

## Chapter 431

### Intentions

The transport Helicopter carried eight passengers, descending into what had once been a grassy paddock, close to the Global Defence Network camp.

The helicopter landed and the passengers disembarked. Akari Asano was the first to step out, her eyes panning the landscape. She took in the pastoral surrounds and the city of Nitra in the distance. The research camps set up by the magical factions gave each other a comfortable distance, arrayed around the strange, colourful town she had observed from the air.

Following Akari was Annabeth Tilden, Craig Vermillion and Taika Williams, the helicopter noticeably shifted as Taika's huge bulk exited. Now that he was bronze rank, Taika was still huge but was less rounded and more a mountain of muscle.

With them were four others, one of whom was a representative from the Engineers of Ascension. He went by the name Alexander Clerck and rarely spoke. More imposing was William Spencer, an Englishman who was one of the much-feared ancient vampires. The others were wary of him, especially Vermillion, as the other vampire present.

The last two members of the eight were former members of the EOA. They had been part of the exodus from that organisation when it was revealed to be behind the monster waves, eventually joining the GDN although neither possessed any magic.

One of the pair, Dashiell Bexton, was wearing a white suit and pastel shirt. He was unhappily distracted by what the wet ground had done to his shoes and pants. The other, Adam Cosgrove, was a man in a slightly dishevelled suit who somehow looked like a neater one wouldn't fit him quite right.

As the helicopter loudly wound down, a pair of SUVs came driving towards them from the nearby Global Defence Network camp. It threw mud up from the wet earth as it pulled to a stop and Akari made a horizontal chopping motion with her arm. A wave of force blasted the mud back to spatter over the vehicle saving them from an unexpected mud bath. Their liaison from the GDN stepped from the first SUV and ushered them into the two vehicles before driving them to the GDN's camp, where they were shown into a large prefab building and offered tea and coffee.

"Sorry, I only drink blood," said the vampiric Spencer.

"Tool bag," Vermillion muttered, then gave their liaison a winning smile. "Tea, please. Lots of sugar."

"Most weaker vampires know their place," Spencer said.

“My place involves a power saw and your neck, so you should be happy I’m going with a cup of tea,” Vermillion shot back.

“Craig…” Anna said.

“Anna, once you see me playing nice with a guy who tried to control you through your blood, I’ll be happy to listen.”

“That was one lapse of judgement,” Spencer said, unapologetically.

“Give me a chainsaw and your head will lapse off your neck, you dusty old—”

Taika’s regional municipality of a hand came down on Vermillion’s shoulder.

“We get it, bro: you don’t like him.”

Vermillion seethed but fell silent. They all sat in folding chairs as the liaison briefed them on the situation around the magic town, including the disposition of the Network factions and the known effects of entering it.

"The town's defensive mechanisms seem to be of a type with Asano's powers. We believe he can shield people from them on an individual basis, which we assume is what he will do for you, so you can meet him there without your flesh rotting off your bones."

"You assume?" Spencer asked. "Assume is not a word that engenders confidence."

“Asano hasn’t exactly been open to diplomatic contact,” the liaison said. “We had to import you all from Australia just so he’d meet with anyone.”

“Bro, the Network keeps trying to kidnap him,” Taika said. “They even succeeded a couple of times, even if he does keep escaping immediately.”

“That wasn’t us,” Anna said, getting a flat look from Craig.

“Alright,” she admitted. “It was kind of us the first time.”

“So, how do we proceed?” Spencer asked.

“I would suggest a car,” Shade said, emerging from one of the room’s shadows. “Unfortunately, the road infrastructure has suffered some mishaps while Mr Asano was away.”

Only the man calling himself Alexander Clerck had noticed his presence, but he had made no mention of it. Clerck was masking his own aura to pass himself off as one of EOA’s enhanced humans.

“Shade!” Taika said. “G’day, bro.”

“Good day, Mr Williams. Mr Asano will be happy to learn of your presence. He requests that you all make your way to the pagoda at the centre of the city. He apologises for the condition of the roads but there have been a number of discourteous visitors in his absence.”

“What about the magic that eats people?” Taika asked.

"It only affects those that are hostile to Mr Asano, his domain or any of his existing guests," Shade said. "Those with good intentions have nothing to fear."

"And who decides if someone's intentions are good?" Anna asked.

"They decide for themselves," Shade said. "I am sure the people here can direct you to the pagoda. They have taken quite a thorough look around, as you will no doubt see."

"Can't Asano give us safe passage?" Anna asked.

"He can, but he won't. He is letting your good intentions be the shibboleth."

Shade turned to Spencer.

"Why is there an ancient vampire amongst you?"

"He's working with us," Anna said. "Is that a problem?"

"On the contrary," Shade said. "Mr Asano's last ancient vampire spoiled while he was here dealing with the transformation zone. He has been looking for a fresh one."

The rest of the group turned to look at Spencer as Shade vanished back into the shadows.

"Is it just me, or did Shade seem kind of passive-aggressive?" Vermillion asked.

"It felt a little more like regular aggressive to me," Spencer said.

Vermillion turned to the liaison. "What exactly did your people do?"

"They're your people too, now, Craig," Anna said.

