

Chapter 454

Something Other Than Human

“Dr Asano, I would like to thank you again for letting us set up the interim government here. Best estimates are over a year before Paris will be restored to the point of initiating repopulation.”

“Thank you for helping push through the Transformed Relocation project with the UN, Mr President,” Yumi said. “The first of the transformed will be arriving this week.”

“It’s not entirely selfless, Dr Asano. We will be in Saint-Étienne for a time, but for the transformed, it will be a home. Many have been treated poorly after losing their humanity and I believe that things will be more harmonious if we earn some goodwill.”

Yumi and the interim French president walked along an empty street. The city of Saint-Étienne was, for the moment, still largely empty. Most of it was occupied by Jason’s spirit domain, which had remade the city. There were some remnants that the transformation zone hadn’t absorbed, left in ruins by the vampire occupation. It was not back to the way it was. The new Saint-Étienne was more like a French city as imagined by a man whose knowledge of France came from watching too many whimsical French films. The interim president was diplomatic enough not to point that out.

The vampires had abandoned France after the transformation zone was unsealed and Jason’s spirit domain became the centre of a new high-magic zone. It was retaken by eager Network forces, although it was made clear that Jason’s spirit domain only answered to one man.

“If I may ask,” the president said, “where is your grandson? He has never been big on public appearances but it’s like he fell off the side of the world in the last few months. The Network would very much like to—”

“We are aware of what the Network would very much like,” Yumi said. “Jason has not fallen off the side of the world quite yet. He has eschewed his worldly concerns, outside of preparing the clan for his departure.”

“If I may ask, Dr Asano, what exactly is this nebulous threat your grandson is saving us from? He’s not exactly forthcoming on the details, which is why so many doubt him. I’m an administrator, chosen both for my ability to get the reclamation up and running and for lacking the charisma come election time. I know little of magic and am just one more person struggling in a world that has completely changed.”

"I think you might be a better politician than you claim, Mr President. I don't understand all that much myself, but how long has it been since there was a transformation zone, anywhere in the world?"

"Forty-two days."

"That's where my grandson has been, Mr President."

"United Nations Liaison to the Asano Clan?" Jason asked.

"You're the one who started taking over chunks of sovereign territory," Anna told him.

"That was never my intention."

"Then give it back."

"Anyone who wants it can come and take it," Jason said, his voice an iron fist in a silk glove. Jason led Anna from the helicopter pad outside the pagoda in Saint-Étienne, taking her inside. The atrium was full of people, very few of whom were human. They walked through the crowd towards what was now a bank of elevating platforms, part of various design changes Jason had made to accommodate the clan. The pagoda was ultimately a cloud construct, even if it rarely showed, and could be altered with alacrity and ease.

"I'm surprised no one is looking at you," Anna said as they navigated the crowd. "You're more or less the head of state, at this point."

She was awkwardly stepping around delicate elves and huge leonids while they unconsciously parted for Jason. Anna quickly learned to walk right behind him.

"They don't see me. Or, more precisely, their minds actively ignore my presence. It's an aura manipulation trick I picked up some time ago from Craig Vermilion. There is a lot to learn from how vampires use their auras."

"There's a new leader who had managed to rise up amongst the vampires," Anna said. "They've separated from the Cabal, who pretty much rule Africa and Russia at this stage. She's concentrating power in parts of Europe and Central America, pulling back from aggressive action."

"I've met Elizabeth," Jason said lightly. They arrived at the elevating platform and got on, alongside several other people.

"So I've heard," Anna asked. "I'd love to hear more."

"She and I spent some time together. I tried to kill her but she outplayed me."

"Some of our intelligence suggests that she's holding back until you're gone. That she wants to avoid you trying again and knows that you intend to leave this world behind."

"That's more likely obfuscation," Jason said. "She's probably just taking the time to consolidate her power."

“Our analysts agree. The ancient vampires seem to have realised that they need to work together but that isn’t natural for them. Many aren’t happy about pulling back after the successful attacks on network holdings in Germany and want to take advantage of the civil war in the US.”

“She’s not stupid enough to poke the dragon while it’s chasing its own tail. Not my concern, in any case. The vampire war is your apocalypse, Anna, not mine.”

“And how is your apocalypse going?” she asked. “A lot of very powerful people made very sure that I’d ask.”

“It’s all finished but the paperwork,” Jason said. “I need to finish up in the other world but for practical purposes, the job is done. To the best of my understanding, the dimensional membrane stopping the earth from spilling out the side of the universe will slowly recover over the next couple of decades. At the very least, things here are no longer escalating. Barring some god-like dimensional entity showing up to make trouble, you can rest easy.”

