

## Chapter 271

### It Would Be Weirder If Magic Wasn't Responsible

Annabeth Tilden was woken by her phone.

"Damn it, Anna."

So was her wife. Annabeth snatched the phone off the night stand and stumbled into bathroom, closing the door before turning on the light and answering.

"What?" she answered grumpily.

"Boss, I was going over the grid feed for the night and I found something. The monitoring agent passed it off as a glitch, which is why I'm only seeing it now, but I took a closer look and I think it warrants investigation."

Annabeth groaned but nodded to herself.

"Alright. Run me through it, Ketiv."

Ketivan wasn't in the habit of making unfounded leaps, with Annabeth placing a lot of trust in her analytical abilities.

"We got a hit on the grid on the Mid North Coast but it definitely wasn't an event. It was incredibly localised and lasted for less than a second."

"That sounds like a random reaction spike. What makes this different to the ones we see all day, every day?"

"Two things," Ketivan said. "One is that there was an almost identical hit in France at the same time. The other is the strength of the reaction. The grid registered it as being above category five."

"There is no above category five."

"No, ma'am."

"There's only been the one category four and the Poms needed a Brimstone missile to deal with it."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Actually, they needed several."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Alright," Annabeth said. "Send an investigation team. If there's something there, look into it personally."

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"Shade," Jason whispered. "Bring the car around. Make sure there's room for our hefty new friend."

Several shadow bodies discreetly separated themselves from Jason's shadow as he made his way outside, where Growl was taking over from Taika on the door.

"It's not like we'll get a lot of traffic just before lock up when it's coming down like this on a weeknight," Growl was saying. They glanced out as the rain continued pouring down on the street.

Jason nodded a greeting at the pair of huge men, and held a hand out for Growl to shake.

"No hard feelings, mate?"

Growl clasped Jason's hand in his own meaty paw and shook it.

"I'm just glad I didn't handle you in the alley," Growl said. "Mr Asano wouldn't have been happy once he realised you really were family."

"No worries," Jason said. "I wouldn't have beaten you up too badly."

Taika laughed and Growl nodded at the door Jason had just emerged from.

"What did you do to the guys inside?" Growl asked. "You scared the crap out of them,"

"It's a body language trick," Jason said. "It triggers instinctual fear reactions."

"I told you, bro," Taika said. "He learned secret kung fu in the mountains. I'll go get a car."

"We'll take mine," Jason said, nodding at the black car pulling up in front of the bar. Unlike Shade's previous sports car form, he was now in the shape of a sleek but roomy four-door sedan, although it still maintained aggressive lines.

"That's a choice ride," Taika said. "You got a driver or something?"

"Or something," Jason said.

In the dark and the rain, the windows looked like black glass and they couldn't see inside. Jason went around to the driver side door and Taika opened the passenger door. He looked around the interior of the car.

"You got one of them self-driving cars," Taika. "I didn't know you could buy them yet."

"I know a guy," Jason said. "It's not strictly allowed, though, so keep it under your hat, yeah?"

"No worries," Taika said and clambered inside. The massive Māori man was a snug fit, but settled in comfortably. "This is nice. These seats are really plush."

Taika directed Jason on a short drive to what looked like a dilapidated brick building, but the heavy security door had a gleaming keypad beside it. Taika punched in a code, telling Jason what it was so he could come and go freely. The interior was a stark contrast with the outside, the old brick storehouse had been renovated into a modern, open-plan

townhouse. The downstairs was divided into sections by furniture, gym equipment, free-standing bookcases and a quartz top kitchen island. The floors were polished wood and a set of stairs led to a mezzanine upper level.

“There’s one bathroom through that door,” Taika pointed out, “and one more upstairs with the bedrooms.”

Taika pointed out the computer tablet on the wall.

“All the smart home functions go through that tablet,” he said. “There’s a computer upstairs, but I’ll bring a laptop and phone in the morning. There’s food in the fridge and you can order delivery through the tablet.”

