

Chapter 886

A Silent City

When the light coming through the window turned from moon silver to orange and blue, Nigel and his team moved to look outside. The moon was still there, but its luminance was being outshone by a massive, nebulous eye, floating over the city like an alien invader. Colour spread out from it, more like fire crawling across the sky than simple light. The orange danced like fire and the blue swam like water, painting the city below.

They had barely caught sight of it when its aura hit them like a bomb. It had not just spiritual but physical force behind it, sending all but the gold-rank Nigel stumbling back.

“That’s not even the full force of it,” Nigel said. “We’re on the periphery. It’s much stronger inside the boundaries of the old clan.”

“That wasn’t the full strength?” Darcy asked, wary of moving back to the window. “What is that?”

“It’s him. Asano. You’ve felt his aura before.”

“I’ve never felt anything like that,” Orange said.

“It’s changed,” Nigel said, “but I recognise the core aspects. But this is something we’ve never seen from him. Get back to the others and move to fallback position three.”

“Three?” Orange asked.

“Whatever is happening here,” Nigel said, “it just changed the colour of the sky. I want you all as far from this as you can possibly be.”

“We don’t want you anywhere near this either,” Darcy said.

Nigel turned to look at her.

“Whatever it is we’ve been waiting for, Darce, it’s happening now. I’m the only gold ranker among us, meaning I’m the only one with a real shot of getting in there, taking a closer look and getting out.”

“You’re going in there?” Orange asked. “You don’t have to do that just for a job.”

“I know. But. Whatever’s going on out there, it’s big. Getting ahead of the information curve will give us a better chance of navigating whatever comes next. I’ll learn what I can and then get out. If I don’t join you within three hours of reaching the fallout position, use one of our exfil plans; don’t tell me which one. We’ll regroup in Casablanca.”

Nigel didn’t wait for further argument, leaping through a window that hadn’t held glass in years.

As Nigel moved through the streets of what had once been Saint Étienne, the replica nature of the city started to reveal itself. What looked and felt like stone and metal warped like clay, the colour fading as sections of building and street turned into cloud substance. Nigel cautiously touched some of it and found it thick and sticky, like glue.

The city's horrific denizens were taking to the streets, and the vampires weren't the greatest number. Many were ghouls; vampiric victims warped into mindless, withered servants. They were erupting from doorways and bursting up from cellars, driven to a frenzy by the aura. Vampires came out after them, trying and often failing to assert control.

Nigel watched from hiding as the vampires themselves seemed to have trouble reining in their own mania. Wide-eyed and twitchy, some even joined the ghouls, scrambling up walls like animals or leaping right onto the rooftops. From there, vampires and ghouls alike started shrieking at the eye in the sky.

Nigel had seen similar behaviour before. When vampires lost control of their predatory instincts, they became savage beasts, with no thoughts beyond killing and feeding. He also knew that these were the weaker vampires, far more aggressive, but mercifully less powerful.

Nigel watched out for the frenzied ones, but it was the stronger ones he kept an eye on. They maintained control of themselves but looked unsettled, casting worried looks at the sky. Some tried to re-establish command over the ghouls and even their fellow vampires. Others moved up to the rooftops for a better look at the eye. More than a few started running, although there was no consensus on direction. From what Nigel could see, they chose to either head for the centre of the city, or to flee it entirely.

Nigel followed those heading deeper in, spending more time hiding than moving. In his hand was a gold-rank pistol with a magical silencer; a rare gift from a powerful and grateful client. He used it to put down a couple of vampires, both slower-moving bronze rankers that caught him between hiding spots. He dropped them in an instant and moved on without bothering to hide the bodies.

The gun made no sound at all and the smell of blood was already in the air. As the aura-induced madness intensified, ghouls were attacking their masters now, and the vampires were feeding on each other. Those trying to get them under control gave up and started running with the others.

The aura driving their behaviour was tyrannical, angry and hungry, as if the aura itself had become vampiric. Nigel was relieved that, while terrifying, it did not affect him as it did the vampires. It was a cyclone of power that moved around him as if he were in the eye of the storm. He could sense that the aura was gold ranked, but also that some other power

lay beyond it. He'd never sensed anything beyond gold rank before, and that was rare enough. Whatever lay behind this aura, it was clearly not of the Earth.

Nigel felt the moment the aura shifted. He wasn't sure how, exactly, as it still wasn't affecting him, but the vampires reacted immediately. The vampires and ghouls on the rooftops had been screaming rage at the eye in the sky, but now those screams turned to fear. They joined the vampires that had retained sense enough to run and started fleeing, either across the rooves or leaping down to the street.

The chaos made it harder to stay hidden and Nigel ducked down a stairwell and into a cellar. The ghouls that had once been inside had ripped apart the door on their way out. He had not been in there long when a gold-rank vampire entered in a blur of movement.

Nigel froze. He was confident of fighting one vampire in isolation, but the fight would inevitably bring more down on him. He watched as the vampire panned its gaze over the cellar while sniffing the air. Its eyes passed over him as if he weren't there and, after a moment, it left. After it did, mist appeared around his body and a voice came from nowhere.

"You can move safely, now. They will neither see nor sense you, so long as they don't touch you."

"Jason?"

"Can't really talk, Nigel; I'm in the middle of a thing. G'day, though."

Nigel made his way back outside, the mist shroud moving with him. The streets were teeming with ghouls and vampires. There were even some blood servants; humans who had been fed on vampire blood. They were stronger and faster than normal people, but enslaved by the blood's addictive properties.

