

Chapter 872

Starting to Unravel

The war was not going well for the vampires. On the ground they were dangerous and powerful, overwhelming any conventional forces not fielded by the magic factions. Their leadership, however, had been sleeping for centuries, if not millennia. These gold-rank vampire lords were personally powerful, but lacked any understanding of the contemporary world. With only a handful of exceptions, they had also proven slow to learn.

The integration of magic and technology had accelerated in the last few years. It no longer needed to be hidden and magic levels were on the rise. While a vampire could handle someone with an enchanted gun, they were unprepared for a magical drone strike, and weapons were only the beginning.

A vampire lord from 1487 was not prepared for the advantages of real-time communication across a battlefield, let alone a continent. Satellite images, spy planes and even motorised vehicles were alien to them. Most found themselves at a loss, both mentally and militarily. By the time Rufus started hunting vampires, they had been excised in any real numbers from most of the world.

There were younger vampires amongst their ranks who were not so oblivious, but this was of limited value. The mentality of older vampires didn't let them accept that anyone younger and less powerful had anything to offer, even in the face of overwhelming evidence. Dominance was in their nature, while humility and adaptability were not. The ability to overcome that nature was proving the key survival trait for the risen vampire lords.

The inability to listen to advice was not the only aspect of vampire nature holding them back. The vampire lords were independent, territorial and resistant to change. They were convinced they could resume the old ways, acting alone and dividing the world into territories between them.

Those unable to let those ideas go paid a heavy price. Their minds still thought of vampire hunters as grim, grizzled men, sneaking into a gothic fortress. They were not prepared for bunker-busting missiles modified to explode with magically intensified sunlight.

The Americas saw the heaviest fighting, with both continents scoured of vampiric presence. In North America, the vampire threat provided unity to a USA on the brink of civil war. With an external danger to point at, power could be quietly consolidated while the

nation was distracted with war on their home grounds. It was a one-sided affair, the US military adapting quickly to a magically enhanced arsenal.

In South and Central America, as well as Africa and Russia, the Cabal rose to the fore. Although the vampires were originally members of their ranks, the rest of Cabal turned on them savagely. Hidden beings of myth and fairytale came out in the open, the world's rising magic enhancing long-stalled power.

The vampire lords who failed to adapt to a world very new to them were hunted down and slaughtered. Some strongholds remained in Africa, Russia and South America, but North America and China were scoured clean by the highly aggressive Network factions. Any remnant vampires were running and hiding, not maintaining territories.

As for the vampire lords that did manage to change with the times, Europe became their stronghold. They realised that old traditions must give way to new ideas, working together and adopting the technology of the humans. While territoriality was in their blood, making alliances fractious, they came together in an uneasy union.

Their leader was known only as Elizabeth. She was a gold-ranker, and extremely tired of people asking if she was Elizabeth Báthory. Those around her learned to stop asking once she started immediately eating anyone who did.

Under Elizabeth, the vampires had managed to establish something of a détente with the rest of the world. Despite the global purge, every major city in the world had vampires still hidden away. Bombings of major vampire strongholds in Europe had been met by assassinations of high-ranking political officials in Beijing, Washington, Moscow and London.

Humanity attempted to eliminate Elizabeth with a nuclear missile modified to flood a region with magically enhanced sunlight. It was a design based on a nuclear device Travis Noble had once modified for Jason. The device had detonated in Rome, inflicting minimal structural damage but sending energy washing through the city. The energy moved like living fire, seeking out the dark places and flooding them with artificial sunlight.

While it had eliminated most of the vampires and their blood servants in Rome, most of the high-ranking vampires had either been sufficiently sheltered or elsewhere entirely. Elizabeth retaliated with a conventional nuclear device, taken from Russia but used in Guangzhou, China. This brought about the first formal agreement between humans and vampires: an official declaration of war from both sides that defined the terms of the conflict.