“Some kind of public announcement would be nice,” Anna said. “We can do it with the UN, make it nice and legitimate. There are a lot of worried people out there, and a lot of crazies stoking trouble. It would be nice if you could explain it all.”

“What do you want me to do, Anna? Go on TV and start talking about alien gods? You want the UN to endorse a message that goes directly against most of the world’s religious beliefs? Remind me what the revelations about magic and monsters did for global religious harmony?”

“We can couch the language to excise anything contentious.”

“People never much liked the truth, Anna. There’s little point feeding them half of it. Let them think what they want. I don’t care anymore.”

Anna looked at Jason’s impassive face. She remembered the wild, animated man she had met just a couple of years ago. He seemed much older despite, if anything, looking younger. There was a tiredness to him, to the way his bizarre eyes watched the world around him.

“Coming back to this world has done more to you than going to the other one did, hasn’t it?” she asked.

“Any sign that Gerling or Mr North are still alive?” he asked, ignoring her question.

“I thought they were both dead. I heard you saw it with your own eyes.”

“I looted their bodies, but I’ve been deceived before and death isn’t always the end. I know that better than most.”

“There has been no sign of Gerling or Mr North. As best we can tell, they both are truly dead. I have no information on Adrien Barbou, either, past Gerling raiding the EOA headquarters and taking him. I don’t suppose you know his ultimate fate.”

“He’s dead. That, I am certain of. Is the EOA showing signs of recovery?”

“No. Somehow, someone got access to the vast majority of their funds and siphoned them away. They lost half their leadership. More, once you realise how much Mr North kept from the others, which we’re still only finding out about now. Recovery isn’t possible and do many of its people are being absorbed into different Network factions.”

Jason nodded absently but didn’t say anything.

“Jason, we traced where the money went.”

“We’re taking in non-humans from all over the world, Anna. Even with the infrastructure I’m bringing to the table, that takes a lot of funding.”

“The UN has offered to help with that.”

“Talk to my uncle Hiro. He’s managing the relocation program on our end.”

The elevating platform took them to the pagoda’s portal chamber, now a warehouse-sized space occupying an entire floor. The walls had archways much larger than those Jason created himself, all of which were open portals. It was a hubbub of activity, with people, forklifts and even supply trucks coming in and out under the direction of a harried group of Asano clan members in visibility shirts.

Jason led them to one of the portals where Asano clan members were checking everyone going in and out.

“Patriarch!” one of them said, startled as Jason stopped masking his presence from her. She was nineteen years old and Jason’s second cousin. He had given up on trying to stop the clan members from calling him that.

The clan structure had been instigated by the former members of the Japanese Asano clan, mostly Asano Akari’s father. Nothing had been heard from the Japanese Asano clan, led by Akari’s grandmother, Noriko.

Jason had not been on board with formalising the clan at first but was railroaded by his grandmother. Yumi had told him that if wanted a say in how the clan was organised, he was welcome to increase his participation in administering it. Jason had declared surrender, washing his hands of the whole thing.

“We’re going through to Slovakia,” Jason said.

“Of course,” Jason’s cousin said.

Jason and Anna went through the portal, arriving in an almost identical portal room. They took an elevating platform up to what was now known as the Patriarch’s suite on the

top floor and Jason led them out to the balcony. Compared to her last visit, when it was ruined and empty, all was repaired and odd folk roamed bustling about the streets. Celestines and leonids, elves and even more exotic people. The once devastated landscape had been repaired under the attentions of Jason's father, Ken.

"It's looking better," Anna said.

"Yes," Jason said. "My father has found it very fulfilling. There's a lot of damage to be fixed around the world and my father's powers and experience are well-suited to handling them."

Anna turned to look at Jason.

"You wanted to take him with you," she intuited.

"He has found a new purpose. I won't try and deny him that."

"So it will just be your sister and her family leaving with you?"

"No," Jason said. "They've elected to stay."

Neither his face nor his aura betrayed his feelings on that.

"My sister had taken the food logistics of the relocation project in hand," he said.

"You'll be seeing a lot of her in your new role, I suspect. Her husband is working with the new medical infrastructure and research team."

"I heard you poached Gladys from the Network. Ketevan wasn't happy."

"We need a lot of people with a lot of expertise. Learning the ins and out of many new species is quite the challenge, even before you start getting into essence users and any other magical quirks that may appear."

"What about your niece?"

Jason bowed his head.

"I'm not the uncle she knew. Not even the one who came back, from before the monster waves. They love me, but they look at me and don't recognise these eyes. Or the man behind them. I scare them."

