

Chapter 396

Brooding Loner

Vampires were neither strictly living nor strictly dead. Most of the undead were quite explicitly deceased, rendered animate by one force or another. In the case of vampires, however, that force was life energy, rendering them, to almost any test, alive. Some even considered themselves more alive than ordinary humans and treated their induction into the ranks of undead being as born again, much like an Evangelical Christian.

Many such vampires counted their age from the moment they were turned, although Franklin was not one of them. He was not dismissive of the life he had lived and did not disdain his long-dead family. His last relative had been a vampire, like him; a nephew turned by Franklin himself to save the young man from an illness long-since cured by humanity.

In more than a century of life, Franklin had learned that regrets were inevitable. He regretted not turning more of his family and he regretted that the one he did turn was such a disappointment. It was Franklin himself who had turned his nephew over to the Network to keep the peace after the latest in a long line of mistakes was too grave for the Cabal to ignore.

That had been before the world changed and the Cabal grew ambitious. Magic was not just exposed to the world but growing in strength. A land of stone and fire had arisen right in the city, Bankstown turning into a place of pooling lava and dark stone. The people caught up in the change transformed into a species with dark skin and eyes of fire.

Different forces, magical and otherwise took different attitudes to the transformed zones once any fighting over the reality core each held was settled. Most governments declared them disaster sites, off-limits to civilians, then worked with the Network to recover the transformed people and salvage whatever magical materials were found within. The EOA was generally the weakest competitor in the fight for reality cores and left once it was decided.

The Cabal would usually wait until the fighting was settled and then start occupying the zones. For reasons unknown to them, the transformed zones made members of the Cabal grow stronger. Many of the Cabal's members had hit a ceiling in terms of power growth, as if the world were not magical enough for them to get stronger. In the transformation zones, this was no longer the case as stagnant power once more flowed through the Cabal's members. As more and more transformed zones appeared, the Cabal

started moving towards overall parity with the Network that had been dominating for the last century.

Within the cabal, the boost in power meant the least to the vampires, who suffered from a different kind of ceiling. Although their powers never stopped growing, once they crossed a certain threshold, the world's magic was no longer enough to sustain them. As their might reached the invisible barriers imposed by reality that stopped the growth of others, they instead fell into torpor. This had placed the vampires in an awkward position within the Cabal, as the most powerful leaders of their faction inevitably surrendered their position to enter hibernation, lest they wither and die.

The vampires were in a rush to awaken their ancient ones, as they feared that the growth of the other factions would eventually lead to all the cabal having greater power. If the vampires were going to dominate, they needed to awaken the old ones as quickly as they could. Other members of the Cabal reluctantly went along due to the need to compete with the Network.

In the case of Sydney, the Bankstown transformation zone was not ideal for vampires. They were highly resistant to most forms of damage, but fire was one of those that had a greater effect. This meant that while the flowing lava streams weren't a wildly dangerous hazard, they made for an unnerving environment.

This did not bother Franklin, especially. He was a peaceful man who did not share the ambitions of many others in the Cabal and had never been dissatisfied with the way things were. He only spent as much time in the transformation zone as was necessary for his role in the Cabal, which is why he was unhappy to have been made manservant to the arisen ancient one.

Franklin had become sedentary over the decades, which had been costing him more and more in recent years. First, there was his nephew. As much as Franklin had despised the boy, Clinton had been the last family Franklin had. The end of his bloodline. Many vampires considered the other vampires they turned their children and Franklin had long considered this path, but again, his sedentary nature had left him not getting around to it. Another regret.

When Craig Vermillion had come to him, Franklin belatedly realised that he should have gone with him. Afraid of change, Franklin had declined, not realising that there was no staying the way things were. Change was coming and it was a matter of choosing which change to involve himself with. He quickly came to realise that he had chosen poorly.

Like many vampires, Franklin had considered himself a living witness of history. He discovered how naïve he had been when confronted with a member of the British Empire born in the early years of the 16th century. Every moment was now filled with regret that he had not disappeared with Craig and the other cabal members with the foresight to see what was coming.

