

## Chapter 351

### Media Blitz

Jeremy Westin was surprised to find a freshly-sealed road leading all the way into the isolated bushland area. He followed it to a gate in a chain wire fence, where a sign marked further progress as a private road. There seemed to be something off about the fence but he would need to look closer to identify what it was.

Next to the gate was a security booth. It was circular and made up almost entirely of mirrored glass that didn't allow him to see inside, giving it an unnerving panopticon effect. The fence intersected the circle in the middle, leaving half of the building on each side of the fence. The glass building was incongruously modern amongst the pleasant, bushland surrounds. He wondered about the legality of something that could throw off blinding reflections, although it didn't seem to be doing that at all, despite the sunshine beaming right onto it. Taking a second look, the lack of glare coming off of it was actually quite unusual.

Jeremy pulled up in front of the gate, turned off his car and waited. No one came out and he wondered if the small building wasn't the security station he assumed but some kind of art installation. He stepped out, looking closer at the fence. Instead of the traditional chain-link pattern, the wiring on this fence was deeply varied, as if someone had tried to make a tapestry from a wire fence. The fence also looked a little different in texture and colour to steel mesh he'd seen in the past, but that could easily be a matter of the galvanisation process.

The wiring was shaped into what looked like ideographs from a language he didn't know, and not the same ones in a loop. He suspected that someone who knew the language in question would be able to read the fence like a book, although what language that was eluded him. The closest thing he had seen was hieroglyphs developed by Catholics trying to convert First Nations people in Canada.

He heard a helicopter faintly overhead, although he didn't spot it when he craned his neck to look for it. He walked up to the glass building, of which the only non-glass portion was a steel section on each side where the fence terminated against the wall. There did not appear to be doors. Walking around as much as he could, the building seemed to be made from two complete, unbroken glass curves, one on each side of the fence. He tried cupping his hands to peer through the glass but its reflective surface was impenetrable.

It turned out that there was a door, so seamlessly integrated that Jeremy had missed it entirely. A panel of glass retracted, slightly, with a quiet hiss of air, before sliding out of

the way. It would have revealed the interior of the building if not for an interior wall made of Māori.

“G’day,” Taika said. “Who are you, and why can’t you read the sign? It’s a private road, bro. How about you bugger off so I can go back to looking up photos of Jason Statham with hair?”

Jeremy opened his mouth to speak but a voice behind him beat him to the punch.

“He’s a journalist. Telling them to leave just encourages them.”

Jeremy turned around to see the person behind him. He recognised the face of Jason Asano from the storm of media surrounding the reveal of the two personas, the Starlight Rider and the Starlight Angel. First had come the Angel at the children's hospital, then the Rider in a rolling gunfight on motorcycles. From the beginning, there was debate over whether the two were the same, given that one brought life and the other death.

Rumours linking them to events across Asia and then Africa only fuelled speculation, culminating in the West Africa EVD outbreak. Despite denials from humanitarian workers, rumours persisted of a man who passed through the camps like a miracle healer.

The person healing people in camps was not draped in starlight but described as a mixed-race Asian man. The parallels with the first stories of the Starlight Angel were obvious, however. It was in the wake of this that a small team of journalists starting putting the pieces together and bringing all the events to light. They dug up amateur phone footage, suppressed news stories and myriad firsthand accounts.

Debate flared as to whether the reported events really did or even could take place. The stories and even the footage was so fantastical that most of it was dismissed as hoaxes and film manipulation. Was the Rider, filmed horrifically killing groups of people, the same Starlight Angel being praised as a merciful messenger from God? The reported appearance of other figures, including the dark riders shown in the helicopter news footage from Sydney only muddied the waters.

When the government started releasing a series of inconsistent and ominous public announcements, suddenly there was an explosion in new information about the enigmatic man of starlight. New stories, new footage. A whole slew of reports from China, reportedly suppressed by the government, of a man helping earthquake victims with superhuman powers.

Then the Rider revealed his identity in a small coastal town in New South Wales, captured in a bevy of phone footage. It was so blatant that there was little doubt that the Rider revealed himself to the world on purpose, but he literally vanished. Recordings of the

incident showed many people, primarily Asano's family, appearing to vanish through a magic archway.

Once again there were claims of hoax and doctored footage. Even so, the media immediately turned piranha, descending on the sleepy beach town in a frenzy. What they discovered was that every member of the Asano family had decamped from the town entirely, leaving reporters to scour the town for whatever they could find.

