

Chapter 888

You Don't Want Glory

Jason and his familiars stood in a doorway that opened onto a blank void, serving as a private dock to the deep astral. Any cosmic visitors had to approach Jason's astral kingdom from elsewhere, as this was for his use alone. It had once led to the Cosmic Throne, but Jason had relinquished that link.

As they watched, a nebulous orange and blue eye opened in the dark. Motes of light, poured from it in a torrent, dancing sparks of blue, silver and gold. They swam through the void like a school of luminescent deep sea fish, lighting up the dark. Despite the appearance, they were not living things but shards of the fundamental substance that made up physical reality. First stolen from Earth's transformation zones, then consumed by vampires, Jason had subsequently sieved it from their bodies and taken it for himself.

"It is insufficient to complete your prime avatar," Shade observed.

"Yeah," Jason agreed in a dissatisfied tone. "I don't like my options for getting the rest of what I need, either. Having Rufus raid the factions on Earth for any reality core stockpiles would make things very hard for Grandmother, diplomatically. The messengers are made of the stuff I need, but they're all indoctrinated slaves. Killing them in a war is one thing, but I'm not going to have the team round them up and drag them into my domain for me to consume."

"There are more vampires on Earth," Colin said. "The clan has strong people now. They could grab vampires for you to eat."

"They could," Jason mused. "There's an argument that they're victims as well, but they're too far gone for any chance at redemption. But I don't want the clan doing something that predatory. I know I'm not great leader material, but I am responsible for them. Part of leadership is about setting a culture, and I want them to be better than me."

"You can't protect them from ever dirtying their hands," Colin said.

"No," Jason agreed, "but only if they have to. I don't absolutely need this from them, so I'm not going to send them off to kidnap things that think and feel, just so I can squeeze the life out of them and consume it."

"I agree that would be best avoided," Shade said.

"I have a suggestion," Gordon said. The sweet tones of his voice emitted from all twelve of the spheres he had at gold rank, making him sound like a choir of angels. It masked what Jason knew to be the familiar's nervousness at speaking. He was new to being understood by everyone.

“Please, share,” Jason encouraged.

“You gave something to the goddess of death once, as part of a bargain.”

Jason’s eyes went wide.

“That’s brilliant, Gordon,” Jason said. Gordon’s orbs dimmed bashfully.

“What am I missing?” Colin asked. He was in his blood clone form, looking like Jason but sculpted from wet, blood-red clay.

“I made a bargain with Death,” Jason said. “To swear off resurrection, for myself or anyone else at my hands.”

“I remember,” Colin said. “Really stupid choice. I can’t believe you gave away power like that.”

“We needed a miracle,” Jason said, “and we got one. I don’t bring it up to relitigate that decision, though. The point is that I had the power to resurrect at the time. I’d drained enough reality material from messengers to build myself a new body if I died. I gave it up to the goddess when I made the deal, but now that I won’t use it to come back to life, she may be willing to return it.”

“Do you think that likely?” Shade asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I probably got in her good graces by shutting Undeath down so hard. Can’t hurt to ask.”

Fiorella liked portal duty. A nice quiet room where nothing ever happened, and the best part: the chair reclined. For someone who enjoyed napping, it was the most coveted posting in the city of Rexion’s militia.

She had only been a girl when the old city fell, and had grown up in Rexion. She’d been in the crowd, sitting on her father’s shoulders when they had the big ceremony to name their new home. Her memories of those days were the hazy recollections of a child. Fear and hopelessness as the Builder cult, the messengers and then the undead came underground, one after the other. Abandoning their home. Hiding in some strange place her mother said was inside a man’s soul — that part still didn’t make sense to her — and finally arriving in their new home.

People had been scared. They had gone through so much; lost so much. Seen people and experienced events that were powerful, confusing and bizarre. It was hard to tell saviours from enemies, especially when one became the other. It had been one thing after the next, and when they arrived in the city, what no one expected was peace and safety. For some, it took years to accept. Some never did, ever wary for some unspecified cataclysm.

The city was no less strange than anything else they had been through. So empty, with how few Brighthearts were left. The buildings that turned into fog, reshaped themselves and turned into different buildings. It still happened occasionally, but it was all the time when Fiorella was still a child.

More people from the surface arrived, but these were neither foes nor saviours. They came not for war but for trade. The new growing chambers produced so much food, and the people on the surface were apparently very hungry. She heard stories of them facing their own messengers, who destroyed their surface growing chambers, called farms. They needed food and had much to offer in return. Most valuable was what the Church of Fertility could provide: children. In only a few years, the streets had been teeming with them, too many to raise as anything but a community.