"I won't lie, Jason; you scare us all. You went into that transformation zone with some of the most powerful beings on the planet and only two of you survived. One of you came out queen of the vampires and the other came out with a kingdom."

"I'm not a king. Mayor, maybe, although that's my grandmother, really."

"Jason, unless you want to let the French and Slovakian authorities reclaim the land, you're a de facto head of state. They're playing nice now, while they're scared and happy that the vampires are staying away. The time will come, though, when they start looking to take that land back. And even if they don't, what will you do with it? You know you have

more territory than the Vatican, right? That's not even counting those astral spaces of yours."

"I've left grandmother in charge of all of that," Jason said. "She'll be more amenable to cooperation than I am anymore."

"She can't do the things you can do."

Anna's aura senses weren't sophisticated enough to understand what Jason did but everything around her seemed to go still.

"Rather than try and get me to do the things I can do," Jason said, "you should be very glad that I've elected not to. I'm done with it all, Anna. I'm leaving the clan with as many resources as I can and I am going. This world is better off without me, now, and I'm better off without it."

"This world could use you."

"This world did. Goodbye Anna. Shade, take her to see Grandmother."

"Of course," Shade said, emerging from Anna's shadow.

"One more thing," Anna said. "Some rumours I've heard."

"You mean you've checked in with your spies within the clan."

She didn't deny it.

"Is your clan resuming the human augmentation research that the EOA was conducting? You've been scooping up certain former EOA people the Network had its eye on. The Network has more expertise in this area. They're willing to collaborate."

"I'll bet they are. I don't trust you to avoid the same shortcuts that Mr North did," Jason said. "I have given the clan only a few hard rules to follow in my absence, and the way that research is conducted is at the top of the list. I've already made sure it's impossible to replicate the existing process for creating silver-rank augmented humans."

"The clockwork cores," she said. "We've been debriefing ex-EOA as their organisation collapses in on itself. The source of the cores went missing, months before Mr North died. We believe he took it."

"He did."

"How much of North's assets did you get your hands on? Did you torture it out of him in the transformation zone?"

"I didn't torture him, Anna. He was a monster that wanted to be a hero and got it very wrong. He hoped that I wasn't the same as him. I hope that too."

"You're not a monster, Jason."

"It feels like this world wants me to be. Do you remember what I used to be like? I got kidnapped, and a few hours later we were sharing some fun banter in your kitchen."

"That wasn't fun for me, Asano. I was afraid you were going to kill my wife."

"Oh, that reminds me. Shade, give her the painting on the way out."

"Painting?" Anna asked.

"Something Dawn left behind. A gift for your wife."

Jason and Farrah had spent weeks drawing out the ritual circle by shaping and placing stones. They were using a football field in an isolated outback town in Australia, never repopulated after the monster surge. The entirety of the circle could only be made out from the air.

Using their wings of fire and wings of darkness to survey their work, Farrah and Jason reviewed and tweaked the largest and most powerful ritual either would likely ever be involved in. At the very least, they wouldn't expect to top it before reaching diamond rank.

After hours of work every day for the better part of a week, they were finally done. They sat in the sun-weathered wooden stands of the old football field, the last paint job flaked and gone before Jason was born.

"I think we're good," Farrah said. "A few more tests to make sure. The final assessment has to be yours, though."

Farrah was a better and more experienced ritualist than Jason, especially with a ritual of this scale. She was the one making sure that all the aspects worked together while Jason, as the specialist in astral magic, took the lead on the ritual's purpose and core design.

"We've pretty much made a more elaborate Stonehenge," Jason said. "In a footy field. That's pretty awesome."

"We're opening a passage between realities and you think being in a dusty field in a town that was all but dead even before the monsters is what makes it impressive?"

"I do crazy dimension stuff all the time," Jason said. "Rebooting Stonehenge is a new experience for me."

"So," Farrah said. "We can go whenever, now."

Jason looked up at the sky, clear and blue.

"I wanted to come back home better than I left," Jason said. "Now I think I'm leaving it worse than when I arrived."

"We've talked before about Rufus telling you that there'd be hard choices," Farrah said. "I don't think he quite had all we've been through here in mind but only the scale was

off, not the sentiment. Sacrificing your sense of self-worth because that's what it takes to do the right thing doesn't make you bad, Jason. It just makes you feel bad."

"When I faced a nightmare hag in your world, my fear was power corrupting me. When I faced one here, my fear was not being as special as I thought."

"I hate to break it to you, Jason, but you needing a little humility is not news."

