

Chapter 431

Intentions

The transport Helicopter carried eight passengers, descending into what had once been a grassy paddock, close to the Global Defence Network camp.

The helicopter landed and the passengers disembarked. Akari Asano was the first to step out, her eyes panning the landscape. She took in the pastoral surrounds and the city of Nitra in the distance. The research camps set up by the magical factions gave each other a comfortable distance, arrayed around the strange, colourful town she had observed from the air.

Following Akari was Annabeth Tilden, Craig Vermillion and Taika Williams, the helicopter noticeably shifted as Taika's huge bulk exited. Now that he was bronze rank, Taika was still huge but was less rounded and more a mountain of muscle.

With them were four others, one of whom was a representative from the Engineers of Ascension. He went by the name Alexander Clerck and rarely spoke. More imposing was William Spencer, an Englishman who was one of the much-feared ancient vampires. The others were wary of him, especially Vermillion, as the other vampire present.

The last two members of the eight were former members of the EOA. They had been part of the exodus from that organisation when it was revealed to be behind the monster waves, eventually joining the GDN although neither possessed any magic.

One of the pair, Dashiell Bexton, was wearing a white suit and pastel shirt. He was unhappily distracted by what the wet ground had done to his shoes and pants. The other, Adam Cosgrove, was a man in a slightly dishevelled suit who somehow looked like a neater one wouldn't fit him quite right.

As the helicopter loudly wound down, a pair of SUVs came driving towards them from the nearby Global Defence Network camp. It threw mud up from the wet earth as it pulled to a stop and Akari made a horizontal chopping motion with her arm. A wave of force blasted the mud back to spatter over the vehicle saving them from an unexpected mud bath. Their liaison from the GDN stepped from the first SUV and ushered them into the two vehicles before driving them to the GDN's camp, where they were shown into a large prefab building and offered tea and coffee.

"Sorry, I only drink blood," said the vampiric Spencer.

"Tool bag," Vermillion muttered, then gave their liaison a winning smile. "Tea, please. Lots of sugar."

"Most weaker vampires know their place," Spencer said.

“My place involves a power saw and your neck, so you should be happy I’m going with a cup of tea,” Vermillion shot back.

“Craig…” Anna said.

“Anna, once you see me playing nice with a guy who tried to control you through your blood, I’ll be happy to listen.”

“That was one lapse of judgement,” Spencer said, unapologetically.

“Give me a chainsaw and your head will lapse off your neck, you dusty old—”

Taika’s regional municipality of a hand came down on Vermillion’s shoulder.

“We get it, bro: you don’t like him.”

Vermillion seethed but fell silent. They all sat in folding chairs as the liaison briefed them on the situation around the magic town, including the disposition of the Network factions and the known effects of entering it.

"The town's defensive mechanisms seem to be of a type with Asano's powers. We believe he can shield people from them on an individual basis, which we assume is what he will do for you, so you can meet him there without your flesh rotting off your bones."

"You assume?" Spencer asked. "Assume is not a word that engenders confidence."

“Asano hasn’t exactly been open to diplomatic contact,” the liaison said. “We had to import you all from Australia just so he’d meet with anyone.”

“Bro, the Network keeps trying to kidnap him,” Taika said. “They even succeeded a couple of times, even if he does keep escaping immediately.”

“That wasn’t us,” Anna said, getting a flat look from Craig.

“Alright,” she admitted. “It was kind of us the first time.”

“So, how do we proceed?” Spencer asked.

“I would suggest a car,” Shade said, emerging from one of the room’s shadows. “Unfortunately, the road infrastructure has suffered some mishaps while Mr Asano was away.”

Only the man calling himself Alexander Clerck had noticed his presence, but he had made no mention of it. Clerck was masking his own aura to pass himself off as one of EOA’s enhanced humans.

“Shade!” Taika said. “G’day, bro.”

“Good day, Mr Williams. Mr Asano will be happy to learn of your presence. He requests that you all make your way to the pagoda at the centre of the city. He apologises for the condition of the roads but there have been a number of discourteous visitors in his absence.”

“What about the magic that eats people?” Taika asked.

“It only affects those that are hostile to Mr Asano, his domain or any of his existing guests,” Shade said. “Those with good intentions have nothing to fear.”

“And who decides if someone’s intentions are good?” Anna asked.

“They decide for themselves,” Shade said. “I am sure the people here can direct you to the pagoda. They have taken quite a thorough look around, as you will no doubt see.”

“Can’t Asano give us safe passage?” Anna asked.

“He can, but he won’t. He is letting your good intentions be the shibboleth.”

Shade turned to Spencer.

“Why is there an ancient vampire amongst you?”

“He’s working with us,” Anna said. “Is that a problem?”

“On the contrary,” Shade said. “Mr Asano’s last ancient vampire spoiled while he was here dealing with the transformation zone. He has been looking for a fresh one.”

The rest of the group turned to look at Spencer as Shade vanished back into the shadows.

“Is it just me, or did Shade seem kind of passive-aggressive?” Vermillion asked.

“It felt a little more like regular aggressive to me,” Spencer said.

Vermillion turned to the liaison. “What exactly did your people do?”

“They’re your people too, now, Craig,” Anna said.

“That’s what I’m worried about,” Craig said. “It’s like you’re trying to make him mad.”

“Those were other branches and other Network factions,” Anna said.

“Don’t worry, Jason,” Craig said. “That wasn’t our Network that tried to kidnap you. Again. And kept your friend in a hole and tortured her for weeks. That was a different Network. Oh, the difference? Well, we don’t like that other Network very much. I mean, yes, we work with them a bit, when we have to. Otherwise, how are we going to get those reality cores you told us not to take? What? Killed your brother, your friend and your girlfriend? That definitely wasn’t us. I mean, yes, it was the Network, but there are degrees of separation...”

“That’s enough, Craig,” Anna said.

“Is it?” Craig asked. “The guy built a magic town that eats people and we keep doing things that make him angry. And now we’re going into that town?”

“You think this is news to me?” Anna asked.

“Do you remember what he was like when he first got here?” Craig asked.

“Yes, Craig. He went to where my wife works. He showed up in my kitchen in the middle of the night.”

"You should be grateful that's all he did," Craig said. "I had to stop him from fighting an EOA collection team in the middle of a café. You may recall what he did next from the news. A rolling gunfight in the middle of traffic? He came back to this world as a naked blade whose first instinct was to cut anything put in front of him. His family calmed him down but then we went and killed one of them, as part of what appears to be a campaign of methodically convincing him to massacre us all with his apocalypse butterflies."

"Your point is taken," Anna said.

"Really?" Craig asked. "I'm pretty sure that every time the Network screwed him over and he let it slide because they're the ones fighting the monsters, someone would have said the point was taken. How far do you think we can push before Jason takes that point and impales us all on it?"

The group of eight were in the back of a flatbed utility vehicle as they approached the edge of the town. After the ute slowed down and stopped, the liaison got out of the cab.

"This is as far as I go," he told the people on the back. "One of you will need to drive the rest of the way. The car is heavy-duty enough that you should be able to handle any terrain issues. If any of you feel like something is wrong, like you're trespassing, trust that instinct and turn back. If you ignore it, you won't like the results."

Another person from the camp rode up on a quad bike, which the liaison climbed onto and they rode away. The eight people left behind stood up in the back of the ute to look at where the gravel track turned to asphalt as it entered the town. Large portions of the road, along with footpaths and garden had been violently ripped up, making what should have been easy navigation more treacherous.

"Anna," Craig said. "Explain to me again how we aren't actively trying to piss Jason off. Or will you need to concentrate on driving us through his town that we dug up like a pack of malevolent monster moles?"

Anna grimaced, not responding as she dropped off the side of the tray.

"If anyone needs to go back, just tap on the cab window," she said, then climbed into the driver's seat and shut the door. She started up the ute and drove it carefully into the town, avoiding road hazards.