The portal chamber had always been there, ever since the beginning. There were all kinds of stories about it. That it led to the place they had all sheltered in after fleeing the old city. That it was the inside of a person's soul. Fiorella's memories of being inside were patchy, just a few images and emotions. Mostly fear and loss.

The portal was only ever used occasionally, by Council Leader Lorenn or visitors from the surface. Then, a few years ago, it closed. When that happened, the militia started putting on extra people. There was talk of some invisible protection having gone away. While many didn't believe it, Fiorella did. Her aura senses were a little stronger than most Brighthearts and she had felt the change. Something that had always been there, without her ever noticing, was suddenly gone.

That had been Fiorella's impetus for joining the militia, but the results were not what she expected. For one thing, she turned out to have little talent for combat. She was trained to draw out her elemental powers, but she was never any good with them in the combat drills. She found her niche in the militia's logistics and administration divisions, cycling through a variety of duties in both.

No new threat ever came. Council leader Lorenn had been diligent in safeguarding the city without the vanished aura and its mysterious, unspecified protection. Through years of negotiation, the surface entrances to Rexion were now administered by the city, alongside some organisation from the surface. Fiorella had been assigned up there a couple of times, finding the open sky unsettling, but also fascinating.

Although she was no slacker, Fiorella's favourite duty remained watching the portal chamber. It was a room that looked to be made of sand-coloured brick and no decorations. At one end, by the door, was a desk with a very comfortable chair. At the other was the portal itself: a white stone archway. It was closed by the time Fiorella signed on, but she

had a memory of it from childhood. Swirling colours of blue, silver and gold. Pretty, but unnerving.

Now, Fiorella's work roster left her periodically assigned to watch that very portal. It stayed closed, nothing ever happening. Napping wasn't strictly allowed, but more than one superior officer had quietly mentioned that alternating good naps with good books was an acceptable way to pass the time. The large reclining chair behind the desk was not as comfortable as it was by accident.

Fiorella hadn't been on duty when the portal had opened again a little over a week ago. There had been a big hubbub at first, a group of combat militia replacing the one administrator in watching the portal. That hadn't lasted long. Council leader Lorenn had gone into the portal with a few of the city's elite veterans, returning quickly and removing the troops on her return. The role of watching the portal fell once more to administration and Fiorella was placed back on the roster.

It had been exciting for the first couple of days, despite the inactivity. She'd been briefed on all the people who might come out, and the ones who would inevitably visit from the surface. A device was set up in the corner so the sky network tablets would work through the portal. It looked like a lamp.

After being assigned, she sat behind the desk, imagining all the exciting things she might witness. The list of people who were likely to come through in either direction were apparently all famous up on the surface. Some of the names in that briefing list she'd heard in stories told by the older militia members. Stories she'd always thought were fanciful, but now she would get to see these people and judge for herself.

Two days into staring at the portal while almost nothing happened, the novelty had worn off. No one had arrived to go in, and one person had come out. When a priest of the Healer named Carlos Quilido emerged, she was bursting with questions. After one look at his stormy face, her questions died on her lips. He shoved a bundle of letters into her hands and went back without a word. If not for the briefings, she wouldn't have even known his name.

The only real difference after the portal opened was the silver, blue and gold light filling the once-empty arch. The colours weren't especially bright, but they did swirl around a lot, making it harder to nap. Not impossible, however, and Fiorella was roused from sleep by a gentle knocking on the table.

"Denny?" she asked blearily. "Is it shift change?"

"I have no idea. And my friends call me Jason."

Her eyes swam into focus as she sat up and looked at the man casually half-sitting on the table. He was a human, with a human face. It had hair on it. She wondered what a human was doing there.

Her sleepy brain finally caught up with what was happening and she almost fell bolting out of her chair.

“You’re him,” she said. “You are him, right? Sorry, Mr Asano, sir. That is you, right?”

She hoped the whimpering sound was only happening inside her head. This was the person they had talked about first and last in the briefing. The one who, should he emerge from the portal, meant she had to send a message to her superior and the Council Leader’s office. It was supposedly his soul on the other side of the portal that people could somehow live inside of.

“Um, I need to go tell people you’re here, sir. If that’s alright.”

“I’ll make you a deal,” he said. “You call me Jason instead of sir, and you can do whatever you like.”

“Uh, yes, sir. Jason. Sorry.”

He let out a chuckle. It was friendly, comforting sound. With everything that had been said about him, she was expecting some intimidating patrician figure. Instead, he looked like any human she’d see at the shaft market where most of the surface people shopped.

“Sir... sorry again. Jason. Is it true that your soul is on the other side of that portal?”

