

Chapter 880

Regrets

The World-Phoenix and the Reaper had been walking down an empty road for two years. No fights, no obstacles. No objective to fight over. The pair walked in silence along the unchanging and seemingly endless road. Two years almost without pause, except for one moment where the World-Phoenix stopped.

“What is it?” the Reaper asked, also stopping.

“I miss food.”

“That is because of your vessel.”

“Knowing the reason does not obviate the circumstance.”

“Agreed.”

They continued on.

In Venice, in the vault of what had once been a bank, Elizabeth opened her eyes. She could feel it was night in the relaxing absence of the sun’s magic. The sunlight couldn’t harm her underground, but she could still feel it during the day. It niggled at the edge of her perception like an itch that couldn’t be scratched.

She left the vault, then showered and dressed before going upstairs. She would have liked to head for the roof and luxuriate with a book under the cool light of the moon. Books were such a pleasure, and so easy to obtain in this modern age. She suspected that was not to be, based on the vampire she could sense waiting in her office.

The very concept of an office left Elizabeth shaking her head. Once upon a time, she had a throne room. A study was one thing, all antique wood and leatherbound books, but that was not enough for contemporary needs. Managing a modern vampire nation required such dark artifice as spreadsheets and — she shuddered at the thought — PowerPoint presentations.

The bank was a fortress. After some magical enhancement, it would now withstand another attempt by the humans to go nuclear. It was also well-prepared for more conventional forms of attack, be it by essence users or vampires. Doing all of that without compromise made it a utilitarian space, not a pleasant one in which to live or work.

For a more pleasant place in which to enjoy her nights, Elizabeth maintained a nearby palazzo. A short walk away, along the canal, it was close enough to reach in less than a second if she put on her full speed. That was not necessary this evening, and she meandered under a clear night sky.

The moonlight pleasantly lit up the clear water of the canal, untainted by the long-gone human population. Before Elizabeth took over the city, it had been an apocalyptic nightmare. The vampire lords ruling it had conducted wholesale slaughter with their unsanitary blood farms. The exsanguination centres had been set up in quick and nasty fashion to infuse human blood with magic as quickly as they could obtain reality cores.

Elizabeth had changed all of that. The transformation zones stopped appearing, cutting off the reality core supply. Most of the city's population was gone, either dead, fled, or transformed into monstrous ghouls. Some few were also blood servants; humans made more powerful by drinking the blood of greater vampires.

After taking over, she had instituted a new regime. The superhuman strength and speed of blood servants and lower-rank vampires made short work of construction. Humans with the knowledge to guide them were given reprieves from serving as blood stock.

The humans who had failed to escape the city were kept to be farmed for blood, but in more humane fashion than elsewhere. Instead of being caged like factory farm chickens they were given more freedom within the largely empty city. Many were let out onto farms, producing the food to feed them. Acceptance over resistance came with privileges and better treatment.

Those who hid instead of reporting to be fed on were soon sniffed out. Those who fled Venice found that beyond the city limits, things were significantly worse. Europe was now completely under vampire control, aside from the British Isles. The Asano Clan had retreated into their astral spaces when their domain magic failed and had not been heard from in two years.

Elizabeth's edicts regarding the humans had not gone down well with the other lords, but she was not doing it out of compassion. Treating the humans better had critical upsides, starting with sustainability. Weak and sickly humans produced less blood of lower quality, while dead humans produced none at all. The herd was not easy to grow, so she kept it healthy and strong.

The other major advantage was optics. Key to Elizabeth's leadership was her adaptation to the modern world and human civilisation. She knew the humans drummed up a lot of anti-vampire sentiment with footage of the blood farms. If the vampires were to ever hold their territory peacefully, they would need to be accepted, if only as a rogue nation.

Acceptance meant at least appearing to be something other than a land of horrors. The vampire threat was largely eliminated from human-controlled territories, and humans

were so quick to forget when the bad things were only happening to someone else. Only during election years, or when distraction from a scandal was required, would the vampire threat suddenly be on the rise again.