The passengers tensed as they passed into the town and immediately encountered Jason's aura. For Craig, Taika and Akari it felt benevolent, while the others felt more oppressed. None of them experienced the sense of trespass that the liaison described.

Alexander Clerck looked around, curiously.

"Oh dear," he muttered to himself. "She's not going to be happy about this."

This drew attention as the man had been all but mute through the entire journey from Australia.

“Something to share with the group?” Akari asked him. She, like the others, didn’t trust the EOA representative amongst them.

“I was just marvelling at what Mr Asano has accomplished here. He’s rather jumped the gun, however, and this will draw attention I hope he’s ready to endure.”

“What kind of people has he drawn the attention of?” Taika asked.

“I never said they were people,” Clerck said.

Akari narrowed her eyes at Clerck.

“You know Jason,” she said.

“We met once, briefly. I helped him find something he was looking for.”

“You didn’t tell us that,” Akari said.

“It was less complicated, this way.”

“It doesn’t make us any more inclined to trust you.”

“You don’t need to trust me. This place knows my intentions.”

“Unless you can fool it.”

“Nothing can hide its intent, here, no matter how powerful,” Clerck said.

“So you say,” Akari said. “Jason has enemies outside this world with power beyond imagining.”

“You speak of gods and beyond? Such entities cannot send their avatars into this place.”

“You expect me to believe this place is powerful enough to fend off gods?” Akari asked.

“Believe what you like,” Clerck said. “It is not a matter of power, but of nature. A god cannot walk into this place any more than you can blink my eyes.”

“What does that mean?” Taika asked.

“It means that there are higher rules for higher beings,” Clerck said. “What is impossible for us is negligible to them, while the same can be true for them and us, despite their power. We can enter this place, while they cannot.”

“Who are you?” Adam Cosgrove asked. He was not a magical being and had been keeping his mouth closed and his ears open around the incredibly powerful company he was in. He was both a former detective and a former EOA member, though, and his instincts told him that Clerck was more dangerous than the fourteenth-century vampire he was sitting next to.

"That will be clear soon enough," Clerck said. "For now, I will reiterate that if this place does not reject me, then you can be assured that my intentions are not hostile, whatever my agenda may be."

"Should we kick him out here?" Taika asked.

"If Asano's familiar didn't see fit to reject me, why should you?" Clerck asked.

"Shade knows who you really are?" Taika asked

"As I said: I have met Mr Asano once before."

Chapter 432

I Need That Song to Play Out

The ute pulled up a little way from the pagoda, due to the level of destruction around it. The gold-rankers trying to dig up any treasures had focused on the pagoda itself, the area around it looking less like an urban street than a motocross arena.

Vermillion continued his discontented mumbling as he hopped out of the tray, while Anna got out of the cab, looking around. She was concerned that Vermillion may well be right about Jason's general receptiveness. She led the group in picking their way between the gaping holes and mounds of earth to reach the pagoda doors, which slid open at their approach.

They stepped into the atrium, their attention caught by the waterfall spilling into the pool in the middle of the floor. Shade was waiting for them.

"This way, please. The conference room is on the second floor."

As they walked down the hall, Dashiell Bexton, one of the two normals in the group, ran his fingers over the wall.

"What is this made of?"

"Clouds," Taika said.

"Clouds?"

"Clouds," Taika confirmed

"How does that work?" Dashiell asked.

"Magic, bro. Are you new?"

Most of the others had been inside cloud constructs before, although it was still an unusual experience. The ancient vampire, Spencer, was particularly unsettled. He came from a time when he was the dominant magical power and this was one more reminder that the world he had woken up in was very different.

They entered a room that, in design, was an ordinary conference room. The colourful cloud-stuff from which everything from the furniture to the walls was made gave it a slightly alien feel, however. One wall was a window looking out over the hacked-up streets.

"Please sit," Shade said. "Mr Asano is on his way."

"Ooh, I missed this," Taika said, settling into a cloud chair.

"This is startlingly comfortable," Dashiell said, turning to the other normal, Adam Cosgrove. "Adam, we should have looked your old friend up a long time ago."

"She's not an old friend," Cosgrove said. "We just helped each other."

“I’d like to think of us as friends,” Erika said as she walked into the room with Jason, Farrah and Yumi. “It’s very nice to see you again, Detective. Sorry, Mr Cosgrove. May I call you Adam?”

“Sure,” Cosgrove said. “It’s nice to see you too, Mrs Asano.”

“It’s Erika, please. Could you ever imagine we’d be here like this, the last time we met in that café?”

“We’re a long way from that day,” Cosgrove said. “The whole world is.”

“Very true,” Jason said, holding out his hand. Cosgrove shook it. “Thank you for helping my sister when no one else would.”

“Our interests happened to align. This is my partner, Dash.”

Jason shook Dashiell’s hand.

“Nice to meet you, mate,” Jason greeted him. “Why are you participating in this?”

“Adam, here, is a goodwill ambassador,” Dashiell said. “I thought it was a bit odd they wanted him just for his connection to your sister until your mate Vermillion started listing off all the stuff they did to you. It sounded like they needed all the goodwill they can get.”

“You’re not wrong,” Jason said. “Never picked up any magic during your time in the EOA?”

“All that human modification stuff sounded a bit iffy to us,” Dashiell said. “We were really in it to peek behind the curtain.”

“They wouldn’t have been accepted anyway,” Alexander Clerck interjected.

“Independent thinkers are always rejected. We want our powered people to be compliant. The process also seems to dampen intellectual creativity, as well. These two were much better as agents.”

“You seem to know a lot about us,” Cosgrove said.

“Because of your connection to Mr Asano, here, tangential as it may be,” Clerck said, turning to Jason with a smile. “And how have you been, Mr Asano.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ve been paying attention,” Jason said. “Do they even realise who you are?”

“They’re all suspicious, but I don’t think any of them have figured it out.”

“Why are you here?” Jason asked.

“My organisation wanted to get some information to you. I was aware this meeting was being arranged, so I presented myself to the fine people of the GDN who were organising it. I decided to deliver it in person because, to be honest, I wanted a look around. A spirit domain, Mr Asano? Very presumptuous.”

“Who is this guy?” Taika asked.

“This is Mr North,” Jason said. “First among equals of the EOA, if you’re willing to believe that horse pucky. How are you doing, Taika?”

Taika caught Jason in a big hug.

“All good, bro. You doing alright?”

“Oh, you know. Keeping busy.”

Taika let out a rumbling chuckle.

While Jason and the others greeted Akari warmly, most of the group was staring at Mr North. The revelation of his identity pushed even the presence of the ancient vampire temporarily out of mind.

“What?” Mr North asked innocently.

Jason and his companions joined the rest in sitting around the table.

“Introductions, first,” Jason said. “For those of us who haven’t met, I am Jason Asano.”

“They’ve seen you on TV, bro.”

“This is my sister Erika.”

Jason glanced at Taika.

“You may have seen her on TV too,” Jason continued. “This is Farrah Hurin and my Grandmother, Yumi Asano.”

All eyes went to Yumi, who looked no older than Jason.

“Grandmother?” Dashiell asked.

“It’s just shape-shifting,” Jason explained. “She’s really an old lady.”

Yumi rapped Jason on the arm and he flashed her a grin. The grin faded as he turned back to his guests.

“Now, if someone would care to explain what the head of the EOA and an ancient vampire are doing here, that would be appreciated. I recognise that you haven’t come here with hostile intent, so I’m at least willing to hear you out.”

“It’s about the vampires,” Anna said. “It’s no secret that they are ramping up for a play at global dominance while the opposing magical factions have made less than stellar progress towards unifying against them. You sent us some details of the operations in Venice and this was, as we’ve discovered, only a tertiary program.”

Jason turned to the vampire, Spencer.

“I assume your unexpected presence is to shed some light on this?”

“Yes,” Spencer said. “Not all of the Arisen, as we call ourselves, want to participate in this plan for global dominion. For one thing, vampires are increasingly territorial by instinct as we grow stronger. Working together does not come naturally.”