From that point on, it became much more of a skirmish war. Staging out of bases in the UK, Ireland, Northern Africa and Asano territory, humanity waged a combination of

logistical attacks and rescue operations. In both cases the goal was the same: extract the humans being used as food. Getting the people out was not only a humanitarian objective but put pressure on the vampires as their food supply dwindled. Most Western European nations were defunct as vampires overran them. Millions had died while millions more were evacuated by human forces or rounded up into blood farms as cattle.

The rising magic on Earth was both good and bad for the vampires. It made it easier for them to grow strong, most having been bronze rank for decades. Many were now silver rank and a dangerous number had even reached gold. Of all the gold-rankers on Earth, more of them were vampires than anything else.

Essence users were also seeing an uptick in gold-rankers, but far less quickly than the vampires. The Cabal was enjoying similar growth, but were secretive about the numbers. It was doubted they had the numerical strength to match the vampires, but rumours abounded that they were poised to claim their own territories.

Cabal fear-stoking was in the realm of conspiracy theories, however, with the magical factions not being concerned. The simple reason for that was the Cabal had already quietly spread their influence over much of the world, to the point that greater ambition would only hurt them for little gain. Much of Asia, Russia and Africa was heavily under their influence, along with Central and South America. In the Pacific states especially, the Cabal was often the de facto or even actual government.

Cabal territories had initially been a safer place for vampires than those controlled by the Network. While the Cabal had unambiguously split from the vampire lords and those who followed them, most of the world's vampires did not. On Rufus' world, vampires were ruthless and amoral, without decency or mercy. On Earth, they had lived peacefully amongst humanity for centuries.

The rise of magic changed all that. Sunlight had affected vampires weakly, especially the younger ones, only diminishing their strength. As the magic rose, so did the effects of sunlight upon them. In the regions with the highest magic, sunlight could even burn them like movie vampires.

More dangerous were the long-term effects. Vampires found their need for blood increasing, and their minds being affected. They were becoming more like the vampire lords: domineering, amoral and violent. At first it was little more than mood swings, but the vampires slowly turned into cold, unfeeling predators.

When the vampire lords first arose, the bulk of the vampire population opposed them. Siding with the humans, they strove to eliminate the lords. That situation grew worse over

time for multiple reasons. One was just that humans didn't do much to differentiate good and bad vampires.

Humans being humans, they lumped all vampires in together. Certain sections within media and politics stoked hatred for their own goals, especially in nations where the rise of magic had caused massive political fractures. An external enemy they could point at was exactly what they needed. Nuance and compassion were not.

As the magic continued to rise, so did the vampires become more dangerous. When some nations started forcing them to register or even rounded them up for public safety, little incentive remained for any vampire to side with humanity.

Some joined the lords, letting themselves become full-blown predators. Others sought advocacy in political circles, fighting to remain a part of the societies in which they had long been secret participants. They fought their growing predatory natures, although the increased need for blood was making that difficult.

In the end, humans and vampires became incompatible. Political reconciliation became impossible as vampires were caged or even executed. Many nations passed laws saying they were not human and had no rights, causing tension with countries where the Cabal held sway.

Most of the remaining vampires escaped to Europe. Many nations unwilling to put them in camps or kill them with death squads deported them, washing their hands of the problem. Others had to escape increasingly oppressive conditions to leave their home countries.

In Europe, there were two camps willing to take the vampires in. One was the nation of vampire lords led by Elizabeth, in need of reinforcements for the war with humanity. Vampires who had initially been against them were swayed by their treatment at the hands of the humans. The changes they were going through as magic rose only made it easier. The alternative was the Asano Clan. It meant braving the dangers of a high-magic zone, but the payoff was worth it.

Many, if not most, of the fleeing vampires wanted to reclaim what they had lost. Lives where they weren't monsters, enslaved by their base nature and constant thirst for blood. Clan Asano alone offered this. The clan's most prominent vampire, Craig Vermillion, had put out an open call, claiming to have a safe haven. Many didn't believe it, yet were desperate enough to come anyway. Better a thin thread of hope to cling to than being adrift entirely.

