking them up. I’ve heard the rumours of the Chinese and Americans having people of that level and they’re probably stronger than an equivalent vampire. How many do they have, though? Two? Three? Five? I promise you that we have more.”

“How many more?”

“I’m not sure any one person knows,” Craig said. “The Cabal is a nest of secrets.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Anna asked. “You’re Cabal. You’re a vampire.”

“And I like the world the way it is. Was, before the damn EOA messed everything up. Even as bad as things have gotten, do you think I want the planet ruled by people with eight-century-old social values and a thirst for human blood?”