"Which is most likely why the vampires haven't made a move already," Vermillion said. "The ancient vampires are instinctually competitive with one another while their attitudes cause friction with the non-vampiric portions of the Cabal. The Cabal was always a loose collection of factions and, like the Network, has fragmented. Some have broken off to form a non-vampiric new Cabal, while others have joined the Global Defence Network."

"There are those of us who do not wish to participate at all," Spencer said. "We recognise that the world has changed and that we are no longer the dominant force on it. While most of the Arisen are blind to the new world and the dangers it presents to them, those of us that do see realise that the vampires cannot overcome all the forces arrayed against them. Even if they are scattered now, a common enemy will unite them. The only questions are how long a war takes, how much damage it does and what comes after."

"So, you're looking to stay alive once the vampires as a whole have lost," Jason said.

"Yes," Spencer agreed. "We have no altruism or desire to help humanity. We simply recognise that so long as we are accepted, there will be power and influence for us to hold, even if we are not rulers. I will take some power over death, and there are others amongst the Arisen who have chosen the same. For most, however, they cannot overcome the inherent desire for dominion."

"Well," Jason said. "I'm not going to sit here, in the middle of my personal magic realm and claim that dominion is not intoxicating. I understand that you make for powerful allies, both in personal capability and the information you bring to the table. My question is: what does any of this have to do with me? I'm not opposed to facing off against some vampires when the opportunity appears, but I have larger concerns."

"Larger than a world ruled by vampires and filled with unliving ghouls?" Spencer asked.

"Yes," Jason said, meeting his stare.

"Mr Spencer and... Mr North," Anna said, "have brought critical information to us that warrants action. That is where you come in."

"Oh?" Jason asked, turning to face her.

"Spencer has revealed the location of the vampire's primary logistics operations. They've created a secure location in which they are producing enhanced blood, lesser vampires and ghouls."

"Lesser vampires?" Erika asked.

Jason turned to Vermillion.

"Craig, could you explain the difference, just to make sure everyone is on the right page."

“Sure,” Vermillion said. “At the top of the food chain you’ve got the greater vampires. That’s me and dust-bucket over there. We went through a voluntary process of transformation and started weak, growing stronger over time. You can accelerate that process by drinking powerful blood, but there hasn’t been a lot of that floating around. Also, if you start preying on the Cabal or the essence users, you end up dead, rather than powerful.”

“It was easier in the past, when the Cabal was a series of fractious groups,” Spencer said.

“Probably one of the outside pressures that pushed the Cabal to unite,” Jason surmised.

“Next,” Vermillion continued, “we have the lesser vampires. These are the ones turned against their will. They start with whatever power level they had before being turned, although they lose their original powers. Unlike greater vampires, they do not gain bloodline powers to replace them. They’re also more subject to control by greater vampires.”

“The powers aren’t lost,” Farrah said. “They’re sealed. Lesser vampires are vampires in body, but not in soul. It’s why they can’t grow stronger. It’s also why the process can be reversed if you get to them fast enough.”

“Lastly you have ghouls,” Vermillion said. “These depraved mockeries are what happens when you try and create a lesser vampire that’s stronger than the person you’re trying to turn. Ghouls are harder to wrangle and significantly less intelligent, but if you want greater power from lesser materials, that’s your option. You can make ghouls directly, or turn lesser vampires into ghouls.”

“And that’s what the vampires are doing,” Jason said. “Turning Europe into a factory for ghouls and blood enhanced by reality cores.”

“At first it was of limited concern,” Vermillion said. “Even considering all the newly-appeared Arisen and the existing Cabal, there were only so many greater vampires. There is a cost to creating minions, even for those with the ideal bloodlines, and the scale could only be so big.”

“Those of us preparing to switch sides,” Spencer said, “were gathering information for when we did. Bringing a gift to the table would get us a better seat, after all. We discovered that operations were scaling up to a far greater degree than should be possible.”

“How?” Jason asked.

"We couldn't find out everything before we were forced to make our move as the others grew suspicious," Spencer said. "We discovered two critical factors. One was that there is an alternate means for ghoulish creation, requiring far less from each vampire per ghoulish created. Second was that there is now a method for strengthening lesser vampires. It makes their behaviour more feral and ghoulish-like, but they retain most of their intelligence."

"I've seen the results in Venice," Farrah said.

"Those smaller-scale operations are appearing across Europe," Spencer said. "We couldn't find out how these processes were developed."

"Which is where I come in," Mr North interjected. "I believe you know, Mr Asano, about a joint research operation from decades ago, involving the Cabal, the EOA and the Network."

"It's where you developed the first magically-augmented humans," Jason said.

"Just so. There were many projects involved with that operation, including the animation of the dead."

"Necromancy," Farrah hissed.

"There was a researcher from that operation. We believed he was long dead, until the events at Makassar. We believe he was unable to resist so many dead as a test platform for whatever he has been working on in the intervening..."

Mr North trailed off as he felt pressure bearing down on him. Jason's aura had blended with that of the entire room and was boiling over with fury. Cosgrove and Dashiell opened their mouths in silent screams, while even the more powerful people went off-colour. Only the gold-ranked Spencer and Mr North were able to fend off Jason's aura with their own and even that was a struggle.

"JASON!" Erika yelled and the moment passed. Everyone but Jason slumped in relief, with even Spencer and Mr North having lost their equanimity. The two normal-rankers had fallen out of their chairs and were throwing up on the floor. Jason stood up and walked to the window, looking out with his back to the room.

"I apologise," he said. "I should not have lost control like that."

"No kidding," Mr North said. "There's a reason you aren't meant to have a spirit domain."

Anna tried to get the meeting back on track, despite her pale, bloodless face.

"This man that North is talking about," she said. "Using information given to us by the former Mrs South, the Network has been looking for him since Makassar. We had some indications that he was with the Cabal but that's where we dead-ended."

“Concealing information has long been the Cabal’s greatest strength,” Vermillion said.

“Is this man in France?” Jason asked, still gazing out the window.

“How did you know?” Anna asked.

“Because you would only come to me if you needed something. What can I do that no one else can? I can enter a sealed astral space, like the one in Saint-Étienne where Adrien Barbou sent Farrah.”

“You’re right,” Spencer said. “We never discovered how the process was developed, but we did discover where. After the Arisen took France, the astral space was used as a secure location for the main hub of the operation. That’s where they develop the infrastructure for the satellite operations, as well as produce more empowered lesser vampires, ghouls and enhanced blood than anywhere else. We also believe that they’re stockpiling enhanced blood there, as an emergency reserve.”

“So you want me to go there and put an end to it,” Jason said. “That place is probably crawling with gold-rank vampires.”

“No,” Spencer said. “As I said, we are too territorial. There will only be a few. Two, maybe as many as five. They will likely be stronger than most, though.”

“And you expect me to beat them how?”

“Don’t act like you haven’t already decided to go, Asano,” Mr North said. Jason turned around to face him.

“There’s a price,” Jason said. “I want Adrien Barbou.”

“Revenge, Mr Asano? Aren’t you above that kind of thing? You let Gerling skip off out of your transformation zone.”

“Gerling can fight vampires. Barbou isn’t that strong.”

“It’s my revenge,” Farrah said. “And I’m definitely not above that kind of thing.”

“The answer is no,” Mr North said, not breaking his gaze from Jason. “You’re going to do this because it needs doing, Mr Asano, whether I give you Barbou or not.”

“And what is to stop me from holding you here and melting you in chunks until you give him up? Jason asked.

“The fact that you invited me here in good faith. You are going to let me go because you aren’t willing to be the person who didn’t. Of course, if you prove me wrong, that’s exciting too. I’d be willing to give Barbou up to see that.”

Jason turned his gaze from Mr North, his face twisted in a frustrated snarl. Mr North laughed.

