

Chapter 391

Finish the Job

No one paid attention to one more man in a dark suit and dark glasses. There was no shortage of them as the funeral was conducted under a bright, clear sky, despite the winter. Jason's use of aura control had progressed to the point that even in a crowd with many essence users he could manipulate their perception to go unnoticed, even standing right amongst them.

It helped that all the essence users were lower rank than Jason. The network leadership would never allow precious silver-rankers to take time away when there could be a transformation zone to fight over at any moment. The Network members were mostly from the ranks, crowding the grassy, outdoor venue for Kaito's service. In the months he had been one of them, Kaito had flown them into hot zones, evacuated them when injured and delivered critical supplies in the midst of danger.

Jason watched Amy, standing stony-faced at the front. Someone had given her an aura suppression bracelet so her emotions weren't on open display in front of all the essence users present.

Publicly, Jason was a wanted criminal, internationally. A rogue element, responsible for bombings in Japan and killing Global Defense Network personnel in Austria. The Network leadership knew that with the failed capture attempt and the death of Jason's brother, lover and friend, they had declared war. Accordingly, they sought to sever Jason's influence and connections inside the Network.

Ostensibly, this meant that the Network was on the lookout for Jason at events like his brother's funeral. In reality, they knew that even a gold-ranker had failed to pin him down, with no shortage of people having died in the attempt. Most Network members didn't even agree with what the Americans had done, especially those from the Australian branches that had worked alongside Jason and his brother. The last thing the people looking for Jason wanted was to find him.

After the service, many people came up to Amy, offering their condolences. Her eyes went wide when she found Jason standing in front of her. She glanced at the people around them.

"How are you here?" she asked in a conspiratorial whisper. "Why aren't people jumping all over you?"

"A trick of perception. So long as no one draws too much attention to me, they won't notice that it's me."

“So I could yell out and people would try and grab you?”

“Yes.”

“Why shouldn’t I, then? You were meant to bring the father of my children back home.”

“I know,” Jason said, his voice cracking.

She scowled as they continued to converse in hushed tones.

“What are you going to do about the people that killed him?” she asked.

“The man in question is powerful. Far more than me but his time will come. First, I have to finish the job that Kaito and I started.”

“Is it worth it?” she asked.

Jason nodded.

“Things are going to get worse before they get better,” he said, “but Kaito played his part in getting us all past this. I know it isn’t a comfort, but he died for something that truly matters. To give his children a future.”

“I know it was his choice to go,” she said. “Even so, I can’t help but hate you for taking him.”

Jason nodded but said nothing else. If his words couldn’t make things better, he kept his mouth shut.

Michael Aram discreetly approached Annabeth Tilden after the service, as she was walking back to the car with her wife. He was in charge of security and media management for the event.

“Committeewoman,” he greeted her, with a respectful nod.

“What is it, Aram? Shouldn’t you be answering to Ketevan?”

“She asked me to keep you in the loop. Some of our security personnel have glimpsed a blurred artefact on the camera feeds.”

“He’s here, then,” Anna said. “What did Keti tell you to do?”

“Pretend he isn’t.”

“Good. If he didn’t want us to know, we wouldn’t.”

“Is he provoking us?”

“Not at his brother’s funeral. He’s probably going to pay me one of his unexpected visits. Thank you, Aram.”

Aram left them and they reached their car, the driver opening the rear door to admit Anna and her wife. As they sat, a shadow emerged from Anna’s shadow to sit opposite them and Jason appeared from within it.

"Anna," he greeted, then turned to Anna's wife. "Susan. We haven't met since I obtained those paintings from your gallery."

"The paintings by Dawn," Susan said.

"Have you actually met the artist?" Jason asked.

"No," Susan said. "She always worked through an intermediary."

"I'll introduce you if I get the chance. She was killed alongside my brother but she'll be back, sooner or later."

Susan frowned but Anna forestalled questions with a shake of her head.

"Are you here to kill us?" Anna asked.

"I'm here to thank you for getting the bodies sent home," he said. "It would have been awkward to make arrangements myself, given the circumstances."

"Asya was a friend," Anna said. "Were you and her...?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm doubly sorry. There was talk of using the bodies or this funeral as bait," Anna said.

"I know," Jason said. "Thank you for putting a stop to that particular idea. My sister-in-law and I have our issues but she deserves to say goodbye to her husband in peace."

"You should know that the Americans may soon be too busy to direct more attention your way," Anna said.

"I'm aware," Jason said. "The Cabal leadership are looking at waking up old vampires, and both the Network and the Cabal are seeing dangerous splits between the leadership and the bulk of their membership. Medieval bloodsuckers and a potential magic civil war, all while the world is slowly being transformed."

"You know a lot. Have you been talking to Craig Vermillion?"

"No, Anna. I've been spying on you."

"Oh. Then you know about the gift I got for you?"

"I do. And thank you, even if it does play into your agenda."

"Be careful with it," Anna said. "I'm not entirely convinced it isn't a trap."

"The same has occurred to me. I'll be cautious."

"Mr Asano, the days ahead are going to be dark and full of chaos. Probably worse than what we've seen, if Vermillion's estimate on the number of ancient vampires is even close to accurate. Is what you're doing going to stop it?"

"I can stop the transformation events and cut off the reality core supply. Eventually. It just got harder now that I have to change up my methodology to avoid being hunted down."

