

Chapter 364

Candid and Authentic

Emi and Akari had arrived together in the main thoroughfare of the village, where Jason and Erika were speaking with one of the reporters. Akari was the one due to be interviewed, but the reporter had been waylaid.

"That story you did last November on mining deregulation was an exercise in buffoonery," Emi said. "I don't even think you're a corporate shill; you're just gullible. Have you even seen the foreign ownership statistics or do you only look at press releases and regurgitate them like a mother bird?"

"Look, Little Miss," the reporter said, "clearly you've—"

"Little Miss?" Emi asked, nostrils flaring. "At least I have the decency use a person's name, *Mr Denier*. Do I look like the protagonist of a book written by a nice English lady in the fifties?"

"Now that you say it," Jason said, earning him a glare that had him holding his hands up in surrender.

"Emi..." Erika said with the disapproving tone only a mother can truly master.

"What?" Emi asked. "You want me to ignore the fact that this guy is facilitating foreign interests selling our country's mineral wealth to other foreign interests while paying roughly the same tax as a guy cutting keys in a booth at the shopping centre?"

"That's rather an oversimplification," the reporter, Denier, said.

"Which is necessary with someone who is obviously simple," Emi shot back. "You'll probably be on TV tomorrow describing the EOA putting weird alien implants inside people to stop them from going insane when they cut them open to carve magic runes on their skeletons as a good idea. I'll have to tune in and watch, so which network were you from? The Wrong Side of History Channel?"

"Emi," Erika said. "Isn't it time for you to go to Coffs Harbour and make sure there aren't any monster waves coming?"

"Fine," she grumbled. "I'll go find Uncle Kaito."

"Feel free to edit that out," Jason said as they watched Emi stomp off in the direction of the main residence.

"She's a pistol, no mistake, but she can go off on political rants when she may or may not have all the facts at hand. No idea where she gets it from."

"Wait," Denier said. "Is she really the one making sure that no monsters invade Coffs Harbour?"

"How's your dimensional membrane protrusion precursor analysis theory, Mr Denier?" Jason asked.

"My what?"

"That's what I thought. When you're better at magic than my niece, feel free to question her credentials. Until then, how about we stick to qualified opinions?"

"NOT REALLY HIS AREA!" Emi shouted from the steps of the house.

"That's enough out of you!" Jason yelled back at her. She stuck out her tongue in response and he did the same.

"I see you are as vigilant as ever about the dignity of the Asano name," Akari observed dryly.

"I didn't pull out my apocalypse beast, did I?" Jason asked. "And he loves meeting new people. But also, eating new people, so..."

"Did you just say apocalypse beast?" Denier asked.

"What?" Jason asked. "No idea what you're talking about. Let's go take a look at the medical centre and you can talk with Akari along the way."

"That would be good," Denier said as Jason led the way. "Miss Asano, as a relative outsider, here, how have you found living with your Australian relatives?"

Akari cast a glance at Jason.

"Challenging."

Erika, being the experienced media personality, had taken to attaching herself to the tour. She wanted to at least reel in her brother's impulsive nature, which was going roughly as well as expected. As the reporters interviewed people at the medical centre, she leaned close to Jason.

"You did tell Craig and his anaemic friends to stay inside today, right?" she whispered.

"Of course," Jason said.

Vermillion had been unhappy about giving up his country mansion but turned out to be quite satisfied with one of the clifftop houses. Since it was not practical to keep shuffling blood donors up from Sydney, he had a sufficient retinue living with him to keep him fed, although he, too, was rationing.

The Cabal was keeping very quiet in Australia but in other parts of the world, they were more active. Individual factions were assisting against the monster waves in places like Siberia and the South Pacific where the Network were at their least influential and spread the thinnest. Having Vermillion present gave Jason a line on Cabal activity, and

while it didn't impact his activities for the moment, if the Cabal became a flashpoint then he had the inside line.

Ian came over and kissed his wife.

"Any idea when the circus is going to shuffle out?" he asked. "We need to get these people ready to transport."