“And there he is. Be wary of your principles, Mr Asano. I might use them to be assured that you enter that astral space, but someone was already playing them like an instrument before I found you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, I’m not going to tell you that. Like the World-Phoenix, I need that song to play out. We all do.”

Chapter 433

Wash Them First

Jason didn't ask any more about Mr North's cryptic clues. Unless he was willing to try and torture the information out of him he wouldn't be forthcoming and Jason wasn't ready to take that step. In any case, Mr North seemed to know more about spirit domains than Jason himself and had entered Jason's anyway. To assume the North had not taken precautions would be foolish.

"Will you act on our behalf?" Anna asked.

"No," Jason said. "I'll act on my own."

"You will go to France, though," she clarified.

"Yes. But I want something in return."

"I can't force him to give up Adrien Barbou," Anna said. "We would if we could. We'd quite like to get our hands on him ourselves."

"Anna, don't you dare," Farrah said quietly. "Barbou belongs to me."

"Spicy," Mr North said. "Jason, I like her."

"I've paid the price for running my mouth when I shouldn't, Mr North. It's time for you to go before you learn that lesson for yourself."

"Do you regret it though?" Mr North asked.

"Sometimes the cost of staying silent is worse than the cost of speaking up, whatever that price may be," Jason admitted. "It doesn't make the cost any less real."

➤ You have designated [Rune Spider (variant)] as hostile.

Jason gestured at the window and the transparent cloud-stuff dissipated, letting in the breeze.

"You can show yourself out, Mr North; I'm sure you'll find your way. I have more to discuss with Mrs Tilden."

"Very well," Mr North said. "But since you and I are not likely to meet again before you return from the other world, a final piece of advice: don't build your bridge here. Put it somewhere that people aren't going to get hurt."

Mr North leapt out the window, which was restored at an absent gesture from Jason who was contemplating North's departing words. The implications of the insight he continued to demonstrate were troubling but Jason put them aside to concentrate on present issues.

“Anna,” Jason said, turning his inhuman eyes on her. “You want me to do this, and I will. But I want something in return.”

“I told you that Barbou is not within our power to give,” Anna said.

“That’s not what I’m talking about. We’ve been discussing opening this place up to the civilians affected by the transformation zones. A place where they can be safe and welcome.”

Anna looked out the window at the ruined streets.

“Safe?”

“Mr Spencer,” Jason said, turning to the vampire. “I hope that you find equanimity with this world you have come back to after so long. Thank you for coming. I’ll see to the return of the others, so you may take the car if you wish.”

“I’ve been buried under a church since the rule of George the Second,” Spencer pointed out. “I do not know how to drive an automobile. As I am faster than a car, however, I shall make do and walk. Like a peasant. You aren’t going to make me jump out the window as well, are you?”

“Certainly not,” Jason said. “Shade, please escort the gentleman out.”

After Spencer was guided away by Shade, Jason turned his attention back to Anna.

“I have something to show you.”

“How big is this?” Anna asked as she looked out over the city from Shade’s zeppelin form. As with the world outside the astral space, it was deep into the night and the empty city was a sea of lights. The rest of the group were in the main passenger cabin while Jason and Anna spoke alone in a small observation room.

“The city is large enough that we can take in as many transformed as choose to come,” Jason said. “For the foreseeable future, at least.”

“I don’t have anything like the authority to make something like that happen,” Anna said. “Every country, every magical faction has their own policies and even laws regarding the transformed.”

“I know. It will be a lengthy and complicated process to even begin.”

“You don’t have time for that.”

“Nor the patience. I’m better at spotting politics at work than wading in myself, I’ve discovered. I’m too enamoured of bold moves and more than a little imperious, at times. That’s why I will give my Grandmother the authority to act on my behalf when it comes to administering this place.”

“Then shouldn’t she be in here with us?”

"I haven't told her yet," Jason said.

"Are you certain she'll agree to do that?"

"She will if I threaten to do it myself."

"The most I can do is start putting you in contact with people. Governments, the UN."

"I'm not looking for you to get it done. What I want from you is to make sure that this is taken seriously."

"People take you seriously."

"This is a different thing."

"Yes," Anna agreed. "I'll do what I can."

"That's all anyone can ask," Jason said.

After a quick sky tour, the group returned to the pagoda for a social gathering in the mezzanine lounge with Jason and his family. Refreshments were set out, mostly magical fruit collected from the astral space. The forested areas had wild fruits and berries while the pastoral regions featured orchards.

"I'm sorry I never had the chance to introduce your wife to Dawn," Jason told Anna. "She's gone off to the other universe."

"And you will follow?" Anna asked.

"In time. I'm close to securing the stability of Earth, at least in the short term. I need to go to the other side to finish the job. To be honest, I'm more than ready to go. I'm tired, Anna. Tired of nothing but going from one fight to the next. Of always watching my back in case some gold-ranker finds me or the Network betrays me again. You know that I'll have to check out France to make sure it isn't some kind of ambush."

"You really think I would do that?"

"Do you remember the night we met in person?"

"In my kitchen."

"I'd just escaped a Network kidnap and extraction team, which was not the last time I was kidnapped by the Network."

"That was the French and American branches."

"If you hang the Network shingle, you're responsible for the Network's actions, Anna. Are you asserting that you've never done something you disagreed with because one of your bosses told you to?"

"Of course not."

"So, yes, Anna. I really think you would do that."

"I'm sorry that it's come to that, Jason."

"I'm past sorry. If I didn't have to stop the world from breaking down like a biscuit in milk, I'd be long gone already. I thought I'd stay and help with the vampires but once I'm done in France, that's as far as I go. I probably wouldn't even go that far if it weren't for the man behind the Makassar undead. I won't let him do that again."

"That's exactly what he wants to do with these ghouls."

"Which is why I'm doing this. Then I'm finishing my task and leaving."

"Will you ever come back?"

"Yes, but not for a long time. You should hope that it's long enough that I'm no longer looking to settle old scores because it will be long enough that I can."

"Speaking of old scores, I have news on Jack Gerling. He's gone rogue."

"Rogue?"

"Since the magic changed, gold-rankers can get by on silver-rank spirit coins now. Thirty a day isn't cheap but it's enough that they no longer need gold coins, let alone reality cores."

"What's he up to?"

"No one knows. From what I've heard, he'd been quietly suborning people for a while and took off with his assistant, a cluster of silver-rankers and a couple of the best ritualists the US had."

"Great," Jason said. "He'll be coming after me, if he isn't already."

"Why?"

"Because, unlike the Network, he hasn't been distracted by vampires and reality cores. Remember why you were kidnapping me in the first place? Before the world blew up, you all wanted my secrets. He still does."

While the others were meeting and talking, Akari and Jason quietly took a walk outside. They discussed the combat trance that Jason had recently been able to touch on but was as-yet unable to fully use.

"We call it the sword Zen, in my family," Akari said. "Obviously, people not dedicated to the sword call it other things. My father is the expert; I only managed to reach that state at Asano village. After Gerling killed Asya, Kaito and Greg, I went into intensive training with my father and finally managed to achieve it. I'm surprised you were able to, given that mastery of technique is not your central focus."

"I recently had the opportunity for some quite intensive experience with the sword," Jason told her.

"Oh?"

"When this place was still covered in a dome, it sealed the powers of whoever was in here. My sword was all I had, at first, and even as more options became available to me, it remained critical until the end."

"And how much fighting was there?"

"Quite a bit. I only achieved the combat trance at the end, when I was pushed to the absolute limit. I've managed to touch on it since, but only sporadically. Farrah has helped but her combat style is, in many ways, the opposite of mine. It's almost like there's a translation issue."

"I don't have much more experience at this than you," she said. "My father is the expert. If you spent some time with him, it may help you."

"I don't have that time, and I may not go back home for a while. Probably not until right before I leave this world."

"I used to want to go with you," Akari said. "An alien world full of strangeness and adventure."

"But not anymore?"

"My fight is here, now. The vampires are coming sooner, rather than later. You're not the only one standing up to save the world."