The largest barrier to making a vampire nation palatable was the vampire population itself. Too many of the lords still failed to grasp the existential threat the humans posed. They blamed those who had fallen for being stupid or weak, asserting their own power and cunning that no human could bring low. For some, that was braggadocio and they were careful to remain under Elizabeth's unified banner. The trouble came from the ones who genuinely believed themselves invincible.

The Asano Clan retreated into their astral spaces as the magic shielding them faded and ultimately vanished. Without the protection of the domains, the joint military bases in France and Slovenia had been abandoned, and the vampires had overrun the territories. Elizabeth had counselled caution, but her hold over the more wild vampire lords was tenuous at best.

Taking over the luxurious magical cloud homes of the Asano clan had emboldened those who questioned Elizabeth. For many of the vampire lords, it was a return to the old ways of ruling in opulence. Every month that passed with Elizabeth's warnings coming to nought yet again served to undermined her authority further.

Elizabeth reached the door of her palazzo and it was opened by her blood slave, Gerling. He looked much as he had in life, but with blood red sclera and swarthier skin. It amused her to see his body so obedient and feel the soul, trapped within, thrashing in agony for release.

She made her way to her office where a gold-rank vampire was waiting. He was one of a pair of lords who had overcome their hedonistic instincts exceptionally well. This allowed them not only to adapt to modernity better than most but also to work with Elizabeth, rather than vying for control. They also shared her wariness of Jason Asano and the threat he would pose on his return to Earth.

"Mademoiselle Elizabeth."

"What do you have for me, Élie?"

"Barnabus Cope continues to establish himself as a central figure amongst the vampire lords in the former Asano territories. I would predict a covert attempt to remove you in the coming weeks. Should that fail, expect open hostilities by the end of the year."

"Hardly news, Élie," Elizabeth said. She took a seat behind her desk and gestured to the one opposite. Élie sat primly in his seat.

“Barnabus has obtained some of the human magic specialists,” Élie reported.

“Turned them, to assure loyalty, and flout your restrictions on new vampires.”

“He’s trying to break into the sealed astral space apertures again?”

“He is.”

“How is that going?”

“He deployed his new experts to try and breach the apertures. They exploded.”

“The apertures or the experts?”

“The experts. The apertures remain as impenetrable as ever.”

“Have their attempts had any impact on the magic levels?”

“No, mademoiselle. The magic levels remain lower than when the Asano domains were in place, consistent with the surrounding regions.”

Elizabeth leaned back in her chair, absently tapping her lips with a finger as she thought.

“What do you think of the fact that Asano’s aura is gone, but the magical cities he created remain?”

“If I were a suspicious man, I would think it reeks of a trap.”

“Are you a suspicious man, Élie?”

“Yes, mademoiselle. I am.”

Amusement teased at Elizabeth’s expression for a moment, before it turned grim and contemplative.

“Here or not, Asano is a problem,” she said. “If he dies on some other world and his magic here diminishes, it emboldens those who would undermine us. If he stays away and things remain as they are, the result is similar but not as deleterious to our position. That may be the outcome with the least negative impact for us.”

“And if he returns?”

“What do you think?”

“I once ran from Asano when he was silver-rank. If he comes back stronger...”

Elizabeth nodded.

“His clan believed that Asano reached gold rank well before they withdrew into their astral spaces. We have to assume that, if he returns, it will be at gold rank. If he brings enough gold-rank allies with him, then it will be more than just us worried about our longevity. The balance of power in this world will change.”

“Asano is known to have antagonism towards most major authorities. Perhaps there is room to exploit that?”

“Our concern should focus on the vampires in the former Asano Clan domains. If Asano returns, we could easily be swept up in his response to their occupancy.”

“You speak of appeasement.”

“I speak of survival.”

“I don’t disagree, but distancing ourselves from the excesses of our kind is tricky. It will be abdicating control of the vampires already uneasy about you. Barnabus Cope will sweep them up, and if Asano does not return — or even return soon enough — we will pay the price for that.”

“A price that can be endured, while the full ire of Jason Asano cannot. We prepare for the thing that will kill us, not the one that will merely hurt us. I managed to escape Asano once. He will be more diligent should he try to kill me again. My best chance is to convince him not to.”

“Do you think he will tolerate our continued existence?”