The rooftops and even the walls had ghouls and vampires running along them, clawed hands and feet digging into tile and brick. The buildings continued to devolve into thick cloud substance, sometimes forcing ghouls to yank themselves out. The buildings warped and undulated as Nigel watched, disgorging vampires right through the walls.

He was careful to avoid all of it, but it was hard when the city itself was changing around him. A balcony he was hiding on might collapse, or the street turn to cloudy glue under his feet. Fortunately, the city's monstrous denizens were having as much trouble or more, and things only got worse for them. Nigel heard Jason's voice again, but not as a nearby whisper. This time, it crashed from the sky like thunder.

"BLEED FOR ME."

Nigel recognise the incantation from Jason's bloodletting spell, but the results were more extreme than what he had seen in the past. The effect on the ghouls was familiar, if

exaggerated, as they bled from every hole in their bodies. The vampiric servants fell to the ground, in flailing seizures. As for the vampires, mist started rising from their bodies like steam, but darker. Nigel would have guessed it was red, but it was hard to tell in the eerie light. The smell was much easier to identify as the coppery tang of blood filled the air.

There had already been a scent of blood carried on the breeze, but it quickly grew thick and heavy. Haze filled the streets as blood mist poured off the vampires, creating a sanguine humidity.

Even the vampires that had maintained their senses were now turning to madness. Nigel leapt to a balcony and ducked down to avoid the tide of ghouls dotted with vampires. Nigel and his team had known there were ghouls in the city, which was normal for any vampire enclave, but the number of the emaciated creatures was startling. It looked like the vampires had been using the city to build a new army of them, probably using spent humans from the blood farms.

Jason's voice spoke again, once more crashing from the sky.

"YOUR BLOOD IS NOT YOURS TO KEEP, BUT MINE ON WHICH TO FEAST."

The moment the thunderous incantation was completed, the blood haze filling the streets started to clear. It rose into the sky, splitting into streamers that converged on the giant eye. When they reached it, they were drawn in and devoured. As the eye absorbed more and more blood, it shifted from blue and orange to purple and red. The light coming from it changed with them until the city looked painted in blood and shadow.

On the streets, the fleeing ghouls and vampires were suddenly stopped in their tracks as a forest of bizarre shadow arms erupted from every dark crevice and cranny. The arms were void black and utterly inhuman; something between tentacles and the twisted branches of a dead tree. Each limb ended in fingers with too many knuckles, tapering to wicked points. As they dug into flesh, the vampires and their ghoul creations squealed like tortured pigs.

A forest of bizarre limbs grasped arms and legs, wrapped around bodies and grabbed heads, sharp fingers jabbing into mouths and digging into eyes. More than just on the street, many were left hanging from walls, caught climbing or mid-jump. They now hung like insects in a web, and like a spider's prey, they were being drained.

The vampires used a variety of powers to try and escape. Nigel saw one turn into a weasel and try to slip away, only to be skewered by sharp fingers and pinned to a wall. Similar fates met all those who shape-shifted into various animals. Those who turned into smoke and mist fared far worse. While they did escape the arms, a surge of aura

surrounded them. Their smoke and mist forms turned dark, thickening into more of the blood mist and vanishing into the haze.

As the blood evacuated their bodies, the vampires withered, their bodies emaciated and limp. Once the last gasps of blood mist sputtered from their bodies, they were barely distinguishable from the ghouls. The younger vampires fell apart into congealed gobbets, splashing onto the street. The older ones crumbled to dust and were carried away on the breeze.

Only the vampires were shedding the blood mist. From the ghouls, blood splattered to the ground, thick and dead. Nigel noticed that some of the vampires weren't shedding mist. These were mostly weaker ones; bronze rank and a few scant silvers. They were still trapped, but their blood spilled from their bodies and onto the ground.

Nigel made his way through the nightmare landscape, barely bothering to hide now. The freakish arms avoided him, and everything else was either dead or dying. He leapt onto a rooftop and saw only a handful of the blood mist streams still rising from the streets. He guessed that these were the gold rank vampires, apparently failing to escape the fate of their lessers.

Nigel watched from a roof as the last of the blood haze rose from the city and was drunk up by the eye. There were no more howls of rage or fear or agony. Only whimpers remained; a city of ghouls clinging to the last vestiges of their perverse existence, a scant few of their masters doing the same. Jason's voice rang out one more time, booming across a conquered city.

"MINE IS THE JUDGEMENT, AND THE JUDGEMENT IS DEATH."

All the blood collected in the eye erupted at once, up from the eye into a cloud that spread over the entire city. Blood rain fell, but each droplet was transformed before it ever reached the ground. Dark blood drops became shimmering motes of gold, silver and blue light. When they struck the mist shrouding Nigel, or hit the tiled rooftops, they vanished without effect. The ghouls and vampires did not get off so easily.

Vampires and ghouls still trapped in shadowy limbs had their flesh explode where the rain touched them. The blood servants that hadn't already died in seizures didn't explode when touched by the shining raindrops. Only their blood did, turning each into a gruesome and extremely deceased mess.

The process of killing off anything that had survived the blood draining was accompanied by fresh howls of intense agony. Nigel looked up at the eye, once more blue and orange. By the time the shining rain stopped falling, there were no more howls and no more whimpers. Nigel was the only thing alive in a silent city.