The spirit domain in France, both the outside and its astral space, was vampire free. The population was made up of humans from Clan Asano, transformation zone victims of

many species, and the messengers. The angelic strangers from another world were victims of transformation zones in their own way.

The domain in Slovakia was smaller and most of the humans there were refugees of the vampire war. Most of those lived outside of the astral space there, while the vampires lived within it. Outside, the high levels of magic caused the daylight to savage any vampires caught in it. Inside the astral space, the rules were different. This was a place that obeyed not the magic of Earth but the intentions of its master, Jason Asano.

The magic in the astral space was even stronger than that of the outside, yet was not harmful to the vampires. Even the sunlight barely weakened them, and the days grew shorter as the astral space shifted slowly to accommodate them. The longer they spent there, the more the changes wrought by Earth's magic began to abate. The hunger lessened, the predatory rage dimmed and their empathy returned.

In the years since Rufus arrived on Earth, the Slovakian astral space had become the only community of human-friendly vampires left on Earth. The rest had turned ruthless and bloodthirsty, any compassion they once had long gone. Some had held out longer than others, but all eventually either found their way to the Asano Clan or lost their way entirely.

The camps amongst the nations of the world were shut down and their occupants executed. The vampires still hiding within human societies were serial killers, hunting for blood. Many were operating as agents for the vampire lords, while others were just uncaring and hungry.

Rufus had come to fill many important roles in the Asano Clan. Along with teaching the Asano Clan princess, he also finished what Farrah had started and established a comprehensive training regime for the Asano Clan. Fortunately, the domains and especially the astral spaces seemed to change to meet the needs of the people living there.

Part of what Rufus needed was already in place and in use on his arrival. Outside of the astral space cities, magical manifestations were extremely common. The further out one went, the stronger the monsters to be found. Along with being a perfect training ground, it was also a treasure trove of magical materials. Rocks and plants were infused with magic while essences, awakening stones and quintessence spawned right along with the monsters.

An additional task that Rufus took to with enthusiasm was joining the vampire war. The most powerful combatant below gold-rank on the planet, he quickly developed a reputation as someone worth fighting beside. He ignored factional politics and joined

whoever was operating out of the military bases the Asano clan allowed on and near their domains. So long as they were fighting vampires and rescuing people from the hideous blood farms, Rufus was an enthusiastic participant.

One group he fought with repeatedly was the messengers. These were not the young messengers who had arrived with Boris and lived in clan territory. These were the Cabal messengers, many of them centuries or even millennia old. They were the most powerful force within the Cabal, and now they were no longer hiding.

Fighting the vampires was both a show of force and a demonstration of the Cabal's good intentions. Rufus had never found them to be joining vampire hunts from cold, political intentions, however, at least not entirely. The messengers he met seemed fully motivated to deal with the vampires as a moral good. While they had a definite streak of arrogance about them, they seemed nothing like the messengers invading Pallimustus. They weren't much worse than Jason on one of his smug days.

Their gold-rankers were especially welcome on these raids into vampire territory, with Boris himself often participating. Gold-rank vampires were a constant threat on such expeditions, and without gold-rankers of their own, things could easily end in tragedy.

Although the Network factions provided most of the key forces for anti-vampire operations, they were reluctant to deploy their gold-rankers. This was less a matter of risk than of politics. Knowing who had how many was a game that Network factions had been playing with one another since the original Network fractured.

Boris had been happy to fill in the gap. He and his messengers, especially the gold-rank ones, frequently made themselves available for anti-vampire operations. This didn't endear him to the upper echelons of the Network factions, but made him very popular with the rank and file. They, even more than Rufus, became very welcome outsiders.