"I really would like to thank you again," Jason said to Cosgrove. They were still in the mezzanine lounge and dawn was starting to poke its head over the horizon. "You may as well all stay for the day. Craig will need to stay inside until it's dark again at least."

"Damn right," the vampiric Vermillion said. "The magic here does bad stuff to the light. I can feel the dawn coming like a chill climbing up my back."

"It's strange meeting you like this, Mr Asano," Cosgrove said. "Your disappearance set me on a strange path. It seems odd, now thinking back on how the cover-up of one little magic event involved so many people. Police, federal police, government. It seems like a lot of effort given that it's all out in the open, now."

"It used to be a lot easier," Vermillion said. "In a world before mass communication and people carrying cameras around in their pockets. The Network's balancing act of keeping everything secret had been close to toppling for a long time."

Vermillion sat a hand on Jason's shoulder.

"Then this guy came along. I won't say he's the one who made them tip over but he definitely added some wobble."

“I’d like to give you something, Mr Cosgrove. Your partner, too, as a gesture of my gratitude. Of course, the concern is that anything I gave you would be confiscated the moment you leave, so it needs to be something you can use here.”

Jason gestured and a portal arch appeared. Two of Shade’s bodies stepped out, each carrying a large duffel bag.

“We’ll have to do it all at once, which isn’t ideal,” Jason said. “It also means that I’ll be picking everything out for you.”

“What are you talking about?” Cosgrove asked.

Shade set the bags on the floor and Jason crouched down to open one. He reached in and took out a cube shining brightly enough that it was hard to look at.

“I’ve picked out two sets,” Jason said. “You can choose between them for yourselves. One is the sun essence, the blood essence and the life essence. It combines into the avatar confluence and is about as perfect an anti-vampire set as you’ll find. The other set are all cheap essences; gun, hand and adept, combining into the master essence.”

“The John Wick special,” Anna said.

Jason put the sun essence back in the bag and closed it.

“If you’re willing, I’ll essence you both up before you go. There’s enough awakening stones in there that we can send you off with a full set of powers. Rushing things like that isn’t ideal, but I’m guessing you former EOA guys are pretty far down the list when it comes to getting resources from the Global Defence Network.”

“No kidding,” Dashiell said. “They say we’re all one big family, but I haven’t seen anyone that didn’t come from the Network originally getting magicked up.”

“It’s not that bad,” Anna said.

“Sure, it’s not,” Dashiell said. “If Adam didn’t know Mrs Asano, do you think we’d be doing anything but scut work?”

“Are you sure about this?” Cosgrove asked Jason. “These are valuable resources.”

“Mate, I’ve got them coming out my arse. Not literally; you won’t have to wash them first.”

Chapter 434

The Language of Passion

Jason had been through months of unrelenting pressure, fighting and walking the knife-edge between life and death. He'd even slipped off it, although at least he had come back, unlike Kaito, Greg and Asya.

Taking a day to spend time with friends and family was like opening a release valve. Although the setting was anything but, there was a blessed normalcy to sitting around talking, preparing a big meal together with his sister and niece. It wasn't anything elaborate, since all they had was a lot of fruit and the food they stocked for Emi, who couldn't live on spirit coins. Even so, the process was more important than the result and, with Erika on hand, it still worked out pretty well.

Eventually, night came and Jason opened a portal to the Global Defence Network's camp. Jason had a sense of loss as everyone but Farrah and his family made their farewells and stepped through. He felt the responsibilities he had been able to ignore for a day looming over him once more as his gaze lingered on the portal.

"Jason, are you alright?" Farrah asked.

"I don't have time not to be," he said dismissing the portal with a flicking gesture.

Jason's father Ken was on a pagoda balcony, looking out over the heavily damaged town. He started slightly as Jason moved next to him, not having heard his son's silent approach.

"Time to go, Dad."

"I think I'd like to stay," Ken said. "I may not be a fighter but my abilities can repair all this damage."

"No," Jason said, his voice soft but unyielding.

"You're worried about our safety."

"Yes," Jason said.

"I don't think anyone wants me, Jason. I can't open the portal to your magic city. I don't know and can't do anything special. I'm not valuable to anyone."

"You're valuable to me. Normally I would let it go but Jack Gerling is out there and he's working towards his own agenda now."

A rare expression of rage crossed Ken's face. Only his wife and the man who killed his son could put it there.

“Gerling has the strength to come in and take you hostage if I’m not here. If you start fixing the town up, he’ll learn that you’re here sooner or later. Once he’s dealt with, I’ll take you up on it.”

Ken placed a hand on Jason’s back.

“Alright, son. You get that prick.”

“You know I’m going to kill him, right? No prison can hold someone like that. Not in this world. Even if there were, the Americans would just step in and take back their errant gold-ranker.”

“I don’t like the idea of killing people,” Ken said. “The world isn’t the way we’d like it to be, though; now more than ever.”

“I know. It feels like the stronger I get, the harder it is to roll the boulder up the hill.”

Jason’s spirit vault still remained after the ability went through its second evolution to become a spirit domain. It was still a sprawling garden centred on a pavilion but now it was more like a botanical garden that would have been right at home in Jason’s magical Slovakian town. During his periods of turmoil it had gone through inhospitable changes, but now Jason was more settled and he had more active control over the space.

He had been nervous about bringing them into the spirit vault after they’d been living in the cloud boat for several weeks. If they no longer trusted him enough to enter, he wasn’t sure how he would cope. If, deep down, they could no longer accept who and what he’d become, he knew he’d handle it badly, if he could handle it at all.

Fortunately, that was not an issue and they entered Jason’s spirit vault without problems. Whether he always held their trust or if enough time had passed since he scared them with his uncontrolled aura, he would rather not find out.

He chose to wander through his own soul for the first time in a while, under a night sky reflective of the one over his town. Farrah walked alongside him.

“I know I’m not looking forward to going back as much as you are,” he told her. “I just need to not be rushing around, putting out fires.”

“You do remember that we’ll arrive in the middle of the worst monster surge in the history of the world?”

“But that isn’t on me to fix,” Jason said. “I’ll do my part, sure, but I can be just another adventurer.”

Farrah knew it wasn’t the moment to prick a needle into that balloon, so she changed the subject.

“So, France, then,” she said.

"No," Jason said.

"No?"

"How many times do the Network think they can come to us, apologise for the last crappy thing they did and then tell us to solve their problems."

"You told them we'd do this, and we should," Farrah said. "What's waiting in that astral space needs to be stopped."

"Yeah, but we're not doing it their way. Even with the sun lamp, do you think taking on as many as five gold-rank vampires and who knows what else is a smart plan?"

"Of course not. You have a better one?" she asked.

"Germany."

"Germany?"

The ancient vampires had, in general, not taken well to modern technology and what was, to them, its magic-like capabilities. Much of Europe had gone dark as they took down power and communications infrastructure, although their limited knowledge left patchwork pockets of communication in place.

Only a handful of places maintained any level of normalcy. Slovakia was now too high-magic for even powerful vampires to retain their full strength during daylight. In Germany, different Network factions had collaborated to hold the country as a beachhead into Europe for the coming conflict.

"After they stopped digging through my spirit domain, the gold-rank Network people were all withdrawn," Jason said. "The US is focused on clearing out their domestic vampires before the conflict truly begins, while China is wary of Russia, which the Cabal pretty much openly runs, now."

"How does that help us?"

"Gerling was the only gold-ranker permanently stationed in Germany. They got lucky in that the area has a higher than average magic level, so only the strongest vampires can operate in daylight without dropping in strength."

"But now Gerling has gone off on his own," Farrah said.

"Leaving us with a small window before Germany gets reinforced to slip in and take some of what the US and China left behind."

"Which is?"

"Magically enhanced heavy ordnance. It was developed to fight gold-rank monsters but now it's being stockpiled for use against the vampires."

"You want to shoot a missile into the French astral space?"