Information started coming in thick and fast. Jason Asano was the brother of a celebrity chef, and footage of his appearances was being juxtaposed with footage from his activities as the Rider. The joking man bantering with his sister as they demonstrated recipes together was a world away from the one massacring drug-fuelled bikers or fighting like a demon when cornered and outnumbered in a Hanoi slum. There was no recorded footage of him ever healing anyone, despite the repeated stories.

The fact that he had been declared legally dead in a hastily covered-up explosion was a key focus of media analysis. Some even postulated that the current Jason Asano was actually an impostor, citing physical differences from his television appearances before and after his reported demise.

Jeremy had sent one of his junior reporters to Casselton Beach, along with the gaggle from other outlets, where unusual stories were turning up from interviewed townsfolk. Asano driving around in a variety of black supercars or being filmed performing elaborate feats of parkour in a park. Some local teenagers found their view counts hitting the stratosphere as their recordings of Jason's parkour antics were revealed in the mainstream media.

Those videos fuelled further speculation regarding an unknown woman apparently putting Asano's young niece through a rigorous training program, including after Jason stopped appearing. That the timing coincided with the activities around the world only cemented Jason as the man of mystery.

Interviews with locals revealed that Asano had been living on an enormous houseboat that appearing out of nowhere one morning and was now gone, just as mysteriously. The houseboat seemed to be a hub of strange activity, from a science-fiction looking helicopter coming and going to strange lights at night to people flying over the water in jet suits that had yet to be released anywhere in the world, let alone, Australia.

The sum total of all these oddities was a media vortex that threatened to swallow up the public warnings being issued as people tried to find the man who could reportedly perform miracles. As a professional participant in the media landscape, Jeremy recognised that something with a lot of power was pushing the Asano narrative hard. There was a lot

of interest in the story, to be sure, but his seasoned sensibilities told him that someone wanted the story painting over whatever else might be going on.

Even so, investigating that meant, like everyone else, investigating Asano. Doing his legwork, he managed to dig up some information about land purchases by Asano's uncle. Looking into Hiro Asano, he discovered that Hiro had been connected to organised crime in Sydney, until just before Jason Asano rose from the grave. At that point he completely extricated himself and moved back to his hometown, living on Jason's houseboat

Further digging led Jeremy to well-buried records relating to a construction project on the expensive chunk of bushland Hiro had purchased. Suspecting this to be the location of the vanished Asano family, Jeremy had come to investigate and now found himself face-to-face with Jason Asano.

There was no indication of how Jason had arrived unnoticed. There was no other vehicle and they were standing in open bushland. At a glance, he seemed a world away from the stories surrounding him, leaning casually against Jeremy's car in shorts, sandals and a Decepticons t-shirt. He had a look of amusement on his face but something in his eyes left Jeremy unsettled. It left him feeling naked, as if Asano was looking at his very soul.

"Hello, Mr Westin," Jason said. "Taika, this is Jeremy Westin. He runs an independent news website called The Westin Front; one of a handful trying to squeak around the media monopoly and do some actual journalism. His speculation about the terrorist readiness exercises has been way off the mark but he's usually pretty good."

"You're Jason Asano," Jeremy said.

"So people keep telling me, but I saw on the news that I'm actually someone else."

"Are you?"

"No. Everyone changes, Mr Westin. I'm not exceptional in that regard."

Jeremy heard fake coughing behind him.

Cough "—load of bull shi—" cough.

Jeremy turned to look at the giant Māori. He turned back to Asano to see that his car had vanished.

"My car."

"We'll take mine," Jason said.

"Yours?"

A terrifying cloud of shadows erupted from Asano, then coalesced into what looked an oversized black hypercar that would not have looked out of place in a batman movie. The gullwing doors opened of their own volition and Jason ducked into the driver's seat.

Jeremy stood frozen on the spot, eyes like poached eggs. He almost stumbled over when Taika gave him an encouraging slap on the back. Jason leaned over in the car to speak to Jeremy through the open door.

"Mr Westin – can I call you Jeremy? Jeremy, I don't have a lot of time, for reasons that will become apparent with tragic alacrity. That means that I need you to make a choice now: either get in and learn the single biggest secret on this planet or I give your car back and you leave. You're the first to find us, but your contemporaries will be close behind and I can give one of them the story instead."

Jeremy blinked, still getting over the one-two punch of overt magic and a back slap that seemed to have realigned several vertebrae. He warily entered the car, looking around at the interior like it would champ down and bite him. The gullwing doors closed and his face showed a trapped expression.

"So what do you think of the security booth?" Jason asked.

"What? Uh, it's an odd piece of glasswork. That reflective treatment seems unusual."

"It's not actually glass," Jason said. "That's the cool thing. It's an aluminium-based ceramic. With a few tweaks."

In front of them, the gate started rolling aside and Jeremy's eyes fell on the fencing again.