“Thanks. I’ll have to thank Uncle Hiro for putting me up somewhere nice.”

“I think he’ll be happy having you around for a bit,” Taika said. “I know he regrets being estranged from family.”

“I know the feeling,” Jason said. “Do you have family nearby, Taika?”

“I do, yeah. Me and my brother got caught up in some gang stuff back in New Zealand. Dad got us out and brought us over here. Now I do security for Mr Asano.”

“You like working for my uncle?”

“It’s honest work, mostly” Taika said. “Mr Asano runs the legit businesses. It’s good to have someone out front with clean hands, yeah? We even work with the cops sometimes.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, bro. If a rich white kid takes some dodgy eccies and has a seizure, that’s as bad for the cops as for us. There’s no stopping the party drugs, so they look the other way and we make sure they find the blokes flogging off the bad stuff. The cops get to make some arrests and we stay out of trouble.”

“Good to know. Thanks, Taika.”

“Boss said that I’m at your disposal for as long as you’re in town. I’ll have that phone and computer for you in the morning. If you need anything tonight, I’m in the apartment building next door, in 2C. Your uncle lives in the penthouse.”

Jason waited until Shade, who had a body hidden in Taika’s shadow, told him that the big man had arrived in his apartment.

“Alright,” Jason said. “Lets go out.”

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When Taika entered the townhouse in the morning he found that Jason had moved the dining table to create a central open space, which he was making use of. Wearing loose pants and a plain tank top, Jason went through a graceful and deliberate kata with

an impressive sword in his hand. On the sound system, some kind of meditative music was playing.

Jason gave no indication of having noticed Taika's arrival, which was novel to Taika. Most people reacted to the arrival of a hundred and fifty kilos of Māori. Taika moved over to the lounge area and placed the phone and laptop boxes he was carrying onto the coffee table. He glanced over that the gym equipment in the corner, noticing it had been moved since the previous night. All the weights had been set to maximum, which even Taika would have trouble with.

Taika had taken the laptop and phone out and was setting them up when Jason walked over. Taika looked around but no longer saw the sword.

"I knew I was right about the secret kung fu. That was a sweet looking kata."

"It's more of a meditative sword dance," Jason said.

Taika gave him an assessing look, glancing at the door.

"I didn't see your car outside."

"It'll be there if I need it."

"You're a mysterious guy, bro."

"No, I just fake it for the ladies," Jason said, flashing a grin.

Taika laughed as he handed Jason the phone.

"I put my number in the contacts, along with your uncle and current numbers for your parents, your sister and your brother-in-law."

"Not my brother, or my sister-in-law?"

"Mr Asano said that might be touchy."

"It's fine," Jason said. "Put them in."

"No worries," Taika said. He took back the phone and programmed in two more numbers from a piece of paper.

"All done," Taika said. "Mr Asano never did say what the issue was exactly," Taika said leadingly.

"I used to be in a relationship with my now sister-in-law, before she married my brother," Jason said.

"Your bother married your ex? That's not cool. How longer after you were with her did they get together?"

"During."

"Oh, damn. That sucks, bro."

"Agreed."

“So is there anything you want to do today?” Taika asked. “I’ve set up an appointment with a lawyer this afternoon so you can sort out the legal stuff about you not being dead anymore. Mr Asano wants to have dinner with you, and you can talk about what you asked him for then.”

“Thanks,” Jason said. “I think I’ll spend the day on the internet, catching up on what I missed.”

“You’ve been away for a year and a half, yeah?” Taika asked.

“Yep. No TV, no movies, no internet. Not even a radio.”

“Damn. You missed the last season of Game of Thrones.”

“Was it any good?”

“It was real good. Extending it to thirteen episodes so they could properly develop the climax was a smart move, after how much they’d been rushing things.”

“Last I heard, they were cutting it down to six episodes.”

“Someone leaked the scripts and the internet went crazy. They rewrote the whole thing and everyone really liked how it turned out.”

“Nice.”