The transformation events had changed the buildings of Bankstown into stone, usually very different from the ones that went before. The cabal had taken over the largest and most refined of them, a large stone manor, largely free of lava streams, with a luxuriously-appointed interior. It was the single aspect of the new world of which the ancient vampire, Lord Willoughby, unreservedly approved. There was no longer any utility infrastructure but that was of no concern to a man who had hibernating in a sarcophagus since 1794.

One of the things he most disapproved of was modern clothing. For this reason, a small army of Cabal members had been dispatched to find something acceptable. As Willoughby lounged in a sitting room, in what no one dared tell him was women's underwear, a parade of clothing was presented. Each person presenting hoped that they wouldn't be the next one thrown into a hard stone wall when the lord's patience wore thin.

"My Lord," Franklin said. "I humbly recommend a more considered approach. The world has undergone many changes during your slumber. The essence magicians have grown powerful in your absence and—"

"Considered?" Lord Willoughby roared. "I have already considered the state of this miserable world and found it wanting! Jumped-up colonials thinking they can throw off the yoke of the Empire? Upstart sorcerers who would challenge the supremacy of the world's hidden rulers? The clothes alone are a travesty."

Franklin didn't voice his doubts on the degree to which the Cabal were ever hidden rulers directing human society from the shadows.

"My Lord, even the mortals have developed in ways that may come as a surprise. The capabilities of modern technology—"

"Are worthless in the face of overwhelming magical power," Willoughby cut him off.

"My Lord, I am merely making the humble suggestion that rushing to act before taking the time to learn may have unintended consequences."

"Do you think me a fool, Franklin? An ignorant buffoon, lost in time? Even in my day, we knew that if a servant kept insisting he was humble he was anything but."

"I apologise, my Lord."

“Of course you do, you gormless peasant. Have the glory devices been prepared?”

“We’ve prepared the cameras, my Lord.”

“Good. The Cabal of these modern times is a fallen beast. If magic is no longer hidden, then there is no excuse for the world not being under our heel. We shall begin with essence magicians and then the colonial government. The world shall see the glory of the new empire.”

Willoughby’s eyes lit up as someone brought in what looked like actual colonial-era garb.

“Excellent, finally.”

“Costume shop?” Franklin asked.

Having escaped the mad British Lord, Franklin was in a car with Nathaniel, the man who had brought in the approved outfit. Nathaniel was an ogre, when not in human form, and a long-time friend of Franklin and Craig Vermillion.

“Theatre costume department,” Nathaniel said.

“Smart,” Franklin said. “Unlike me. I should have taken the advice of our mutual friend.”

“He betrayed the Cabal.”

“Did he? Or is he trying to save it?”

“Be careful who hears your words, Frank.”

“Oh, I am, Nathan. I don’t have a way to contract Craig, which I arranged in order to protect him. It means that I am unable to express the degree to which I regret my choice. It also means that I can’t tell him that I could potentially arrange access to the reality core storage, should anyone be looking to get in there while a certain vampire lord was indulging himself in raiding the Network headquarters.”

“You’re taking a risk telling me this, Frank.”

“I’ve lost too much by leaving everything around me to stagnate. It’s time I started taking some risks. Is that something you can help me with?”

“I would never betray the Cabal,” Nathaniel said. “Of course, if I just happen to run into my friend Craig, who knows what might come up in conversation.”

Inside Jason’s cloud palace, floating on the ocean, the friends and family of Kaito, Greg and Asya were taking the chance to say goodbye. They had nine final hours, which proved a boon as it took some more time to accept what was happening than others.

Jason had created a large hall within the palace and once the ritual to call up the spirits of the dead was complete, he started modifying the cloud-stuff in the hall to fill the empty space with furniture. It was only moderately amazing to the group, most of which were getting their first exposure to the power of cloud constructs. After the ghostly souls of their loved ones returning, even the room transforming around them was only a mild wonder.

The event was essentially a wake, with two exceptions: the deceased were both present and cognisant and there wasn't any food. Although the food shortages of the monster wave months were slowly be remedied, the chaos following the transformation events was interfering with food distribution.