Rufus did not at all envy Boris. While Rufus had made a name for himself amongst those fighting the vampire war, Boris had become one of the most well-known figures on the planet. He was the most prominent figure amongst what the media was still calling angels, and the new face of the Cabal.

The Cabal remained the most enigmatic of the factions. They had the most secrets and their members seemed to have stepped straight out of folklore and fairytales. This tied them into the belief systems of myriad cultures, complicating their presence on the world stage. Boris and his messengers were constantly needing to deal with people who believed them to be angels of the Lord, despite Boris' constant denials. The larger religions continued to avoid definitive statements, despite mounting pressure.

Rufus had little ability to make sense of Earth religion and even less inclination. Where Boris had been unwillingly thrust into the position of a major religious figure, Rufus wanted none of it. He's seen some things about a group who had strange ideas about Jason and definitely didn't want to be caught up in that. If they found out half of what Jason got up to, they would only get worse.

Rufus was already more famous than he wanted to be. War correspondents embedded with anti-vampire forces seemed obsessed with him. Emi kept showing him articles about the mysterious warrior from another world, fighting for the reclusive Asano clan. He took solace from Boris having it much worse, from addressing the UN to meeting the Pope.

Another task Boris had taken to was establishing spirit coin farms. Farrah had left information on how to do so, but had little more than inexperienced general knowledge from Pallimustus. She was no spirit coin farmer, and the people of Earth hadn't done well at the task. Boris rectified this, helping to establish farms across the planet. It was another thing that kept the messenger so busy, which left Rufus suspicious about one thing: why did Boris visit Clan Asano so frequently?

Rufus had the chance to ask on their return from a joint vampire hunt. They had successfully eliminated a blood farm, liberating the victims trapped there. While the victims were devastated physically and mentally, at least they were alive. Not for the first time, he ruminated that they could use someone like his mother. The local mind healers were adequate, but still new to magic and what it could do to people.

The victims had been evacuated to England, while Rufus and the squad he was working with returned to the base in Slovakia. They disembarked a transport helicopter just outside the demarcation line for the spirit domain, and the helicopter vanished. It had been conjured by a vehicle essence user, allowing for relatively secure transportation.

Rufus was heading for the car pool where he could get a ride back to the central tower of the domain. The domain in Slovakia occupied what had originally been rural land, and didn't mimic the original space the way the domain in Saint-Étienne did. Here, the cloud buildings didn't hide their nature, creating a small but overtly magical city.

Boris landed nearby, having made his own way back. The messenger didn't need a helicopter when his wings could push him through the air faster than the speed of sound. As for safety in numbers, he was probably the most powerful being on earth. He noticed Rufus glancing in his direction and strolled over, shrinking to human proportions as his wings vanished.

"Something on your mind, adventurer?"

“I was wondering why you spend so much time here. I’d think it was you trying to lure away the messengers, but they’re all in France while you keep coming to Slovakia.”

“I don’t like lying to people,” Boris said. “It’s inelegant when a few judiciously placed and entirely true facts can get them lying to themselves. I don’t want to do that to you either, so I will simply say that there is a secret that is not mine to share.”

“Very well,” Rufus said and they started walking together.

“Is your primary charge still refusing to use monster cores?” Boris asked him.

“You heard about that?”

“By all accounts, it’s hard to avoid hearing about it, giving her screaming matches with her mother.”

“Her grandmother has decided that eighteen is the age where people can choose to participate in monster hunts for themselves. As her birthday grows closer, the tension between them has grown worse.”

“What about you?” Boris asked. “As the girl’s teacher, have you found yourself caught in the middle?”

“Erika is worried, but she’s no fool. She understands that there’s no stopping her daughter and that I’m the one who will be keeping her safe.”

“Does the girl really want to fight monsters? Or has she simply railed against her mother’s restrictions for so long that she’ll do it on principle?”

“That is definitely a factor, but she does want to fully master her abilities. I’m afraid my biases against monster core use have had an impact there.”

“You’re that set against them?”