“Not exactly,” Jason said. “What we’re after is a magically-enhanced SADM. Basically, a nuclear bomb in a backpack. I sneak it into the astral space, set the timer and get out. Preferably without anyone realising I was ever there.”

“You think it will go that smoothly?” Farrah asked.

“No,” Jason said. “A guy can live in hope, though.”

“Are you even sure they have this weapon in Germany?”

“Yep. I’ve had Shade spying on all the Network camps since we got here and they’re all based out of Germany. I know which base to go for and even roughly where on the base to find it.”

“We should be going before we miss our best chance, then,” Farrah pointed out.

“Yeah,” Jason agreed, his voice heavy with reluctance. He cast his head back to look at the starry sky. “It was a nice break, though, wasn’t it?”

“It seems we aren’t the only ones looking to jump on the Network’s moment of exposure,” Farrah said over voice chat. They were plunging through the dark sky over an airbase lit up below them. With their silver-rank perception, they were able to make out the battle being waged between base personnel and the attacking vampire forces, most of which was made up of bronze-rank ghouls.

The base had the advantage of numbers, with no shortage of essence users, along with regular soldiers armed with magical firearms. The vampires had the advantage in individual strength, however, and the normal soldiers were especially imperilled. Unable to use anything stronger than iron-rank weapons, they were holding through training, discipline and superior numbers, focus-firing the unthinking ghouls.

Jason’s aura senses took in the base and he detected a pair of gold-rank vampires. It was likely that similar attacks were taking place at other Network strongholds in Germany or there would have been more.

“I think the vampire war just started,” Farrah said. “Do we intervene or grab what we came for in the chaos?”

“What do you think?”

“I say we help,” Farrah said. “We can’t do anything about wherever else they’re attacking, but losing Germany would be a huge blow for the side that doesn’t eat people. I’m always ready to kill some vampires. The sun lamp won’t help us at night but all these flunkies will help me charge my bracelet and you to stack up power.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Let’s clear out the riff-raff, then, and let the gold-rankers come to us.”

“We’re really going to take on gold-rank vampires, two-on-two,” Farrah said.

“The person who thinks something is impossible fails before they even start,” Jason told her.

“That person also doesn’t get turned into a beverage for their hubris,” Farrah said.

“Just try not to think about that part.”

The two gold-rank vampires were hunting the strongest essence users while their forces of lower-rank vampires, lesser vampires and ghouls overran the base. The Network’s silver-rankers had gathered at the edge of the base to form a united front, inflicting enough harm that it took eating them for the vampires to recover.

“The rise of these new magicians in our absence has been a nuisance,” one of the vampires said as he dabbed his mouth with a napkin. “I’m starting to come around on them, though. Their blood is an absolute delight.”

“Yeah, they’re tasty,” the other said, roughly wiping the blood from his face with his sleeve as he tossed aside a loose arm. “Ellie, this is taking too long. The normal humans and their magic weapons are doing far too well against the ghouls. You know what herding ghouls is like and we need to be sealed up in the transports before dawn.”

“My name is Élie, not ‘Ellie.’ I’m not an English peasant girl.”

“Still bitter about the French Revolution? Just be glad you fell into slumber beforehand. Otherwise, those peasants you hate so much might have taken your head, Ellie.”

“Élie!”

“That’s what I said. Ellie.”

“Élie.”

“Isn’t that what I’m saying?”

“No.”

"It feels like that's what I'm saying. Say it again?"

“Élie.”

“And what am I saying?”

“Ellie.”

“You’re just saying the same thing both times.”

“I hate English so much. Can’t you learn French?”

“Can’t you learn Russian?”

“Why would I want to learn Russian? I already speak French.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s the superior language. The language of passion, of sensuality. Everything you say in Russian sounds like you’re telling off your dog when he doesn’t deserve it.”

“Russian is the language of men, while French is the language of women!”

“Yes,” Élie said with a smile. “They do rather like it.”

Andrei opened his mouth to retort but said nothing, turning his head.

“What?” Élie asked before noticing it for himself. The auras of the ghouls were growing weaker and then vanishing in a slowly spreading area. The vampires there were panicked and scattering, fleeing the area.

“What is that?” Élie asked.

“I don’t sense an aura,” Andrei said. “Some kind of magic effect.”

“I take it back,” Élie said. “These new magicians are trouble.”

The vampires exploded into action, making their way across the base in a blur of speed, soon finding the source of the problem. They came to a stop as they found a sea of ghouls, wreathed in fire. Lighting up the dark sky above them was a swarm of orange and blue glowing butterflies that dropped onto the ghouls from which even more were rapidly spreading.

“I think this is fine,” Andrei said. The aura of the butterflies was clearly of a lower rank than him. So long as there were no gold-rankers or a large group of capable silvers, he was not concerned.

“This doesn’t worry you at all?” Élie asked.

“We’ve done most of what we came here for. Killed the strong ones and made a big, wet mess. We don’t need the ghouls to trash all the magic weapons and it’s easier to organise leaving if all these ghouls are burned up,” Andrei said. “I hate those things.”

“The others are not going to like it,” Élie said.

“It’s not our fault. We didn’t set them on fire.”

“We should at least find out who did, though. I only sense one person behind the ghouls and she’s weaker than us.”

“There are two,” Andrei said. “The other one masks himself very well, despite also being weaker than us. I can barely sense him.”

“Trouble, then.”

“It’s that man.”

“What man?”

“The man with the magic butterflies, obviously. He’s the one from the events in Moravia.”

“Where?”

“Great Moravia.”

“Great Moravia hasn’t existed for a thousand years. The Hungarians conquered it. Are you saying this man’s a Hungarian?”

“No, he’s from that island. The one the English took and killed most of the black people.”

“That hardly narrows it down, Andrei. The damnable English.”

"You have a problem with colonisation?"

"I have a problem with the spread of English cooking technique."

"Perhaps we should focus on the present?" Andrei asked.

"Who was that man again?"

“He was the one who went into the big dome everyone was so obsessed with.”

“Didn’t several of people go into that? I heard one of them came back and turned into a giant octopus.”

"That doesn't matter. There's a man, he's here and clearly, we need to kill him."

Lower rank vampires came running out from amongst the ghouls only for bloody strips of cloth to whip out, grab them and drag them back, screaming.

“Yes, Andrei. I do rather see your point.”

Chapter 435

Forthright Honesty

The two ancient vampires watched their small army of ghouls burning and rotting at the same time. The ghouls were eerily quiet as they burned and died without making noise beyond the crackle and pop of flames burning their flesh. It was the screams of the lesser and lower-ranked vampires caught amongst the ghouls that punctuated the distant gunfire of soldiers and more ghouls fighting elsewhere on the massive base.

Vampires did not have the power to sense magic, but their sensitivity to life force was very strong. The gold-rank vampires could sense the life force of their weaker brethren, caught amongst the ghouls. That life force was being rapidly drained, vampire by vampire.

Above it all were the blue and orange butterflies, shining brightly in the night even with the glow of flames below them. Some of the butterflies flew in the direction of the two gold-rank vampires but Andrei held out a hand and blood droplets shot from his palm, exploding the butterflies before they came close.

“Keep an eye on them,” Élie said. “There are quite a lot.”

“Oh, thank you,” Andrei said. “I hadn’t noticed the giant swarm of glowing magic butterflies.”

“Something in there is draining life force,” Élie said. “Are you sure it’s a magician and not one of us?”

“Yes.”

“Should we go in and fight them?”

“Everything’s on fire,” Andrei said. “I’d rather wait for them to come out.”

“I don’t disagree,” Élie said, “but shouldn’t we go in and save the other vampires?”

The two vampires shared a glance.

“Life is challenge,” Andrei said.

“They’ll be all the stronger for overcoming it on their own.”

The ghouls were rapidly dropping, unmoving but still burning on the ground. After most of them had fallen, a cold voice rang out from within the ghoul pack.

“As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest.”

