

Chapter 887

The Fundamental Things

Nigel looked up, watching the night sky close over the nebulous eye. The blue and orange light painting the city disappeared with it, allowing the moonlight to once more have primacy. The macabre remnants of the city were illuminated in silver. The buildings were warped, like plastic models melted under a hot lamp. Some sections had broken down entirely, leaking cloud material that sparkled in the moonlight.

Pools of blood and streaks of gore shone black under the silver light. They had no smell to them, as if everything that made the congealing fluids blood had been leached out of them. The sanguine aroma that had drenched the air was no longer carried on the fresh night breeze.

“You’ve been diligent in your training, I see.”

Nigel span around on hearing Jason’s voice. His aura senses hadn’t registered the man’s approach and still didn’t recognise his presence. To his supernatural perception, Jason Asano and the world around him were one and the same. Jason was standing on the roof in a floral shirt, tan shorts and sandals. He slouched casually, hands in his pockets. While moonlight washed the colour out of everything else, it lit him up like he was standing centre stage.

“Nigel? You okay, mate? You look a bit shell shocked.”

Nigel continued to stare at him.

“You’re going to ask that after what you just did?”

“Yeah, fair enough.”

“Are you back?” Nigel asked. “Or are you some kind of illusion?”

“Not exactly. This body is an avatar. A physical projection from another universe, like an interdimensional phone call.”

“But you are still alive.”

“Was that even a question? The answer is more complicated than you’d think, I’ll admit. I guess it depends on how you define alive.”

“Are you undead?”

“No. I guess I’m, I don’t know. Geographical?”

“What does that even mean?”

“Let’s put that aside for now. For practical purposes, I’m alive. You thought I was dead, though? I’d have thought the System would have put that idea to bed.”

“One of the prevailing theories is that the System is what’s left of the magic that once inhabited this place. That the domains fell because you died and their power seeped into the planet, and once it permeated the entire earth, the System happened.”

“People actually think that?”

“The impossible isn’t what it used to be, Asano.”

“I suppose not.”

Nigel looked at the man, an utterly incongruous figure in the dark and blood-soaked city.

“You seem relaxed for a man that just turned a city into a grave.”

“I’m trying to be a better man than the one who left this world. But I don’t have it in me to mourn the ones who had it coming. Not anymore.”

“Who decides who has it coming? I won’t argue about killing vampires, but I just saw a power this Earth has never seen. What is to stop you from deciding anyone you don’t like has it coming? Where’s the line?”

“Wherever I decide it is.”

“Why do you get to make that judgement?”

“Who do you think should decide where I use my power, Nigel? Some faction leader? A president or a prime minister? A parliament or a congress? The United Nations?”

“I don’t know, but you just wiped out a city. That’s a dangerous power to leave unaccountable to anyone.”

Jason tilted his head, peering at Nigel. He realised that Jason was reading the emotions in his aura.

“You’re asking me this because you’re afraid of yourself, aren’t you? Of the power you have as a gold ranker.” Jason said.

“Yes.”

“Who do you work for now, Nigel? Who do you answer to?”

“Myself. My conscience. My team and I are private contractors. This job is for Anna Tilden, but my team and I aren’t attached to any group. We answer to each other, choosing which jobs to take and which to refuse. My team are the ones who hold me to account.”

Jason smiled.

“Mine too. I didn’t have them on Earth, which is probably how I went so astray. If not for Farrah, I’d have lost myself completely, I think.”

“Sometimes I question myself. The power I have at this rank is right out of a comic book. I could knock down a building with my bare hands. Throw a train like a javelin. My

team are my brothers and sisters, but they don't have this much power. It scares me sometimes."

Jason nodded.

"I understand. Maybe more than anyone. You're a gold ranker with no affiliation? You got out when the Network fell apart?"

"Yeah."

"But you were silver, then, and no one much cared, right? Until you hit gold rank and suddenly everyone wants a piece of you, and they aren't scrupulous about how to get it."

"No, they're not."

"Sucks, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, I didn't handle it very well, so I might not have the best advice. For what it's worth, though, I think you're on the right track. Listen to the people you trust. Let them show you when you're heading off the rails."

"I need more than that. Sooner or later, someone is going to decide they don't like a gold-rank free agent and start looking for levers."

"Your family. Your team's families."

"Yeah. A lot of the team come from old Network families, so they have protection enough for now. But if people with real power come along..."

"You don't trust the Network factions to not sell them out."

"Exactly. I've been looking for a place we can all belong. Where our families can be safe and the people in charge won't use us for things we don't want to do."

"Are you asking to join the Asano Clan?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I don't know if they'd have us, and I'd want to know more before we agree to be a part of it. But I saw you, during your time here. What loyalty and betrayal meant to you."

Jason nodded.

"When you have so much power that you can solve most of the old problems," he said, "you realise that it's the fundamental things that really matter."

"Yes."

"Well, I'm not going to say you can be in or out. I'll leave that to my grandmother. But I think it might be a good fit, so I'll have a word with her."

"There's something I'd like to know, Asano."

"I'm guessing there's more than a few, but go on."

“I understand you wanted to clear the city of vampires, but why do it this way? To show the rest of the world what happens when they cross you? Letting me see so I can go back and tell everyone how dangerous you are?”

Jason shook his head.

“Nah, mate. The people who make the decisions in this world don’t scare, no matter how real the threat. I learned that the last time I was here. Once I’m back, they’ll take their shots and pay the price for trying. I don’t like it, but there’s nothing I can do to stop it. Not without becoming just like them.”

“Like them how?”

“Letting innocent people pay the price for what I want.”

Jason gestured at himself.