People want what I have and it doesn't stop with the Americans. Being distracted by wider events isn't the same as giving up."

Anna nodded.

"There was some concern that you would lash out in revenge."

"I'm not strong enough to go after the gold ranker."

"I meant against the Network at large."

"Without the Network's tactical team having the courage to defy the gold-ranker, I would have lost even more people. I know that they were acting against the Americans rather than for me, but I'm grateful, nonetheless. I won't repay that with ill-placed vengeance."

"A lot of people will be glad to hear that."

"I won't deny I felt a powerful urge to start clearing out Network branches one by one," Jason confessed. "It was a closer thing than I'd like to admit, but there would be no coming back from that. Having power gives me a chance to do the things I need to, even when others say I shouldn't. Unfortunately, it also gives me the power to do things I want to, even when people are right that I shouldn't. It's a path to making costly mistakes."

"It was the Americans who did this, Mr Asano, not you."

"I could have done it differently. More carefully. I have to, now, but I could have from the start and kept others out of it. Not considering the consequences of my actions to the people around me is a lesson I've failed to learn before and this time it wasn't just a close call. The people around me paid the price for my arrogance and short-sightedness. Perhaps this time I will finally learn."

"What will you do now?"

"I'll make use your gift. Force the Americans to refocus their gold-rank assets on the transformation zones instead of me. Then I'll get back to the job that my brother, Asya and my friend died for."

"Good luck, Mr Asano."

"And to you, Mrs Tilden."

Jason's shadow rose up to engulf him and he was gone.

A contingent of people from two Japanese clans had arrived in Australia and settled in Asano village. First were members of the Asano clan forced out by Noriko Asano as she wrested control of the clan from her son. There were only a handful of them, being the former clan head, Shiro, and his closest family.

Shiro's daughters, Akari and Mei, had been travelling with Jason since his trip to Japan. He had sent them to Asano Village due to the clan turmoil and now had followed with the rest of their family. Jason met with Shiro, without anyone in the village being aware that he had returned.

"Thank you for seeing my daughters safe in the most trying of circumstances," Shiro said as they met in the house Shiro and his family had been assigned. It was a large home out in the bushland, surrounded by trees. "I know you lost people of your own."

"It was fortune, rather than any capability of mine," Jason said. "You should thank the Network tactical team that unravelled the trap."

"You are modest. My daughters have told me of how powerful that category four was and you fought him, face to face."

"Did they tell you I lost? It was an escape, not a victory."

"Nonetheless, Akari wants to keep helping you. She knows how important what you are doing is."

Jason shook his head.

"I've already made that mistake before. The way we will be operating now, Akari can't participate. It will just be Farrah and myself."

Shiro nodded.

"I am glad, to be honest. I know I should let my daughter make her own choices but I would rather have her close and safe. Thank you for giving us sanctuary in hard times."

"I'm honestly not so sure how secure this sanctuary is," Jason said. "Farrah is working on activating some of the stronger defences as we speak but forces are emerging that are stronger than any of us. I'm afraid of this village becoming a target."

"We will do our best to defend it, if it comes to that," Shiro said.

"I appreciate that," Jason said. "Having more silver-rankers here gives me some peace of mind."

The second contingent from Japan had arrived with the Asano clan, despite their recent conflict. The Tiwari clan's core leadership had tried to dig out those who had acted against Jason, only to find much of the clan turning against them. Playing on the unrest stirred up by Jason's interaction with the Tiwari leadership, the leadership of the Network's Kobe branch had taken advantage.

The network supported a coup by a hidden faction of the Tiwari clan, in return for information about the magic door they had been guarding for centuries. Handing the door over to an outsider had been more contentious to the clan than the patriarch has realised

and he found his entire family expelled. The two former patriarchs, Asano and Tiwari, realised they were in similar circumstances and both turned to Jason.

"They call fulfilling our ancient purpose a betrayal while selling out everything we are to the Network," the ousted patriarch explained to Jason. There were more exiled Tiwari than Asano clan members and they had been assigned to a cluster of houses in the village's beachfront area.

Koya Tiwari, Itsuki's father, also thanked Jason for bringing his son alive through such a dangerous trial.

"He is not happy that you are leaving him behind," Koya said. "I confess that I am."

While Jason had quietly met with the exiled patriarchs, Farrah had been activating additional defences around the village. These were protections that she had put in place from the beginning but never activated due to the cost. Afterwards, as she and Jason flew away from Asano village in Shade's plane form, she discussed an issue with Jason that had come up during the activation.

"Is there a problem with the defences?" Jason asked, seeing Farrah's troubled expression.

"Just the opposite," Farrah said. "It worked too well. I was able to put the stronger defences in a semi-dormant state that consumes minimal resources, only becoming active and power-hungry as needed."

"That's great. Which makes me wonder why we didn't do it that way in the first place."

"Because we couldn't. The ambient magic was too low, even with the magic-collecting systems built into the village's infrastructure."

"You're saying that the ambient magic is rising?"

"We built those defences a year ago and since then we've had the monster waves and the transformation events. I think they are causing a more precipitous rise in the magical density than any of us realised, even Dawn."

Rainbow light burst into place in the middle of the plane, fading after an instant to reveal Dawn. Her new avatar projected a silver-rank aura.

"Miss Hurin is quite right," she said.