"I think Terrance is around here somewhere," Jason said. "He's on press-wrangling duty, so I'll go find him to play bad-guy and kick them out."

"Actually, could you go do that, Honey?" Ian asked. "Some of the patients wanted to meet Jason and I thought that might look good for the cameras."

"Why would they want to meet me?" Jason asked.

"Because you're the hero of Broken Hill."

"No, I'm not!"

Jason's raised voice caused the attention of the reporters.

"I do not want to hear that phrase spread around," Jason said, his voice low and fierce.

"You don't always get to choose," Erika told him.

After leaving the medical centre, Jason led the reporters back to the main thoroughfare where Taika was standing in front of a series of vehicles, looking self-satisfied.

"What is going on?" Jason asked.

"Team Knight Rider," Taika said. "It's sweet, right?"

"No, it isn't. Shade, why would you even participate in this? Most of these vehicles aren't even black."

"I know," one of the cars said unhappily. "I lost a bet."

Jason put a hand over his eye and let out a groan before looking over at the camera crews who were still filming everything.

"Did you really have to do this today?" Jason asked Taika.

"A bet's a bet, bro," Taika said, handing Jason his phone. "Take my photo."

"I don't think that's necessary," Shade said. "I'm certain that Mr Asano requires my services in some capacity."

"No, I'm taking the photo," Jason said. "A bet is a bet; he's not wrong."

"This is all very undignified," Shade said.

Jason took the photo and handed Taika back the phone.

"Okay, Shade. Knock that off and come give these nice reporters an interview."

"You have been an enigmatic figure for some time now," Jeremy Westin said. He and Jason were sitting comfortably, facing one another in the lounge of the main residence of Asano Village. The sun had long since set and the other reporters were gone. Along with Jason and Jeremy were the cameraman, Terrance, and Erika.

"Are you looking to lift the veil of mystery, Mr Westin?" Jason asked.

"I imagine you'll still have no shortage of secrets when we're done, Mr Asano. I'd like to start by going through some background and then what the public has seen of you, from your perspective. As you might imagine, there has been no small amount of inquiry into your background. Until just a few years ago, you were a relatively ordinary person, with an ordinary job. The most unusual thing about you was your occasional appearances on your sister's cooking program."

"I did see the interview with my old boss, Sadiq," Jason said. "That part where he was cranky about me not giving notice once he found out I was alive was classic Sadiq. Someone should make a workplace sitcom about that guy."

"That brings us to the key point," Jeremy said. "Your disappearance and apparent demise. The destruction of your apartment and the subsequent cover-up. Then you're gone, presumed dead, for a year and a half. You come back ten months ago and immediately we get the first appearance of the Starlight Angel or Starlight Rider. Do you have a preference for either moniker?"

"Jason's fine. If you really insist then I prefer to avoid the religious connotations."

"Yet, that does seem to be a problem for you. You have been hailed as the messenger of God and Satan both."

"Jeremy, I'm not interested in telling anyone what they should or shouldn't believe," Jason said, prompting a startled cough from Erika.

"Sister, dear," Jason said. "You're a professional. I think you know better than to step on the audio."

"Sorry," she said. "I thought I heard a bull defecating."

Terrance paced back and forth. He was in the main residence with Erika, Farrah and Jason.

"What the hell is Team Knight Rider?" he asked.

"It's a TV show from 1997 that got cancelled after one season," Jason said.

"Why did you stage that scene? You did stage it, right? You didn't just lead a bunch of reporters into the middle of your farcical personal life."

"Of course I staged it," Jason said. "You think Shade goes around making dodgy bets? You wanted humanising. A little unexpected weirdness feels candid and authentic. If something or someone comes across as too polished and too perfect, people react negatively. I'm sure you know that better than me."

"I'm fairly sure you had not perfect covered. What was that thing with your niece?"

"That was entirely her," Jason said.

"Seriously, mining deregulation?"

"What do you want me to say?" Jason asked. "Contemporary youth are showing an increased level of political engagement."

"And that bit about the EOA and alien implants?" Erika asked.

