

Chapter 923

A Long Few Days

Ketevan drove Anna and Susan through the city. Back when Anna had lived there, the domain had only just been established. The vampires were storming through Europe and no one knew how reliable the protection of Jason's power would be, especially in the absence of the man himself. The humans changed by the transformation zones were still new to their conditions and pouring into clan territory as refugees.

Years later, they had clearly integrated. As the car passed an outdoor café, more eyes were on the strangers in the car than the man with green scales and cream on his nose from an iced chocolate. Susan pointed out a beautiful winged man flying over the rooftops.

"It's like the bar in Star Wars, but French," Susan observed. "I love it. I wonder what the art scene is like, here."

"Small, but has some unique aspects you might find fascinating," Ketevan told her.

"It all looks so normal," Anna observed. "Not long ago, you were all hidden in an astral space while vampires ruled here."

"A lot of people are still in there," Ketevan told her. "Out here, it's closer to how the rest of Earth is. The astral space is more overtly magical, and a lot of the clan grew up there. It's the world they know."

"But the clean-up and restoration after the vampire occupation seems to have gone quickly," Anna said.

"Nigel will explain that. He's been talking about owing you a debriefing for a long time. He just couldn't do it while you were in the US. He'd have been snatched up at the airport, and even if he snuck in, you were always being watched. Suffice it to say, by the time we emerged, there were no signs of vampires in clan territory. We've been expanding out since, clearing out blood farms and purging vampires."

"You mean killing them," Susan said.

"Yes," Ketevan agreed. "I mean killing them."

"Are we sure they're not redeemable?" Susan asked. "Craig Vermilion was always so nice."

"And still is," Ketevan said. "I had lunch with him last week. We have a large vampire population in the Slovakian territory. Jason's power shields them from the effects that turn the others bad. But the ones out there... the weak ones are feral, now. Little more than animals with an insatiable thirst for blood. The more powerful ones are worse. They kept

their minds but lost anything approaching a conscience. They know what they're doing to the people in those blood farms, and they just don't care."

"If their numbers were smaller, perhaps something could be done," Anna said. "There are more vampires and more victims than were ever made public. The official numbers are nowhere close to accurate. The evacuation of Europe is the largest mass-migration event the world has ever seen. So many were lost along the way, turned into ghouls, blood slaves or more vampires. Most ended up in the farms, though. The food supply. The unreleased casualty estimates put the numbers close to World War Two."

"But a lot of those people have been rescued, right?" Susan asked. "From the blood farms?"

"Yes," Ketevan said, "but many more remain, still feeding the vampire population. Now that the global militaries aren't operating in Europe, we're holding the people we rescue in the astral space here in France. We didn't put them with the vampires, for obvious reasons. We have medical professionals helping as best they can, but the physical and mental trauma they've suffered is indescribable. I don't even know how someone would come back from that. Once relations are re-established with the wider world, we'll have them join other refugees from their respective countries."

Ketevan sighed.

"I wanted this to be a fun catch-up," she said. "At least for a little bit. I suppose I've gotten used to the clan being isolated and surrounded by a continent of vampires. I can see how that would be alarming to visitors."

"What happened when you had to hide away?" Susan asked. "Were you safe?"

"Very," Ketevan said. "I'll leave that for Rufus and Jason to explain, but the short version is that Jason needed to seem weak."

"To deceive the vampires?" Anna asked.

"The vampires don't worry him. He was apparently fighting something like gods at the time, and he needed to trick them."

"Something like gods?"

"The actual grim reaper, amongst others. Or so I'm told. It all sounds extremely far-fetched, but far-fetched is what we do here, so who knows? Not my department, fortunately. As I said, Rufus and Jason will explain."

"That would be a first," Anna muttered.

Ketevan was driving them to the home of Erika Asano and her husband, Ian, located close to the administration tower. The tower was a looming edifice of renaissance architecture, the most overt divergence from the original design of the city.

As promised, Anna and Susan's first engagement in the Asano clan was social. Now that Erika and Ian's daughter had moved out, they lived in a modest townhouse in the shadow of the tower. The front faced one of the city's major thoroughfares, leading to the admin centre. Behind the townhouse row was a shared parkland.