"That's what I'm worried about," Craig said. "It's like you're trying to make him mad."

"Those were other branches and other Network factions," Anna said.

"Don't worry, Jason," Craig said. "That wasn't our Network that tried to kidnap you. Again. And kept your friend in a hole and tortured her for weeks. That was a different Network. Oh, the difference? Well, we don't like that other Network very much. I mean, yes, we work with them a bit, when we have to. Otherwise, how are we going to get those reality cores you told us not to take? What? Killed your brother, your friend and your girlfriend? That definitely wasn't us. I mean, yes, it was the Network, but there are degrees of separation..."

"That's enough, Craig," Anna said.

"Is it?" Craig asked. "The guy built a magic town that eats people and we keep doing things that make him angry. And now we're going into that town?"

"You think this is news to me?" Anna asked.

"Do you remember what he was like when he first got here?" Craig asked.

"Yes, Craig. He went to where my wife works. He showed up in my kitchen in the middle of the night."

"You should be grateful that's all he did," Craig said. "I had to stop him from fighting an EOA collection team in the middle of a café. You may recall what he did next from the news. A rolling gunfight in the middle of traffic? He came back to this world as a naked blade whose first instinct was to cut anything put in front of him. His family calmed him down but then we went and killed one of them, as part of what appears to be a campaign of methodically convincing him to massacre us all with his apocalypse butterflies."

"Your point is taken," Anna said.

"Really?" Craig asked. "I'm pretty sure that every time the Network screwed him over and he let it slide because they're the ones fighting the monsters, someone would have said the point was taken. How far do you think we can push before Jason takes that point and impales us all on it?"

\*\*\*

The group of eight were in the back of a flatbed utility vehicle as they approached the edge of the town. After the ute slowed down and stopped, the liaison got out of the cab.

"This is as far as I go," he told the people on the back. "One of you will need to drive the rest of the way. The car is heavy-duty enough that you should be able to handle any terrain issues. If any of you feel like something is wrong, like you're trespassing, trust that instinct and turn back. If you ignore it, you won't like the results."

Another person from the camp rode up on a quad bike, which the liaison climbed onto and they rode away. The eight people left behind stood up in the back of the ute to look at where the gravel track turned to asphalt as it entered the town. Large portions of the road, along with footpaths and garden had been violently ripped up, making what should have been easy navigation more treacherous.

"Anna," Craig said. "Explain to me again how we aren't actively trying to piss Jason off. Or will you need to concentrate on driving us through his town that we dug up like a pack of malevolent monster moles?"

Anna grimaced, not responding as she dropped off the side of the tray.

"If anyone needs to go back, just tap on the cab window," she said, then climbed into the driver's seat and shut the door. She started up the ute and drove it carefully into the town, avoiding road hazards.

The passengers tensed as they passed into the town and immediately encountered Jason's aura. For Craig, Taika and Akari it felt benevolent, while the others felt more oppressed. None of them experienced the sense of trespass that the liaison described.

Alexander Clerck looked around, curiously.

"Oh dear," he muttered to himself. "She's not going to be happy about this."

This drew attention as the man had been all but mute through the entire journey from Australia.

“Something to share with the group?” Akari asked him. She, like the others, didn’t trust the EOA representative amongst them.

“I was just marvelling at what Mr Asano has accomplished here. He’s rather jumped the gun, however, and this will draw attention I hope he’s ready to endure.”

“What kind of people has he drawn the attention of?” Taika asked.

“I never said they were people,” Clerck said.

Akari narrowed her eyes at Clerck.

“You know Jason,” she said.

“We met once, briefly. I helped him find something he was looking for.”

“You didn’t tell us that,” Akari said.

“It was less complicated, this way.”

“It doesn’t make us any more inclined to trust you.”

“You don’t need to trust me. This place knows my intentions.”

“Unless you can fool it.”

“Nothing can hide its intent, here, no matter how powerful,” Clerck said.

“So you say,” Akari said. “Jason has enemies outside this world with power beyond imagining.”

“You speak of gods and beyond? Such entities cannot send their avatars into this place.”

“You expect me to believe this place is powerful enough to fend off gods?” Akari asked.

“Believe what you like,” Clerck said. “It is not a matter of power, but of nature. A god cannot walk into this place any more than you can blink my eyes.”

“What does that mean?” Taika asked.

“It means that there are higher rules for higher beings,” Clerck said. “What is impossible for us is negligible to them, while the same can be true for them and us, despite their power. We can enter this place, while they cannot.”

“Who are you?” Adam Cosgrove asked. He was not a magical being and had been keeping his mouth closed and his ears open around the incredibly powerful company he was in. He was both a former detective and a former EOA member, though, and his instincts told him that Clerck was more dangerous than the fourteenth-century vampire he was sitting next to.

"That will be clear soon enough," Clerck said. "For now, I will reiterate that if this place does not reject me, then you can be assured that my intentions are not hostile, whatever my agenda may be."

"Should we kick him out here?" Taika asked.

"If Asano's familiar didn't see fit to reject me, why should you?" Clerck asked.

"Shade knows who you really are?" Taika asked

"As I said: I have met Mr Asano once before."