“I used to be. Not as much any more, but I find myself denigrating them out of habit.”

“Ah, old habits. They can so easily come back to bite us. For example, if young Emi was willing to use monster cores, it wouldn’t have soured her relationship with her mother. It sounds like this whole situation might be your fault.”

“It isn’t.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

“Good, because it’s not.”

“I just said that it sound like it is.”

“Well, it’s not.”

“Technically, I didn’t say it sounds like it is. I said it sounds like it might be.”

“Will you please stop? This is like talking to Jason.”

“You miss your friend?”

“Not right this second, I don’t.”

Boris chuckled to himself.

“You know, I heard some odd rumours about her confluence.”

Rufus stopped walking and gave him a sharp look, then reached into his pocket and activated a privacy screen. He glanced around, noting that no one seemed to be listening. It was late and the people around the base were all busy.

“I know you hear a lot of things that maybe you shouldn’t, Boris, but some things you should keep to yourself.”

“Oh, come on, Remore. You think you can keep something like that a secret? It’s a fundamental shift in the nature of the cosmos. You know this has to be a result of what Jason is up to.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Don’t I? The girl got the wrong confluence, Rufus. Vast, myriad and harmonic are meant to produce the unity essence. But they didn’t, did they? What did she get?”

Rufus stared at Boris for a long time before answering.

“You don’t know?”

“Do you have any idea how hard it is getting information out of the Asano Clan? Any malicious intent and your flesh starts rotting off. I learned what I have out of curiosity and good intentions.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Is it that hard to believe? What have I ever done other than help you and the people you cared about?”

“Spent billions of years learning the patience and skill to manipulate me and the people I care about.”

Boris blinked in surprise, then burst out laughing.

“I can’t argue with that. I like you, Remore. But you might as well tell me her confluence. It’s going to get out sooner rather than later.”

“Resonant. She got the resonant confluence.”

Boris nodded.

“Makes sense. Seems like it would be on the list for that combination.”

“What list?”

“Well, you shared a secret with me. One that I’m kind of amazed has held this long, and definitely won’t once she starts fighting monsters with a team. But I’ll still share one with you, in turn. You might even call them different parts of the same secret.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you even understand what Jason is doing? The ramifications of that? You know that essence combinations have only one potential confluence. It’s been that way for longer than this universe has existed, which seems like forever to someone barely three decades old. But, before the Cosmic Throne was sundered, things were different. More flexible. In a lot of ways, but how essences combined was one of them. Once upon a time, an essence combination could produce different confluences, from person to person. Some had more options than others, but it was never locked into one. Not until the throne was sundered.”

“And that changed how magic worked?”

“In a way. The Cosmic Throne was a regulatory measure on the function of the cosmos. After they broke the throne, the great astral beings had to take steps to maintain cosmic order in its absence. Because they couldn’t do what the throne did, the way the throne did it, they needed to enact restrictions. Some went unseen by the denizens of the cosmos. Others were sweeping changes to how things functioned.

“Like essence combinations being restricted to a single confluence?”

“And giraffes existing. I’ve never seen a planet with complex life where some kind of giraffe didn’t evolve. I saw one that’s amphibious. Their heads pop out of the water like the telescope on a quadrupedal submarine.”

“I feel like we’ve drifted very far off topic here,” Rufus said.

“Right, yes. So, after the sundering, the Celestial Book locked off essence combinations. I have no idea how that helped, before you ask. The operation of the cosmos is a machinery more complex than anyone who isn’t a great astral being can understand. But, if Jason repairs the throne, all those restrictions will be undone. If I’m not mistaken, he’s already working on it, and those restrictions are already starting to unravel.”

“Then why aren’t we seeing more of it?” Rufus asked.

“If I’m right, we will. Isolated incidents, to start with. Probably connected to Jason, if your little apprentice is any indication. The great astral beings should have noticed already.”

“What does that mean for Jason?”

“I have no idea.”