“No. Not as things stand. The best we can do is prepare and hope to find an opportunity for survival in whatever circumstances come about. Start with finding ways to distance us from Cope in the eyes of the humans.”

After two years, the World-Phoenix and the Reaper finally encountered something other than flat, straight road. It began with the appearance of mountains in the distance, rising out of the jungle. The road diverted from its previously unshifting course, narrowing as it drew closer to the mountains.

The pair continued to walk as the road wound up into the mountains. The trees lining the road changed as the air grew cooler with altitude. Many sections had no growth at all, only barren patches of dirt filled with obsidian slate. The road itself changed, the wide flat stones now black obsidian; a worked and polished version of the slate by the side of the road.

High in the mountains, snow started covering everything but the road. The obsidian flagstones were heated from underneath, melting any ice that fell upon them. The melted snow left them smooth and slick, but the great astral beings with their preternatural balance did not slip or fall.

“This whole region is volcanic,” the World-Phoenix said. “I can feel the fire beneath the ground. The echo of it in the stone.”

Finally there was a crest, giving them a panoramic view as the road started to descend. They stopped to look over a massive caldera spread out before them. Running through the mountain range, it formed a long, wide, high-altitude valley. Within the caldera

were lakes giving off steam amongst a forest wholly unlike the jungle at the feet of the mountains. Towering trees reached as high as a hundred metres or more.

The forest was far from empty. It was an expansive woodland city, partially constructed and partially grown. Treehouses were built on multiple levels of each trunk, relying on their width and strength. The keen eyes of the great astral beings picked out furnished hollows grown into the trees. There were rope bridges and elevators using crude rope mechanisms. Despite the vastness of the tree city, it looked uninhabited.

“That forest,” the World-Phoenix said. “Is it...?”

“A nested soul,” the Reaper confirmed. “This forest is a single, living thing, with its own soul.”

“How did we not sense this? Nesting a soul leaves traces we would have seen, even in these limited vessels.”

“I do not think he used soul engineering. Not in the usual conscious and controlled way. These souls were connected willingly and through abnormal means. The transformation zone hid this from us, and Asano used the reintegration of the zone to implement it instinctively.”

“Who showed him that this was even possible? The gods of Pallimustus?”

“Their doing so would not have escaped our attention. Asano may have discovered this process on his own. He has been given many tools for manipulating reality, with precious little instruction. Largely by you, World-Phoenix.”

“Once again, I have set him on a path he has followed further than I ever intended. We have been labouring under a misconception. We believed that our presence in his soul would alert us to any manipulations to this game he has staged. But there is no telling what he had hidden from us in that nested soul.”

“All that is left to us is to find out,” the Reaper said. “Let us move forward.”

“Wait a moment,” the World-Phoenix said.

“Why?”

She nodded at the panorama before them.

“Because it’s beautiful.”

The Reaper turned his head to look at her.

“You should indulge in your mortal vessel,” she said, keeping her gaze on the vista.

“In our normal state, experiencing pleasure or appreciating beauty is beyond us.”

“We are not here to enjoy ourselves.”

“That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t. I think we both realise that Asano has played us, Reaper. That I don’t get what I want. And that you do, without having to get your hands dirty.”

“We are not mortals. I suppose it is futile to try and make you accept that what we are is important. Your very purpose here is to maintain what you made of yourself.”

“Don’t talk to me as if you hold the moral high ground, Reaper. You agreed to sunder the throne. You came here to enslave Asano’s soul. I’ve lost that chance, and you know what? I’m relieved.”

“Mortal weakness.”

“Yes. I wouldn’t have regrets if I wasn’t in this vessel. But I am.”

“You were always too fond of your prime vessels. You go through them so fast because you raise them like pets instead of using them like tools.”

“Says the man who got sad because his boy left home.”

“I FELT NOTHING!” he roared, earning a raised eyebrow from the World-Phoenix.

The Reaper said nothing, levelling a glare at her as he tugged adjustments to the drape of his suit. Without another word, he marched away. The World-Phoenix watched him go, then turned to take in the panorama one last time. She looked down the road where the Reaper was striding downhill. With a sigh, she started walking.