In that environment, Jason was not going to store a supply of food for entertainment purposes when almost everyone in his company was an essence user. Emi alone needed to eat, and only while she was outside of Jason's spirit vault. His soul realm turned out to suspend normal biological necessities, which left Jason both curious and glad. Curious, because he wondered what impact it had on the ageing process. Glad, because no one was going to the toilet in his soul.

Jason himself stayed quietly out of the way of the reunions, to the point of using subtle aura manipulation to push himself out of everyone's attention. A lot of the people present blamed Jason for the three deaths. He didn't want them wasting the last time they had with their loved ones on recrimination for him. That could wait until after.

As he watched everyone say their mournful goodbyes, he reflected on the people he had killed. From the beginning, he had worried about it becoming too easy and that had come to pass. Jason couldn't muster up any remorse for the people he massacred in Venezuela; only grim satisfaction that no more of his friends and family had been lost.

Jason waited as everyone else took their turn, sitting in a chair at the edge of the room until Farrah approached him.

"You're not being considerate," she told him as she sat on nothing, trusting him to create the cloud chair that rose up underneath her.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You're telling yourself that you're being considerate and letting everyone else spend the time with them. The truth is that you're scared. Scared to face them; scared that they'll blame you. Scared that they won't,"

Jason looked at her and then gave a slight nod.

"I suppose I am," he acknowledged.

“Don’t waste the time you have,” she told him. “Who gets this kind of chance? Don’t waste it.”

“You’re right.”

“Then why are you still sitting here with me?” she scolded.

Jason nodded, his cloud chair sinking into the floor as he stood up and made his way over to where people were surrounding the three dead guests of honour. Things grew quiet as Jason arrived near Kaito, whose soul was using Shade as a vessel. His body was dark and semi-transparent, looking every inch the ghost that he was.

“That’s some pretty rough sad face you’ve got their little brother,” Kaito said. “Who died?”

Jason was taken aback by the flippancy of his dead brother, unable to find words to respond.

“This is what’s great about being dead,” Kaito said cheerfully. “No one will tell you how bad your jokes are.”

“Your jokes suck donkey balls,” Jason said and Kaito burst out laughing.

“There he is. Excuse me, everyone; I need to have a private chat with my adorable little brother.”

“Adorable?” Jason asked as they headed away from the others.

“I’m dead, so I can call you what I like.”

“And here was me thinking that being dead might turn you into less of a tool bag,” Jason said. “I guess the afterlife isn’t turning into some enlightened being.”

Kaito’s image glitched like a television with a briefly-interrupted signal.

“Probably best to steer away from that particular topic,” Kaito said, looking queasy.

“Sorry,” Jason said. “Good thing Aunt Marjory isn’t here.”

Kaito laughed again.

“Did you know that she thought you were an angel?” he asked Jason.

“So I heard,” Jason said. “I wish I’d been there when she found out it was me.”

The brothers sat down, facing one another.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you,” Jason said.

“That was never your job,” Kaito said firmly. “Your job is saving the world, so don’t bugger it up. My wife and kids are on it.”

“I’ll do my best to see them safe,” Jason said.

“Just make sure you and my wife don’t comfort each other, reconnect and get married,” Kaito said.

“Oh, fuck you.”

Kaito's laughter erupted through the hall, drawing all eyes.

"And here I thought that avoiding bad language was the one thing you did learn from Mum," Kaito said.

"You're an asshole."

"You can't call me an asshole. I'm dead."

"I should take out a sandwich and eat it in front of you."

"Why would eating a sandwich annoy me?"

"Because you're dead and you'll never get to eat a sandwich again."

"Oh, you're right. That would be a dick move."

"You seem pretty happy for a dead guy but I won't ask how that works."

"I appreciate it," Kaito said. "You seem pretty cut up over me. It's nice to know you cared."

"No, I'm cut up over the other two. I'm faking it with you so Eri doesn't yell at me."

Kaito laughed before taking on a more sober expression.

"She's worried about you, Jason."

