

Chapter 862

Vacation Days

In a section of central Australia, the landscape was flat and dry, the red dirt occasionally marked by scraggly yellow grass. There had been a town there once; a pit stop between nowhere and nowhere else. The last few residents had been evacuated when the monster surges hit and no one had bothered coming back.

Jason and Farrah had chosen the town because there was nothing worth coming back for. The buildings were falling apart, leaning like old men under the punishing sun. There had been an old footy oval that hadn't seen a game in forty years. Grass had long given way to dirt and gravel, only the old bar seeing use in the town's last days. They built a circle of standing stones, like a rune-carved Stonehenge, on the flat ground of the oval. Not long after, they vanished into it and no one on Earth had seen them since.

The pair had left a mysterious artefact behind in a world ramping into a magical arms race. The magical factions, governments and even corporations rushing to get in on the new world of magic all rushed to investigate. The Australian government made the most of it, extracting favours and contracts from every interested party in return for access. What was left of the old town was knocked down, the buildings not worth using. In their place, caravans, motor homes and prefab constructions popped up overnight.

That first investigation was wiped out by a wave of magic that gushed out from the circle. What little remained of the town was wiped away, along with everything that replaced it, barring Jason and Farrah's stone circle. Even many of the people had vanished, presumed dead. All that remained was a ring of standing stones in a circle of red earth, scoured flat.

In the wake of that event, efforts to study the stone megaliths were both better funded and more cautious. A ring of buildings was constructed around the standing stones. These were proper facilities, not a hurried research camp. The Australian government's presence was obvious, along with the magical factions, the UN, the US, and China. A few corporations had paid through the nose to secure a position, looking to exploit the new reality of a magical Earth. There was little cooperation, only sharing resources as was strictly necessary.

In the middle of the night, two low-level workers were in a monitoring station belonging to the Australian government. Each screen was fed by an extremely expensive camera, zoomed in on the stone circle, including a satellite shot and several covering light spectrums outside of the normal human range. The camera feeds were live, but the shift

between day and night was the only change they had ever shown since their installation. Even the weather stayed the same. The only season was the dry, endless summer.

Lenora Coleman had been excited to join the program right out of university, but a year in that room siphoned any of that out of her. Even in the middle of the night, sweat dripped off her as a standing fan ineffectually pushed around the hot air. She had her feet up on a desk as she read yet another book about pregnant werewolf men. Her supervisor, Barry, was far from criticising her inattention as he played a game on his tablet.

Lenora got up and grabbed a can of soft drink from the fridge.

“Want one, Boss?” she asked, holding it up for Barry to see.

“Any sugar-free ones left?” he asked, looking up from his game.

Lenora bent over and peered into the fridge, digging one out from the back.

“You’re in luck,” she said and wandered over to hand him the drink. She looked down at the game on his tablet.

“*Vampire Survivors?*” she asked. “Isn’t that in bad taste when there’s an actual vampire war going on?”

“It’s a video game, Nora. That doesn’t have any vampires in it, by the way.”

“It’s got ‘vampire’ in the name.”

“Maybe they already survived the vampires, I don’t know. I didn’t make the—”

Both snapped their heads to stare at the monitors as multiple alarms rang out. Alarms they hadn’t heard since their initial training for the monitoring station. An alert for motion on the cameras was paired with one from the system that monitored the magical grid, restricted to local events. In the year they had been there, no monster, essence, or awakening stone had manifested in the area, despite the high regional magic.

Lenora and Barry both stared at the monitors. There was a huge, vaguely sphere-shaped zone of rainbow energy floating over the stone circle. It lit up the night with kaleidoscopic brightness, strong enough to shine rainbow light through their window, kilometres away from the site.

“It’s throwing off a lot of heat,” Lenora said, glancing at the thermal monitor. “Around 80 degrees C. I don’t suppose this is just a normal magic manifestation?”

Barry tore his eyes from the monitor bank and moved to the systems panel for the grid monitor.

“The grid is registering this as an anomalous category-four incursion,” he said.

“Gold-rank,” Lenora corrected. “We call it gold-rank now.”

“Tell that to whoever updates the software; this says category four.”

“Whatever it’s called, how boned are we?” Lenora asked.

"It just says anomalous."

"You used to monitor the grid for the Network, right?"

"Yeah, but the grid isn't equipped for much more than pointing at magical stuff. My job was to make a phone call when it did, and that's as far as it went. Speaking of which, check that the messages were sent."

Lenora moved to a systems panel and looked it over.

"The automated notifications have all gone out correctly," she said. "We shouldn't have to do anything, right? This is all above our head."

"It might be worth making a call," Barry said. "If the minister doesn't hear about this promptly, I don't want us to be the people everyone between us and him takes his displeasure out on."

"Good idea," Lenora said.

Barry moved to the landline on the wall and hit one of the speed dial buttons.

"Put me through to the office of the Minister for Supernatural Affairs," he said. "Me? This is Barry Sinise at the monitoring station for the Asano Circle. No, *Barry* Sinise. No, there isn't any bloody relation. Just put me through!"

"Uh, Boss?"

Something in Lenora's uncertain tone grabbed Barry's attention. He turned to look at her, noting that rainbow light was no longer coming through the windows. He looked at the monitor bank where Lenora was pointing.

"Am I imagining things," Lenora asked, "or is that a host of angels?"

No one needed to sleep during the battle in Jason's soul, but the rules included three mandatory breaks per day. No violence was possible during these breaks, but there was always a food cart waiting by the side of the road, along with enchanted training weights tailored to a silver-ranker. These went ignored by most of the great astral beings. The exception was the Celestial Book who merrily plundered each new food cart.