"Tweaks?" he asked. "Like the wire on the fence?"

"Good eye," Jason said as the car started moving. Jeremy noticed that Asano wasn't touching the steering wheel or the pedals, but he'd conjured the car out of solid shadows, so that wasn't really worth mentioning.

"Things are about to get crazy," Jason said. "The big news companies are using me to mask the very important warnings trying to go out, although I think the government announcements are doing better in countries where more than two companies are owning ninety percent of the media. I don't have to tell you that."

"Why are you showing me these things?" a rattled Jeremy asked.

"Because either today or tomorrow, an interdimensional war with an endless, unrelenting enemy is going to start across the world."

"What?"

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Jason drew into the main thoroughfare of the family village, parking in front of the large residence. Erika was waiting for him out front. The street was awash with activity, with many stopping to look as Jason pulled up. Mostly they were Asanos, but not all. Jason spotted Taika's mum loudly directing people as she organised something inside of

the gathering halls. She gave Jason a wave and then went back to yelling at some of Jason's cousins who had paused in the process of carrying a table.

"What's up, Eri?" Jason asked as he stepped out of the car.

"Shade tells me you've been explaining magic to a reporter."

"Someone is clearly building up a specific narrative. I figure that we use the attention on me to put our own out there."

"Ignoring the fact that what you just described is the network's job, not ours, Shade told me that you were doing the explaining yourself."

"Who else was going to do it?"

"Shade, or anyone else that isn't you."

"He needs to know."

"Assuming that's true, you're literally the worst person to explain it to him."

"I'm not that bad."

"So you haven't been dropping bombs with zero context to see how googly you can make his eyes go?"

"Shade, you're a traitor," Jason said.

"Fun is for people with time," Shade said from Erika's shadow. "We have very little of it, so I decided that your sister would be the better introduction for Mr Westin. All you did was unnerve the man for your own amusement."

Jason groaned his concession and he and Erika turned to where Jeremy was still in the car. Jeremy yelped as the car dissolved into darkness around him and he fell to the ground while the shadows were being drawn into Jason's shadow. Jason helped Jeremy to his feet as a motorised scooter came zipping along the thoroughfare.

"Uncle Jason!"

Emi didn't fully stop the scooter before stepping off, allowing the momentum to carry her into a power hug.

"G'day, Moppet," Jason said, returning the hug. "I thought you'd be off working for the Network."

"Farrah had them assign me to Coffs because it's closer to home. I have my own security escort!"

"Someone reliable, I hope."

"It's Ruth and Greg, since they aren't working with Uncle Kai right now."

Jason could sense them both, meandering in the direction of the main thoroughfare. Emi didn't need constant guarding when she was with family.

"Speaking of Kai," Erika said, "Jason, how long before you two are back in the air?"

“Enough time to sleep,” Jason said. “Once Kaito is back at full charge, we’re back at it. The goal is to set up a series of potential teleport destinations so I can get around the country by hopscotching portals. I can portal to anyplace I can halfway remember, so I’m just hanging out on various places while Kaito takes a break. ”

“Let me take care of the journalist,” Erika said. “Emi can take you to our other guest and then I’ll bring the reporter back to you for an interview before you hit the sack.”

“The other guest being our Japanese visitor?” Jason asked. He could already sense an unfamiliar silver-ranker. She was a core-user but her aura had none of the usual sloppiness. Instead, it was clean and sharp.

“Yes,” Erika confirmed.

As Jason’s thoughts drifting to core users, he noticed the absence of his sister in law.

“Amy’s not here?” Jason asked.

"She's still organising civic preparedness for when things kick-off," Erika said.

The Casselton region was too scattered to warrant a permanent Network scanning presence. The Network had foisted the area onto Jason, despite his having evacuated his family. It wouldn’t take too much of his time to portal in and check the area for proto-spaces every couple of days between patrols. The concern was that a manifestation out of his dimensional compass range could lead to a dimensional breach in a neighbouring area. Once the monsters arrived, there was nothing to stop them from wandering in.

For this reason, Amy, as mayor, was preparing to commandeer all the accommodation in the tourist towns of Casselton Beach, Castle Heads and Casselton North. They all fell comfortably inside the range of the compass, if used in the central town of the three, Castle Heads.

Once people started realising the new reality about to descend on them, Amy would be ready to collect most of the regional populace into the three towns. It wouldn’t prevent monsters arriving from out of range but was better than just leaving people to their fates. Few small towns had as much protection.

“Alright, Jeremy,” Jason said. “I’m going to leave you in the capable hands of my sister while I go deal with the Next Damn Thing. Emi, lead the way.”