"I know."

"You killed a bunch of people on TV?"

"They were coming for all of us, Kai. As a publicity stunt. I had to drop them fast before they loaded themselves up with magic PCP. I didn't know it would kill them but I'm glad it did. I won't let what happened to you happen again."

"Did you tell her any of that or did you just go all emo and broody on her?"

Jason bowed his head, not meeting his brother's eyes.

"That's what I thought," Kaito said. "Jason, you've always done whatever you set out to do. You have a way of looking at where you are, looking at where you want to be and finding the path between. A lot of people can do that but not everyone is willing to pay the price. Hell, you got together with Amy and she's been in love with me since she was twelve. It wrecked you, yeah, but you got it done. It's pretty bloody intimidating, little brother."

"It's not always me who pays the price," Jason said, his voice breaking as he looked at his dead brother.

"I know. You need to watch out for that, but don't let it stop you. It's what makes you special. It's why I'm sure that you are going to save the world. If I'm being honest, I think it's why I think I did what I did to you. With Amy. You always had this determination, like nothing scared you and nothing was impossible. I never had that kind of courage. I think...

I think I wanted to prove that I could overcome that. That I was better than you. Amy, I think was trying to escape it.”

“Escape me.”

“Yeah. They were crappy reasons for the crappy thing we did. I’m sorry little brother.”

“Well, I did get you killed by an exploding wizard,” Jason said with a smiling mouth and sad eyes. “Your thing is still worse, but since this is the end, I guess I can forgive you.”

“Thank you, little brother. That means a lot.”

“Just to be clear,” Jason said, “forgiveness is about me being the better man, not you actually deserving it.”

“Oh, you asshole,” Kaito laughed, then once more he turned serious.

“Jason, I have something to ask you. Call it a belated dying wish.”

“If it’s a sandwich, I really can’t do anything about that.”

“It’s about the guy who’s going to save the world.”

“Well, that’s me. Unless you know something I don’t.”

“I know it’s you. I just want it to be the right you.”

“What are you talking about? Do I have an evil twin Mum never mentioned?”

Jason scowled.

“I bet she likes him more,” he muttered.

Kaito grinned.

“This is exactly what I want,” he said.

“Your dying wish is me ragging on Mum? Done.”

“Not that, you unfilial prick. I want the Jason who saves the world to be the one inexplicably obsessed with terrible TV shows that are older than he is, not the guy with the dead eyes who kills without remorse. I know you’ve seen a lot of terrible things. I know you’ve had to do some of them yourself. I need you to rise above that stuff instead of letting it drag you down. We kind of all need that because we’re relying on you, little brother.”

“It’s not so easy, Kai.”

“I know. But set out to do it and you’ll do it. That’s what you do. Are you going to refuse the last wish of your brother’s ghost?”

“I don’t even know where to start. The things I’ve done; the things I have left to do. It feels like I’m being dragged into a swamp. I’m not sure how to pull myself out.”

“By letting people help you, idiot. Being a brooding loner never works out. Even TV vampires figure that out by the end of the first season.”

“As if you’d know.”

"I watched vampire TV shows," Kaito said defensively.

"What vampire show did you watch?"

"You haven't heard of it."

"Look at who you're talking to. You didn't watch any vampire shows. If you say frigging Highlander..."

"I thought that was a movie about wizards or something."

"You think Highlander was about wizards?"

"I didn't like wizards. I watched a vampire show."

"What vampire show?"

"Forever Knight."

"Forever Knight?"

"See, I told you hadn't heard of it."

"All these years and only after you die do you reveal you did watch old TV shows after all? I can see why, given your choice. Forever Knight? A TV show based on a TV movie starring Rick Springfield - who they couldn't even get back for the show! The guy who sang Jesse's Girl was too busy for your terrible TV show."

"You realise that if you knew as much about magic as you did about American television from the eighties and nineties, you'd probably have saved the world already."

"Forever Knight was Canadian!"

On the other side of the hall, Erika had a tear in her eye and a smile on her lips as she watched her brothers loudly argue.