Also present at the gathering was Nigel Thornton, who was apologetic about never delivering the report she sent him out for. His deference marked a sharp difference to the other gold-rankers she'd met for her work, of which there had been quite a few. The nations that boasted them were not shy about reminding people.

Their hosts had set up a picnic lunch on the patio, with a rustic wooden table and benches. They watched families play in the park, and a bunch of kids playing cricket. The food was astoundingly good, courtesy of their chef hostess, but Anna recognised very little of the food.

"We farm the ingredients in the astral spaces," Erika explained. "The magic is rich, and the agricultural land is varied. Too much to be naturally occurring, but ideal for producing all kinds of food."

"You didn't have trouble providing for people during your exile, then?" Susan asked.

"I think exile is a harsh term," Ian said. "From our perspective, it was a safe haven while the world outside was struggling. Hundreds of millions of refugees, pouring into Asia, Africa and the Americas. From what we've heard, it caused a new wave of food shortages after things had finally recovered from the monster waves."

"Magitech largely solved the supply problem," Anna said. "The farming stacks produce a lot of food cheaply. The real issues around the food supply are political and economic. It's the largest shift in how agriculture operates since the introduction of electricity and internal combustion. The entire industry is being turned on its head, at least in developed countries. So much of US agriculture was centred on corn, and that's collapsed under the practicalities of how the world works now. A lot of the American Midwest has gone the way of the steel towns forty years ago. Australian agriculture fared just as badly, if not worse."

"Then there's the refugees themselves," Susan added. "The population of the United States grew by half within a year."

“A logistical disaster,” Anna said. “And that was moderate, compared to places with large tracts of unoccupied land. Canada, Australia, and large portions of Africa, China and Russia. Any place that magitech could make liveable quickly.”

“Australia’s population is now seventy-five percent European refugees,” Susan said. “The political chaos that resulted is still going on. Australia has always had an unpleasant intolerance streak around migrants and refugees, and that really spilled over in the time you were all hidden away.”

“We heard about the turmoil,” Ian said. “It’s hard to believe they took in that many people.”

“There was a lot of international pressure,” Anna said. “A lot of resistance, too. There was a double dissolution of government, for only the second time ever. Things still haven’t settled.”

With the conversation moving to the heavy topics they had previously avoided, the group moved inside. They discussed a mix of global events and events within the clan. The clan members had missed a lot in their isolation, even before fully withdrawing into the astral spaces. As for Anna, she was currently the eyes of the world on what was happening in Asano territory. Some still believed that Jason was dead, while others saw his impending return as a Sword of Damocles, poised over their heads.

Nigel finally got to tell the story of the day the vampires who had claimed the Asano territory died. He was the sole witness, and his account of Jason’s wrath sounded like an Old Testament story.

“...the blood rain turning into this colourful, sparkling light, destroying what was left of the vampires and their minions. Then I was alone, the last one standing in a city that stank of death. Until Jason showed up. Or his avatar, however that works. It seemed like he was really there.”

“They don’t smell the same,” Erika said. “The avatars. Jason smells like flowers and cut grass. Taika, too. Something about being a cosmic entity. His avatars don’t smell of anything, and they feel like rubber to touch.”

“What did Jason say to you?” Anna asked Nigel.

“We talked about having power, and the people who wanted to use it. He saw that I was gold rank and deduced the problems I’ve been having. He said it was a lot like what he went through, during his time here. And we talked about the possibility of my team and I joining the clan.”

“Which you did,” Anna said.

“Yeah. The clan has been quietly smuggling our families in while we participate in rescue and reclamation.”

“Retaking the areas around Asano territory,” Anna said.

“Yes.”

“There is some concern about the clan’s ambitions towards Europe.”

Erika snorted her disgust.

“Our ambitions are dealing with the vampires and the people they’re still holding in their blood farms. You just told us about the refugees from here clogging up the infrastructure across the planet, but the people in charge are already looking to divvy up Europe between them.”

“You say that,” Anna told her, “but we’re sitting in what was French territory before your brother claimed it for himself.”