Andrei and Élie shared another glance.

“Is he talking to us?” Andrei asked.

They sensed what remnant life force remained in slain ghouls and vampires get sucked away all at once. They could even see it, moving through the air like red streamers. It gathering into a single point and was absorbed by a shadowy figure, standing

amongst the dead. Even with their exceptional vision, the vampires could barely make it out.

“Are you, perchance, experiencing an ominous premonition?” Élie asked.

“Now that you mention it,” Andrei said, “I do believe I am.”

“It suddenly occurs to me,” Élie said, “that if two people less powerful than us decide to engage us in battle, they’re either very foolish or know something that we do not.”

“That is very sound reasoning,” Andrei agreed.

They looked behind them, then back at the shadowy figure standing amongst the dead ghouls. Now that most of them had dropped, they could also see more people, to match auras they had already sensed. There was another magician, clad in stone armour and wreathed in flame. Her aura held the promise of consuming fire, the last thing a vampire wanted to encounter. Behind her was a mound of glowing lava, moving like a living thing.

A floating figure was surrounded by orbs that matched the colour of the butterflies. Its aura was alien, unlike anything the vampires had encountered before. The other looked human, aside from its red-purple skin, yet was anything but. There was hunger and blood in its aura that made even their own vampiric auras pale in comparison. They were also able to barely sense another aura, dark and hidden, seemingly many places at once.

The dark figure at the front was difficult to sense at all and, despite their superior power, the vampires could barely sense the domineering will it was currently holding in restraint. They turned and dashed in the other direction as quickly as their gold-rank speed would let them.

Jason and Farrah stepped out of the sea of burning ghouls. Jason pushed back his hood and absently scratched his head as he sensed two vampiric auras shooting off into the distance. Colin and Gordon, along with Farrah’s magma elemental, were finishing off stragglers.

“They’ve scarpered,” Jason said. “They did a runner.”

“Saves us a fight,” Farrah said, dismissing her armour. “Works for me. My bracelet is nice and charged up now and I didn’t have to burn the charge fighting those two.”

“But why did they run?” he wondered.

Farrah looked back at the carpet of dead ghouls and vampires, plus the ceiling of magic butterflies.

“No idea,” she said. “Still, now we can go find your magic bomb. Should be easy enough to get it and go in the chaos.”

Jason nodded.

“There are still some ghouls and weaker vamps running around but the Network personnel should be able to handle it.”

Travis Noble was twenty-one years old and a category two magitech weapons engineer from California. He was also having a very bad month. The day after he arrived in Germany, his supervisor went AWOL when the base's category four essence user ran off and took a handful of people with him, including Travis' boss. Noble was perfectly happy when the Germans put one of their own experienced and qualified people in charge of his department, only for his bosses to insist that an American be in charge instead.

That was how Travis wound up in charge of the Special Munition Stockpile Division, leading of a bunch of people that all hated him. The German's hated him because one of theirs was kicked out, while the other American's hated him for being queue-jumped by a guy on his first day. This didn't even make sense, as the regulations required the person in charge to be a magitechnician, while the other Americans were administrators and logistics supervisors. The lack of magitech experts was the reason Travis had been sent in the first place. This did not lead them to cut Travis any slack.

The people he got on best with were the soldiers and tactical specialists who were guarding the stockpile but whose chain of command was separate from Travis' departmental hierarchy. He now found himself huddled inside the main stockpile warehouse with the security detail, minus their silver-rankers who had left to meet up with the others on base and confront the vampires as a unit.

The stockpile warehouse was the most secure building on the base, with magical protection designed to hold up against all but the most powerful attackers. Unfortunately, those most powerful attackers had turned up. The department staff were hunkered down in the offices, while Travis himself was in the main warehouse with the security team and the weapon stockpile, in case his expertise was required. Even in their current situation, Travis couldn't help but be distracted by the head of the security team, Ingrid. The defeminising tactical outfit currently left her almost indistinguishable from the male soldiers but Travis had been working up the courage to ask her out for a week.

“You know,” Farrah said as she drew a ritual diagram on the wall in chalk, “this is some impressive protective magic.”

“You can get in, though, right?”

Her head turned to give Jason a flat stare, her hand not pausing as she continued to draw without looking.

“Sorry,” Jason said, holding up his hands in surrender.

“You can get in, right?” Farrah muttered, turning her attention back to her work. “You don’t hear me questioning whether you can slowly and horrifically kill someone, making their final moments of life a terrifying ordeal of pain and despair. I just trust you to do what you do.”

“That’s a little hurtful,” Jason said. “I said I’m sorry.”

“Sorry enough to make a strudel?”

“If I can get the ingredients, sure. Food distribution is still a mess, although we do still have those nice apples from the astral space.”

Farrah spoke a short incantation and previously invisible runes lit up all over the building before fading again.

“That’ll shut it down for about an hour,” she said. “Wouldn’t want to permanently drop the protections, given all the stuff in here.”

“Good thinking,” Jason said.

They moved along the building to the main doors, which were large enough to drive a large truck through with clearance to spare. On top of being heavy, they were still locked, even with the magical protection gone. The lock broke as if it weren’t there as Farrah lightly pushed the sliding doors apart.

When the walls lit up with magic runes that quickly faded, the security team’s tension went from high to razor-sharp. Guns were hefted at the ready and they positioned themselves to shoot from cover on command.

“What’s happening,” Ingrid whispered sharply to the magitechnician.

“Someone just dropped the magic defences,” Travis said. “Someone who knows their business, because they were turned off, not broken through.”

“Could they have been turned off from the inside?” Ingrid asked. “By one of your people?”

“The head of the German contingent is the only one other than me who could do that,” Travis said. “You know him, right? Think he’d betray us to the vamps?”

“No,” Ingrid said, “but today is not the day for assumptions. Bernd, Karl. Go bring Lukas here, and be careful. If he’s betrayed us, he may have tricks up his sleeve.”

Two of the security team made for the offices.

“Do you have a gun, techie?” Ingrid asked.

"Yeah," he said. "And it's Travis."

"Can you shoot it without hitting your own team?"

"Yes, Ma'am. No promises on hitting the other team, though."

"Just pull it out and do your best," she said. "No one is expecting much."

"I wish women would stop telling me that," Travis said. Ingrid gave him a sidelong glance, forcibly suppressing a snort of laughter.

Travis opened his dimensional space, which took the form of a holographic cabinet with a door that slid open. He reached in and pulled out what looked like an oversized, high-tech revolver where the spinning bullet chamber had been replaced with a belt-feed mechanism. A long belt of ammunition dangled from it, each bullet engraved with intricate glowing runes.

"Is that a belt-fed pistol?" Ingrid asked.

"I call it the Compensator," Travis said.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Ingrid said.

"What? No, not for that. I'm fine in that area. Perfectly fine."

"It's alright," she assured him.

"No, it's... look, I'm better at building guns than using them, so I made one where aiming was less of an issue. To compensate for my crappy marksmanship."

"Uh-huh."

"I don't have a small..."

Travis trailed off and everyone tensed up as they heard the main doors slide rapidly open. Voices started echoing through the large warehouse.

"So, we left the magical protections in place and broke the lock," a man's voice said.

"You think a lock is going to stop anyone looking to rob this place?" a female voice shot back.

"I guess it didn't stop us."

"It didn't stop who?"

"Okay, it didn't stop *you*. I'm breaking into the next place."

"That's an astral space; that doesn't take skill. You're just using your absurd magic power."

"I only got that magic power to go in that very same astral space and get you!"

"Oh, look at me. I'm Jason and my version of a sacrifice is getting amazing magical powers, oh no."

"You're going to talk to me about sacrifice? Do you know how many times I've died?"

“With how often you bring it up? Every time you go and get yourself killed you come back from the dead and somehow you’re complaining?”

“The first time wasn’t my fault! And the second time, I brought you back with me.”

“That was nice, actually, yeah. You know all the people in here are getting pretty nervous, right?”