“This, the gawking tourist outfit, is aspirational. Casual. Fun. A little dorky. It’s who I want to be. But this...”

He spread his arms out to indicate the city around them.

“This is who I am. When I have to be. This wasn’t a show, Nigel. This was a practical necessity. I left all these cloud buildings intact in the hope that the vampires would move in. I wasn’t taking their blood, but the remnants of reality core energy, from when they were infusing the power of those cores into blood.”

“And that’s why some weren’t drained,” Nigel realised. “They were the younger ones, who had never fed on reality core blood.”

“Yes.”

“How powerful are you? Are you at the rank after gold?”

“That’s complicated. Technically, I’m both gold rank and the rank that’s after gold. In this place, my domain, I’m extremely powerful. I don’t like the term ‘holy ground,’ but that’s essentially what we’re dealing with. I’m not a god, but I do certain things the way that gods do. When I come to Earth, it will be in a mortal vessel. Gold rank, like you. It will have power like what you saw here, but scaled back. It will be an extension of myself, a more developed version of this avatar. Killing it won’t hurt me, just cost me time to make a new one.”

“Did the same thing happen in Slovakia as happened here?”

“Yes. But the vampires there kept their blood farm within the domain, so I was able to rescue those people. Here, the blood farm is off site, outside the reach of my power. This avatar can’t go beyond the boundary of my domain, so I can’t intercede there myself. You know the blood farms they used, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Nigel said. We’ve been here for months, scouted it all out. We just didn’t have the numbers to rescue the people, or a way to extract them if we did. After your domains went down, mainland Europe fell entirely to the vampires.”

“The clan can offer you numbers and safety. Is the rest of your team nearby?”

“Yeah. If I move fast, I can reach them before they evacuate the region.”

“Then please go and bring them back. In the meantime, I will clean the city.”

“It’s quite a mess.”

A nearby patch of blood smeared across the roof burst into ghostly white flame.

“That won’t be a problem,” Jason said.

Sophie swung her leg in a horizontal kick that hit nothing. A wind blade shot out, widening as it passed over the plain. The horizontal wave of razor-sharp air passed over the grass, shimmering like a heat haze and humming like an engine. In its path was a massive horde of stonehide lizards, the crashing sound of their feet overpowering the sound of the wind blade.

It was a large group, far too many to come from a normal manifestation. They were left over from the monster surge, four years previous, and hidden in an uninhabited mountain range. Sophie’s contract was firstly to eliminate them before they caused havoc on the trading routes of the flatlands. Once that was done, she needed to investigate what had driven them down from the mountains. They’d been up there for years without bothering anyone, and the Adventure Society wanted to know what had changed.

As the wind blade struck the stampeding herd, secondary wind blades erupted from the struck monsters. Those in turn triggered more and more secondary blades, bouncing back and forth between the monsters until the massive herd became a meat grinder of rent armour and spraying blood.

Sophie stood and watched, listening as the countless cracks of new wind blades rang like a thunderstorm. The gem in her wristband started blinking, indicating someone was contacting her sky talk tablet. She pulled it out of a dimensional pouch and accepted the call. Clive’s face appeared on the tablet.

“It’s time?” she asked.

“It’s time. The portal to Jason’s soul realm has opened up again. Finish whatever business you’re on and make your way to Yaresh.”

Sophie ended the call, put the tablet away and turned back to the horde of monsters. Despite the power of her gold-rank wind blade, stonehide lizards were tough, even for silver-rank monsters. They were all savagely lacerated, but yet to fall. The only ones that

had died so far were those trampled in the frenzied stampede. By the time the magic of her attack was expended and the blade storm came to an end, the stonehide lizards were rushing all the harder. Bellowing in rage, they hurled themselves across the plain in Sophie's direction.

She watched their approach, took out a sandwich and bit into it. From the sky, a sound started at a high pitch, growing deeper as the source descended at breakneck speed. Humphrey landed in the middle of the herd like a bomb. The shockwave of his abrupt arrival flung the monsters away from his impact point. The force of the wave ripped bodies apart in the air, splitting them along lines broken in their armour by wind blades.

Pieces of monster flew more than a kilometre away, several chunks avoiding Sophie as she manipulated the air to deflect them. A massive cloud of dust followed, again moving around Sophie thanks to her wind control.

Visibility died as the cloud surrounded her. A figure came striding out, tall and broad shouldered. Dust had caked onto his armour, muting its colourful rainbow scales. He pulled his helmet off with a grin.

"Took you long enough," she told him. "I was starting think that Nik would rank up before—"

She dropped her sandwich as he pulled her into a passionate kiss. A moustachioed dog dashed out of the dust cloud like a cheetah, snatching the sandwich before it hit the ground.

"...whatever business you're on and make your way to Yaresh," Clive said. The image on his tablet of Sophie nodded and the call ended.

"Would it kill you to say goodbye like a normal person?" he muttered, and shoved the tablet into his storage space. He got up and went to the outer office.

"Jeff, how are preparations for my trip away?"

"Vice Chancellor Grantham reported that she was read up on everything and ready to stand in during your absence. She did request a meeting to go over any last details, and update you on the portal network project."

"That's fine. Set something up."

"She suggested a dinner meeting."

"That's fine. Tonight would be best, if she can accommodate it. I want to leave tomorrow."

"I'm sure she will, Archchancellor. And, if I might suggest, sir, do dress up nicely."

“Why?” Clive asked. “I’ve got too much to do to go fancying myself up just to eat and go over administrative details.”

Jeff watched as Clive stalked back into his office, closing the door behind him. Jeff shook his head sadly.

“That poor, poor woman,” he muttered.