“It wasn’t French territory,” Jason said.

Everyone turned to look at him in the doorway. He was holding a plate with a sandwich that looked to be made from the leftovers of their lunch. He looked at it with a frown.

“I forgot that I can’t taste things with my avatar,” he said sadly, sat the plate on a side table and walked into the room.

“Don’t just leave things sitting around like that,” Erika scolded.

Jason groaned and the plate floated off the table and out through the door. He moved to join the others and cloud rose from the floor to form a chair under him as he sat.

“It wasn’t French territory,” he said again. “It was vampire territory. And I didn’t ask to take it. I didn’t even know it was possible before Slovakia, and I had no choice anyway. I had to take them.”

“You had to?” Anna asked.

“Yes. Do you know what a transformation zone is, Anna? It’s a scab, over an open wound in the side of the universe. Mostly, the wound heals and the world limps on. But some scabs aren’t enough. Left alone, the wound under them will rip a hole in the side of the universe. The resulting rupture would annihilate the Earth, at the very least, and probably the solar system. And that’s assuming it didn’t chain react from there and start tearing the whole universe apart, although the likelihood of that is small. And it would be stopped if that started happening.”

“By you?”

“Not my area, and beyond the scope of even my real power. There’s an entity called the World Phoenix who would cauterise the wound from the outside. The side effects of that would have been drastic, but pointless to all of us, who would have been dead.”

“You do this, Jason,” Anna said. “Grand proclamations. Fate of the universe. But all we have to go on is your word. You never tell us enough to check for ourselves.”

Jason nodded.

“Back then, I was more inclined to kill you all myself. Fortunately, I didn’t have the power to conquer the world back then.”

“Implying that you do now?”

“Yes.”

“This isn’t the same world you left, Jason.”

“And I’m not the same person who left it.”

He sighed.

“Anna, we’re falling into old patterns here. *I’m* falling into old patterns, and that’s not going to be productive. I know that I never explained myself the way people wanted, but I hope you understand why.”

Anna gave a reluctant nod.

“I remember a lot of conversations where I had to explain that the Network people that came after you this time were another faction that had gone rogue. I can’t blame you for refusing to work with us anymore. Given how it all ended, it seems that it was all just rogue factions, acting in their own interests. I suppose you saw that before I did. The clarity of an outside perspective.”

“Anna, I believe that you were never like that. That you were trying to do the right thing. That’s why I want to work with you now. And to start, I’ll answer any and all of your questions. About back then, about now. I’ll offer you what proof I can, when I have it. But I’ll warn you now, there are some things that will be hard to believe, and all I have for you is my word. I can show you more once I arrive in person, but I can’t wait for that. We need to start preparing now.”

“For what?” she asked. “Rufus Remore said you wanted to work with me, but he didn’t say why. What is it that you want?”

Jason nodded contemplatively, more to himself than to her.

“My intention today is to help you understand that I will be coming back to Earth with unassailable power. Limitless, for most practical purposes. Anything I want to do, I will be able to. Anything I don’t want to do, no one will be able to make me. Conquer the world,

erase nations. Eliminate every head of state on the planet in an afternoon. Whatever threat the people of this world think I pose, I can promise you that it is much, much worse.”

“Alright,” Anna said. “Let’s suppose that I believe you. Why am I here, listening to you tell me that?”

“Because I don’t want to be the thing that terrorises the world. I don’t want to bring down governments and make nations collapse. What worries me is that the fear of my doing so will lead the powers of this world to force my hand. My first goal is to avoid having my return to Earth destroy it.”

Anna looked at Jason, eyes examining him as her mind ticked over.

“You really think that you’re that important? If Rufus hadn’t come out and told everyone that you’re some great big threat, they wouldn’t have thought it.”

“No,” Nigel interjected. “They’d have tried to exploit him, just like before. Anna, I don’t think I properly conveyed what I saw that day. It wasn’t the power of a man. It was the power of a god.”

Anna looked at Nigel, then back to Jason.

“Do you think you’re a god, Jason?”

“That’s complicated. I think we’d better get into those questions; it’s going to be a long few days.”