“That’s complicated, as you might imagine. But yes. How old are you? Early twenties? Old enough to have lived through all the trouble. You would have been a little girl when you and your people took shelter in there. I don’t imagine you remember much, or clearly.”

“No, sir.”

He smiled and shook his head.

“What’s your name?”

“Fiorella, sir.”

“It’s probably time you go tell someone I’m here, Fiorella.”

Her eyes went wide.

“Yes, sir!”

After she bolted out of the room, Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow.

“Why did you ask her name when you already knew it?” the familiar asked.

“I don’t want to rub it in their faces that this place is my domain. This is their home. And it creeps people out when they know you can be — and probably are — watching them at every moment.”

“I don’t understand why people have a problem with that.”

“That’s because watching people from the shadows is kind of your thing.”

Council Leader Lorenn’s office was modest. She was seated not behind her desk but on one of a pair of couches, with Jason sat opposite.

“Again, Council Leader, I’d like to express my apologies for withdrawing the protection of my aura without warning, but I was always watching. I saw your efforts to protect your people, both militarily and diplomatically. You are a good leader.”

“I understand your reasons, Mr Asano. I might have had trouble believing them, had we not been through that transformation zone together. And while your aura may have gone, the infrastructure never showed the slightest indication of failure.”

“Fortunately, I didn’t have to take things that far for my ruse to work. Even if my identity had been eliminated, my power would have remained.”

Lorenn nodded.

“I won’t pretend to understand the nature of the battles you fight, Mr Asano. What I will do is apologise, in turn.”

“For what?”

“After the transformation zone, I was tired. Afraid to hope and quick to doubt.”

“That’s nothing to apologise for, Council Leader. My tribulations are meagre things compared to what you and your people suffered, yet I handled them with not a scrap of your grace and equanimity. You have nothing but my admiration.”

“Thank you, although you had little time to see past the façade. We all have our scars.”

“Don’t we just.”

“My point, Mr Asano, is that you were off and away before I even began to grapple with what you had left us. This place is a wonder. People I have met from the surface say that cloud vehicles such as yours are rare and precious things. An entire city of such construction is unheard of, even amongst the marvels of the surface world.”

“The surface world has no shortage of wonders.”

“I don’t doubt it, but this city stands amongst the best of them. The requests to come and study it have proven that.”

“Have you accepted any of those requests?”

“No. This is our city, but your power. I would not do so without your consent.”

Jason nodded.

“There is a person who I have somewhat accidentally dodged for most of two decades, now. They are a diamond ranker and created my cloud flask. I think letting them study this place would be fair compensation, so long as they don’t interfere with your people. Emir Bahadir will have their contact details.”

“Very well. But you keep deflecting from my topic, Mr Asano. After the transformation zone, I was bone weary. For so long, I had been putting one foot in front of the other, waiting for the next disaster. Always on watch for the next problem. Once I finally accepted that we have found safety, I looked back and realised just how much we owe you. It’s obvious, but I was too caught up to see it until you were gone. You are the saviour of the Brighthearts.”

“Many people were a part of this. Including you.”

“Not everyone carried my people in their soul, or fought a god.”

“If you need someone to build a statue of, Council Leader, then choose Gareth Xandier. He fought that god too, and it’ll look better anyway.”

“We did.”

“Oh.”

“Mr Asano, you sheltered us when we were lost. Not just kept our people safe but welcomed them into your very soul. Then you reclaimed our home and rebuilt it out of miracles. The ground we walk and the homes we live in are expressions of your power. This is the kind of story myths are made of.”

Jason leaned back into the couch and sighed.

“Then let it fade,” he said. “Myths are just old stories. Let me be that. If you’re going to talk about what happened here, don’t make it about me. That doesn’t help anyone. Talk about the people who came from the surface to help. That’s useful. Something that can build bridges. Let me be a footnote.”

“Why shy away from fame? From what I can tell, you aren’t short of it on the surface.”

“Maybe a while back. In certain places. But there are always new stories. New heroes. It’s been time enough that I can be just some guy. As much as any gold ranker can be. If I do something a little special, that’s expected of gold rankers. I won’t stand out like before.”

“I’m not sure that anyone but you believes that.”

“Call it a hope.”

“You don’t want glory?”

“I’ve had glory. It’s an empty thing. The time it cost me with my friends and my family are among my greatest regrets.”

“I feel like you deserve more.”

“Fame isn’t a prize, Council Leader. It’s a price. Surely you know that.”

Lorenn nodded contemplatively.

“Yes, I suppose I do. But surely there is something we can do for you.”

“Open a good sandwich shop.”