"Did someone tell you that you're good at cheering people up? They lied to you."

"Jason, you're the second most important person in the world right now. That would mess with anyone's head. Add in the fact that you out-skill everyone here to an absurd degree, now. But don't worry; back in my world, I'll take you to Vitesse. In any big adventuring city, you'll just be some guy."

"I am looking forward to just being some guy again," Jason said.

"That won't be a problem. You're strong, I'm not playing that down, but over there you're far from unique. You and I are what they call guild level."

"Rufus told me to stay away from adventuring guilds."

"That's because guilds in dinky little province towns are just pointlessly aping how they do it in the big cities. There, all the top adventurers are in guilds. Guild level means you have the skills to be recruited by a real guild. Once you see it for yourself, you'll see why we were so dismissive of the Greenstone adventurers."

"You're in a guild?"

"Yeah. The Burning Violet guild. It's an old guild but after Rufus' grandfather became guild leader it became more and more associated with the Remore Academy. It's Rufus' family, plus allies like Gary and me. Gary's around the bottom of guild-level, to be honest, because he's as much a craftsman as an adventurer. Splitting your training time comes at a price."

"The guild must be strong if it's full of Remore Academy graduates," Jason said.

"It's okay, but you're underestimating the level of guilds in a city like Vitesse. Plus, most of the big-family graduates don't join. They have family connections that lead into the more prestigious guilds, but connections only open the door. The Remore Academy gives them the skills to walk through it. Mostly it's the lower-class graduates who join the Burning Violet guild."

"There are lower class graduates?"

"Sure. The Remore Academy has a huge scouting program, looking for people with potential. The academy does scholarships, puts them up in dormitories and trains them until they're trying to escape, free tuition be damned."

"You didn't attend the academy, did you?"

"No. I was already an adventurer when I met Rufus and Gary."

"Undead taking over a town, right?"

"Yeah. You know, it's funny; I used to think of that as this great horrible disaster.

Compared to Makassar, though, it wasn't even a big deal. The numbers were smaller and the Adventure Society sent a whole contingent of gold-rankers, so there was never any doubt about resolving it. That's why they let low-rankers like us participate."

"That would be nice," Jason said. "I'm looking forward to seeing people more powerful than me and being happy instead of afraid."

"Well," Farrah said. "It sounds like you're ready to go. Just take a good look as you're saying your goodbyes. You won't be back for a long time. While you're doing that, I'm going to Switzerland."

"Switzerland?"

"So I can essence-up the most important person in the world. I'm going to need some essences, by the way. And some awakening stones. The good stuff, too; no cheapies. I could have done this a year ago if you'd told me she moved to Switzerland a quarter of a century ago. We didn't have to worry about the Americans at all."

"I didn't know."

"You need to stay on top of these things, Jason."

"You didn't know either."

"I'm from another universe!"

Jason shook his head.

"You know I can't portal you all the way to Switzerland, right?"

"The United Nations is loaning me a plane. I promised Anna I'd help with the protection magic on the new UN building."

"They're going ahead with that?"

"Well, with the US civil war still going on, it's not exactly a testament to peace."

Jason groaned.

"I don't want to get caught up in more mess, Farrah. You know that."

"I know, but Anna's a friend. While you were running around stomping out monster waves, I was working with her to get the grid back up and running. She's a good person, Jason."

Jason got to his feet.

"I know," he said. "But I'm just done with it all. I have to let it all go."

She stood up as well and gave him a warm but concerned smile.

"Are you sure you're ready for that?" she asked. "The places, sure, but the people?"

“Yeah,” Jason said sadly. “I’m sure.”

Jason made his farewells in France, on a warm autumn day. Taika complained about his mother and her opinions on French food. Travis wanted to go with Jason but knew that his contribution would be critical to the coming war with the vampires. He did, however, jump at the chance to give up his previous affiliation and work with the Asano clan. Jason extracted Travis’ family from the United States personally.

At the end, Jason drifted down the River Furan on a cloud construct pleasure yacht with his sister and niece. They didn’t speak of magic or monsters or leaving. They enjoyed each other’s company, played one of Greg’s board games out on the deck. Jason ignored the occasional glance Erika made at his strange eyes and what he read in her aura when she did.

After watching the sunset together, he opened a portal and sent them back to Saint-Étienne. He was about to close it when a small figure dashed back through and clamped him in a vice hug.

“Goodbye, Moppet,” he said, tousling her hair.

Jason’s body no longer had the physiological mechanisms to produce tears. He had been something other than human for a long time, but never had he felt it more than in that moment.