"Okay, it was mostly her," Jason admitted.

"That girl is a menace," Terrance said.

"Did you just call my daughter a menace?" Erika asked.

"Your daughter is—"

"...an unabashed delight," Jason interrupted, completing his sentence before the man finished digging a shallow grave. "She also has a doting uncle who gets very cranky when people say bad things about her. An uncle who, on an unrelated note, has killed dozens of people."

"You've killed dozens of people?" Terrance asked.

"I downplayed the number when they asked me about it in the interviews," Jason said.

"Why do people keep threatening me with violence?" Terrance complained, looking at Jason. "They don't threaten you."

"Did you not hear what I just said about the dozens of people? Everyone who has threatened me is either dead or a god-like being from beyond reality. Or had their power stripped by an invasive procedure. Oh, or had their soul devoured by one of those god-like beings I just mentioned. That was a rough way to go, but I wasn't directly involved. Actually, there is one guy who wound up fine. His name's Jerrick and I almost killed him but I kept him alive for evidence on this thing I was working on. Then there was a political cover-up and he lost his job but he's doing alright. Even helped me out one time when my soul was being tortured, because of the time I didn't kill him. There were these other guys I killed in a shopping arcade while I was bringing him back and I think it left an impression. They gave him his job back for that. Helping me, I mean, not watching me kill a bunch of people."

"Uh..." Terrance said.

"Invasive procedure?" Farrah asked. "Are you talking about skeletal suppression?"

"Yep," Jason said.

Farrah noticed the confused expressions on Erika and Terrance.

"It's a similar process to what the EOA apparently does as part of their enhancement process," she explained. "They cut you open and carve magic right onto your skeleton, except, instead of giving you powers, they enchant suppression collar magic right onto your bones. Assuming you survive, it permanently suppresses all your magical abilities."

"That sounds horrifying," Erika said.

"It's not used very often," Farrah said. "Normally, if you've done something bad enough to warrant it, they just execute you."

"Even in Farrah's world it's considered ethically sketchy, and that's saying something," Jason said.

"Are you saying that my world is immoral?" Farrah asked.

"Every time I killed people I got rewarded," Jason said.

"That means you were killing the right people," Farrah told him. "I thought you moved past this kind of thing."

"I don't ever want him to move past that kind of thing," Erika cut in. "If he becomes a remorseless killer, he's not really himself any more, is he?"

"That's true," Farrah acknowledged. "Who did they do skeletal suppression to?"

"Lucian Lamprey," Jason said.

"The Director of the Magic Society?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "He helped that crime boss to kidnap me."

"You didn't mention that in your recordings."

"It wasn't exactly the best time for me."

"That's understandable."

Terrance moved next to Erika.

"How much of this are you following?" he asked.

"It's best not to try with Jason. Just let him run around, nod occasionally and wait for him tire himself out."

"Like a toddler."

"Yep."

"I don't suppose you know how to get your brothers into some kind of water fight?"

Erika turned to give Terrance a flat look.

"I had to ask," he said.

"It's time for me to get out of here," Jason said. "I have a plane to catch."

"Get a good night's sleep first," Erika said. "The plane will wait for you. I know you have magic stamina or whatever but you still haven't slept since Broken Hill. Your amiable façade is getting a little pasted on."

"My amiable façade is fine."

"You just explained to your publicity guy how all the people that crossed you died horribly. Now he thinks that if he's mean to your niece you're going to kill him and bury him out in the bush."

"That's not really what I was thinking," Terrance said. "I am now, though."

"Don't be ridiculous," Jason said. "I wouldn't bury him out in the bush. I'd feed him to Colin."

"You didn't show Colin to the reporters, did you?" Farrah asked.

"Of course not; you know what Colin's like. He's super friendly but also a terrifying apocalypse monster that feeds on blood and flesh."

"What about Terrance's bones?" Erika asked.

"Colin's a little trooper, so I'm sure he'd manage," Jason said. "He's got all those teeth, remember?"