“Okay. I’m going to go. You need anything, give me a call. Otherwise, I’ll pick you up for lunch before I take you to see the lawyer, yeah?”

“Sounds good,” Jason said.

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Taika called Hiro, neither aware of the shadowy creature hiding a body in each of their shadows.

“Are you getting Jason settled?” Hiro asked.

“No worries, Boss. Well, maybe some worries.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Your nephew’s weird.”

“He’s certainly different to what I remember. You think there’s a problem?”

“It’s just a lot of little things. He disappeared, yeah, and now he’s back and all mysterious and stuff? What if he’s EOA?”

“Clearly he’s been through something,” Hiro said. “It’s a big leap from there to the EOA, though.”

“We know they’ve been sniffing around,” Taika said. “You saw how jumpy it’s made Growl. What if your nephew is their foot in the door?”

“That wouldn’t be their style. They’re known to be domineering. What makes you think Jason is EOA?”

“When I checked on him this morning, I saw someone had put all the weights up to maximum. You nephew isn’t exactly a huge bloke.”

“You think he’s one of the EOA’s juiced-up thugs?”

“I like your nephew, Boss, but he feels dangerous.”

“He’s not one of their juicers,” Hiro said. “That drug cocktail they put them on messes up their heads.”

“Like brain damage?” Taika asked.

“Exactly like that. Did Jason seem brain damaged to you?”

“No, Boss; he seems pretty sharp. I can’t help but feel like he seems dangerous, though.”

“I thought the same thing. Keep an eye out, but make sure nothing happens to him. If the EOA do get it in their heads to make use of him, it’ll be by grabbing him, not recruiting him.”

“No worries, boss.”

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The abandoned hospital’s helipad was still serviceable and Annabeth Tilden’s helicopter landed mid morning. She was dressed in a sensible suit, as was the woman waiting for her with a powerful torch in hand. They looked like government functionaries, which was exactly the intention.

Annabeth didn’t bother asking questions over the noise of the winding down helicopter, instead letting Ketevan lead her inside, guiding the way by torchlight. They went down stairs and set off down a corridor.

“What do you have, Keti?” Annabeth asked. “I’ve got the Engineers of Ascension pushing into Sydney that I have to keep an eye on, now the Children’s Hospital miracle debacle and whatever this thing here is.”

“The hospital miracle thing is ours?”

“A hospital full of kids were mysteriously cured by an angel made of stars, Keti. It would be weirder if magic wasn’t responsible.”

“That really happened?”

“Yeah. The media doesn’t even need to sensationalise. Not that they aren’t trying, bless them. Whoever’s responsible clearly doesn’t give a crap about the mess they’re making, but that’s Aram’s mess to sort through. What do you have for me here?”

“It definitely wasn’t a glitch in the grid,” Ketevan said. “The magic event is over, but it was so powerful that we can still read the residual magic like it just happened. After our investigators picked up on it, I sent in an after-action team to see what we could learn.”

“And?”

“Well, you remember that I told you the event was localised?”

“No. You woke me up in the middle of the night.”

“Sorry, Ma’am. Well, it turned out to be very, very localised.”

Ketevan turned off the torch when they reached the maternity ward, where a number of lamps had been set up to illuminate the area. The after-action team looked like a forensics team as they bustled about. In the maternity theatre, a flat board had been set out and a magical diagram drawn onto it. Floating above the circle was a horizontal figure that looked to be made of fire.

“What am I looking at?” Annabeth asked.

“As best we can tell,” Ketevan said, “this is the echo of a variant incursion event.”

“That’s a rather extreme variant,” Annabeth said.

“Yes,” Ketevan agreed. “I told you about the rated strength, which still registers above five in every test we run. The proto-astral space existed for less than a second, which is quite a lot less than the usual forty-three hours. And, of course, instead of covering kilometres, it was the size and shape of a person.”

“You’re suggesting a person came through,” Annabeth said.

“Or something person-shaped,” Ketevan said. “Maybe it was an angel made of stars.”