None of the great astral beings had proven interested in speaking with Jason during the breaks, which suited Jason just fine. He used the time to meditate or work out his body, creating an optimal balance for advancement. While he did, the cosmic entities stood around awkwardly, including the World-Phoenix and her monster army.

It was more than a month before any of them broke the unofficial embargo on speaking with Jason. He was floating just over the ground, meditating cross-legged when he opened his eyes to look at the Builder standing in front of him.

“You have provided me with a better vessel than I have chosen for myself in our previous encounters,” the Builder said.

“That wasn’t hard. You were scraping the bottom of the barrel with Thadwick.”

“I thought that we should talk, now that the others cannot stop us.”

“And how would they stop us?”

“When the other great astral beings ascended me to their ranks, they took precautions to control me. When they bestowed upon me the sanctioned authority of original Builder, they set conditions on that authority.”

“What kind of conditions?”

“They have the power to revert my mind to the state it was in during my last moments as a messenger. I keep my memories, but my personality reverts.”

“Weren’t you sixteen years old then?”

“Yes. Brash, impetuous, foolish. Arrogant to an unrivalled degree. I was a prodigy on a level previously unseen amongst my kind. Given the nature of messengers, you can imagine what this did to my judgement. You do not have to, I suppose.”

“I do not.”

“I have, over time, learned to maintain the wisdom of years instead of needing to rebuild it each time. Even so, they can still revert my mind for a time.”

“Can great astral beings even have personalities when they aren’t inhabiting a normal vessel?”

“Not as such. To have one imposed is a highly unnatural state.”

“That explains a lot of the behaviour I’ve seen from you. Why would they do that?”

“I know now that their intention was always to restore my predecessor at some stage, shifting the authority given to me back to him. They never truly considered me one of them. That is why I am building my own universe. Not from a seed but something different, belonging to only me.”

“By pillaging worlds. Stealing astral spaces.”

“Yes. It is so that when the others finally move against me, I am left with an option beyond a fight I cannot win. The universe I am building will be my astral kingdom.”

“You’re saying that you’ve been pillaging worlds for billions of years so you can become an astral king?”

“The greatest of astral kings, with a kingdom unrivalled in the cosmos.”

“Unrivalled in the cosmos, huh? Couldn’t you just become a regular astral king? The kind that doesn’t need to kill who knows how many people in the process? Billions at this stage? Trillions?”

“A necessary price. How could you expect being a normal astral king to be enough when I have forged universes? Such a thing is beneath me.”

“Well, congratulations,” Jason said. “I’ve officially met a worse person than Thadwick Mercer, so it makes sense that you and he were the same person for a while. Why are you here, fighting to restore the throne? What’s in it for you?”

“The great astral beings could only do what they have done to me because they have become unbound from their core purposes. If the throne is restored, they will be more restricted in their actions against me.”

“Yeah, that figures. I’ll say this for you: you’ve definitely restored my faith in you being an evil, selfish piece of crap. I’m going to go get a hot dog.”

Boris did not like the way he was returning to Earth. Leaving had been easy enough. Earth magic and technology had been easily circumvented when he was on the Earth side and leaving alone. Returning, though, he had no access to the surveillance infrastructure watching the circle. Even if he did, there was no hiding the magical signature of messengers arriving by the hundreds. The only way he could arrive was in spectacular fashion.

Most of the hundreds of messengers were only months old, liberated from the transformation zone. They appeared in the air over the stone circle, along with two giant brown eggs. Those eggs dissolved almost immediately, dropping their contents to the ground. Rufus Remore recovered quickly and used his aura to float to the ground. It was a pale echo of what a messenger aura could do, but as a silver-ranker he could levitate himself slowly. It was enough to at least not fall on his face. Taika Williams fell on his face, hitting the ground like a boulder.

“That legit sucked, bro,” he mumbled into the dirt.

Boris didn’t bother to watch Remore moving to check on his friend. Instead, he extended his senses over the gathered human monitoring stations. There were some familiar auras in the Cabal section, currently being very surprised.

“No, Minister, the monitors are accurate,” Barry said into the phone. “There is what appears to be an army of angels out there. As of yet, no one has—”

The door slammed open as a portly man in a moderately well-fitting suit burst into the room.

“Give me that phone!” he demanded and marched over to snatch it from Barry.

“Minister,” he said into the phone. “This is Gordon Truffett. I’m onsite and taking command of operations.”

Barry shrugged and moved over to where Lenora was working at a computer.

“Anyone muster up the balls to go over there yet?” he asked.

“Not yet, although I’m seeing a lot of activity on the Cabal side. That makes sense with what facial recognition turned up.”

“We got hits?”

“Two,” Lenora said. “Each promising to be its own special can of worms. One is Boris Ketland. Our database lists him as a Cabal executive, but a human, not a ten-foot-tall angel.”

“It’s not that shocking. Since when has any human member of the Cabal turned out to be an actual human?”

“Never. The next hit is on one of the two humans. Or the two that look human, anyway.”

“The ones that fell out of those egg things?”

“Yeah. The system pegs the big Māori as Taika Williams. Member of Clan Asano — the Australian Clan Asano — and known associate of Jason Asano. Also, one of the people killed when the circle sent out that magic surge that got us all stationed here.”

“He survived the magic wave?”

“Looks like it. Assuming that’s actually him, he’ll be the first survivor, right?”

“Yeah,” Barry said as he turned to watch Truffett talking rapidly into the phone. “I’m glad this isn’t my job to sort out. I wonder if they’ll let me take my vacation days.”