Jason forewent his semi-sleep trance for actual slumber. With Farrah nearby and secure in his hidden, underwater cloud house, he was able to let go of his defensiveness and get some genuine rest. He had been half-expecting nightmares but mental exhaustion won out. In the morning he called to say he was ready for the plane and meditated while it was prepared.

After Broken Hill, Jason's meditation pushed his abilities closer to the precipice of silver, with two of them tipping right over. The ability that allowed him to shadow teleport and open portals, Path of Shadows, crossed the threshold to silver. He could now portal a silver ranker, albeit only one, and his range immediately doubled from four-hundred kilometres to eight-hundred. On the downside, portals beyond the bronze-range of four-hundred kilometres increased the cooldown from ten minutes to an hour, although after ten minutes he would once again be able to portal at the shorter range.

His other ability was his aura, Hegemony. Already possessing a terrifying strength, it now reached new heights of potency. It also gained new effects with its new rank, one extremely useful and one much more niche.

Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Aura (holy, unholy).
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are suffering from.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts an instance of [Sin] on enemies that make physical or magical attacks against allies within the aura. Instances applied in this way cannot be resisted.

- Effect (silver): Aura can be extended over a larger area before aura strength becomes compromised. Transcendent damage dealt by enemies within the aura is downgraded to either resonating-force or disruptive-force damage, depending on the source.

- Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached silver rank.

Transcendent damage was rare below silver rank, Jason being unusual in that regard. Although it was an effect that would rarely see use, it could prove critical. One of the known properties of transcendent damage was that complete annihilation of the physical body would prevent most resurrection effects. Since such a revival ability was now one of Jason's trump cards, the prospect of transcendent damage negating it was a sizeable threat. Now, so long as his prodigious aura was not suppressed, that threat was neutralised.

Farrah had spent most of her time in Sydney and was happy to stay in a cloud bed once again. They had both slept until late morning, after which Jason was finally able to return Farrah to Sydney via portal, although she alone was the portal's limit. He had previously attempted to portal himself while Farrah resided in his spirit vault, but the portal had collapsed in the attempt.

Feeling buoyed by his new gains, when the call came to tell him the plane was ready, he cheerfully sought out Akari and Dawn in their clifftop house. Dawn immediately noticed the changes in Jason, congratulating him on his advancements.

Jason opened another portal direct to the Network's hangar at Bankstown airport, where they found Asya and Michael Aram waiting for them, along with Akari. As portalling

the silver-ranker consumed all the portal's capacity, he sent her first while he and Dawn followed after waiting out the ten minute cooldown.

"Seeing us off?" Jason asked.

"Tagging along," Asya said. "Akari is a member of the Kobe branch, while Dawn and yourself aren't network members at all. Michael is representing the Sydney branch and me, the International Committee."

"I hope this flight goes better than our last one together," Jason said, shaking Aram's hand.

"We've had the plane very thoroughly checked," Aram said, "but I'll be relying on you to save me again if things go awry."

"We're also here to help things go smoothly from a diplomatic perspective," Asya said. "We've prepared a gift for when you meet Akari's father, the clan head."

"Thank you, but I'm comfortable with the gift I've prepared," Jason said.

"May I ask what you've chosen?"

"Just a couple of things I picked up along the way," Jason said.

"He refuses to tell me," Akari said.

"It's a surprise," Jason said.

"I am deeply concerned," Akari said, getting a laugh from Asya.

"Uh oh," Jason said. "I think they're teaming up. Mike – can I call you Mike? – I think we need to form a man alliance."

Jason threw an arm around Aram's shoulders and started leading him toward the plane.

"We can do manly men things, like talk about trucks."

"Um, I don't know anything about trucks," Aram said.

"Me either," Jason confessed. "Or fishing. Are you a fishing guy?"

"I'm more of a theatre guy."

"Yeah? I saw a great production of Wicked Sisters at the Seymour Centre just before the monster waves started."

"In the Reginald Theatre? I saw that too. It really was good."

Still with one arm slung over Aram's shoulders as they headed for the plane, Jason used his other arm to punch the air triumphantly.

"Manliness!"