“Yeah, hang on. Uh, excuse me, everyone. Please don’t shoot us; we’re just here to steal a nuclear weapon.”

“What are you doing?”

“I thought they might respond to forthright honesty.”

“Not about that. Now they’re definitely going to shoot us.”

“It’s not like it’s going to hurt.”

Ingrid stepped out of cover, levelling her rifle at Jason and Farrah. Farrah was no longer in her armour, while Jason still had his cloak and blood robes but the hood was pushed back to reveal his face. The weird energy in his eyes undercut what he hoped was a friendly expression.

Jason’s familiars had been returned to him, other than a few Shade bodies scouting out the base. Ingrid’s gaze fell on Farrah’s magma elemental in the warehouse doorway. It was a mound of lava the size of a bakery van with arms and what roughly looked like a face. She ignored it for the moment to stare at Jason.

“You’re Jason Asano,” she said. Jason turned unhappily to Farrah.

“Is there something about my face that makes me seem really, really forgetful? People keep telling me my own name as if I somehow don’t know what it is.”

“You do seem like an idiot,” Farrah said.

“Hey...”

“Remember the day we met? You kept getting knocked out by that guy with the shovel. It wasn’t a great first impression.”

“Okay, yes. Escaping took me a couple of goes, but I was new to a life of derring-do. And who was the one who beat the cult leaders? Oh, did I ever tell you what happened to that guy?”

“The one with the shovel?”

“Yeah. Turns out he joined the Builder cult and—”

“Excuse me,” Ingrid called out and Jason turned back to her.

“Oh, sorry,” Jason said. “If you could just point us to a conveniently-sized nuclear bomb, that’d be great. Preferably one with instructions. They don’t have to be in English.”

“You think I’m going to just hand over a nuclear weapon?” Ingrid asked.

“No,” Jason said. “Fortunately, you and your squad back there aren’t dangerous enough that I’ll need to hurt you badly when we take one.”

“What do you even want with a nuclear weapon?”

Jason glanced at Farrah.

“You’re the one who said forthright honesty,” Farrah told him.

“Alright,” Jason said. “I’m going to blow up some vampires. They have a stronghold that only I can get to. So I’m going to go there and nuke it into glass. The good thing is that the reason only I can get there is that it’s sealed in an isolated dimension. That means no blow-back on Earth.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Your belief is irrelevant,” Jason said. “We’re taking what we came for. We were hoping there would be a nice quiet vault to raid with no one here. You’d be well-served by pretending we were right.”

“So, that’s who you are?” Ingrid asked. “A man who comes in, using his power to take what he likes?”

Jason bowed his head.

“I never wanted to be,” he said softly, and then looked up, meeting Ingrid’s blue eyes with his alien gaze. “But yes, that’s who I am. So, shoot me or don’t. Either way, we’re walking out of here with what we came for.”

“Wait,” Travis said, coming out of cover, waving his arms. “Oh, this thing is heavy.” He set his gun down on a crate and moved up next to Ingrid.

“Techie, get back,” Ingrid hissed. “What are you doing?”

“Uh, hi,” he said, ignoring Ingrid’s order. “G’day, mate. That’s your thing, right? You’re super-Australian, even though you’re kind of Japanese.”

“Okay, a few things, mate,” Jason said. “One, Aussies hate it when seppos say g’day. It’s like nails on a chalkboard.”

“What’s a seppo?” Travis asked.

“You are, mate; don’t interrupt. Two, I’m not Japanese. I’ve been to Japan exactly twice and someone poisoned me in a resort hotel. Didn’t love it. Three, where did you get that gun? It looks super-sweet.”

“Jason...” Farrah said.

“Right, sorry. Look, mate, what are you doing running out like that? We’re having a very serious discussion, here.”

“If you’re looking to blow up some vampires,” Travis said, “I can help you. I’m your guy.”

“Travis!” Ingrid barked.

“Ingrid, do you know who this is? It's Jason Asano. He's the world's first superhero. He's been to another universe!”

“Travis, this is not for you to interfere with. You know the things they say about him.”

“That's all made up by people who want to diminish his influence,” Travis said.

“I wouldn't say all,” Farrah said.

“Whose side are you on?” Jason asked.

“Okay,” Farrah said. “How about we all take a step back, put away our guns and our...”

She looked around, seeing that she and Jason had already dismissed their conjured weapons. She looked back at the open doors of the warehouse.

“...giant lava monsters and talk about this calmly.”

Farrah looked from Jason to Travis.

“Preferably you and me,” she said to Ingrid, “while these two sit quietly and don't make trouble.”

“My job is to protect this facility,” Ingrid said.

“And that's what you're doing,” Farrah said. “You can't stop us with force, you have to know that. So your next option is negotiation. Buy yourself some time and mitigate as much damage as you can.”

“Why would you allow that?” Ingrid asked. “There are vampires out there, as well as our silver-rankers.”

“The vampires are dead or escaped,” Farrah said. “What's left of the base personnel are mopping up the scattered ghouls left behind. We didn't get here in time to save your silver-rankers, though, I'm sorry. They're gone.”

Ingrid paled but kept staring down the sight of her rifle at Farrah.

“How do I know that you weren't the ones who killed them?”

“Because we didn't kill you,” Farrah said.

Farrah waited a long moment until Ingrid dropped the barrel of her gun to aim at the floor.

“Okay,” Farrah said. “Let's talk.”

Chapter 436

Pertinent Factor

“There are offices in the back of the warehouse,” Ingrid said. “We can sit down and talk there.”

As acting head of security for the weapon stockpile facility, Ingrid directed her team to secure the warehouse now that Jason and Farrah were no longer the chief concern. Ingrid knew that there was nothing she could do to stop them, so trying was pointless. Negotiation was her only recourse.

“You don’t need to worry about the door we left open,” Farrah said. “My magma elemental will handle anything that comes that way.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t put all my faith in a giant pile of lava,” Ingrid said. “While I’m sure it’s very powerful, we don’t know the conditions around the base.”

“I can help you with that,” Jason said. “Shade, give... Ingrid, was it? Give Ingrid a status update on the base.”

Ingrid’s people stirred as Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow and started reeling off the disposition of the surviving base personnel, ghouls and vampires located in it. Ingrid organised two teams of her people to go out and assist.

"Tell you what," Jason said. "As a gesture of goodwill, I'll send my lads off to help your people out. They can run around with your teams."

Jason conjured up Colin from his own blood, looking like a blood clone of Jason. Gordon manifested from Jason’s aura, strange and alien. Two Shade bodies emerged from Jason’s shadow.

“My mates can help you out,” Jason said. “Shade can guide your people where they need to be, while Colin and Gordon can be the muscle.”

“I’m not sending my people out with your pet monsters,” Ingrid said.

“Farrah,” Jason said, “Are you getting an Anisa vibe off Ingrid, here?”

“A little bit, yes,” Farrah said. “Didn’t your friend Humphrey...?”

“He did, yeah. Let’s hope this works out better.”

Ingrid sent her team off and Jason sent his familiars out separately to operate alone.

“I have to say, I’m a little offended,” Jason said. “You Network people are on our side, you know. At least, you should be. Except when you periodically decide to come after me for whatever reason, obviously. Because let me tell you, I’ve had about as much of that as I’m willing to put up with. The next time you all—”

“Not the time, Jason,” Farrah chastised.

“Sorry.”

In a farmhouse in Austria, abandoned since the monster surges, Gerling and his people had settled in to plan their next move. Gerling was being briefed by one of the people he had recruited from the Network. Jeff Campbell was underwhelming as a combatant, but an expert at intelligence gathering.

“Are you sure?” Gerling asked.

“This comes from people we planted in the Network branches years ago and are now pretty highly placed in the Global Defence Network,” Jeff said.

“We planted?” Gerling asked.

“Sorry, Boss; that the US Network put in place. The plants are still using the old communications protocols, or they were, at least. I’m pretty sure they know we’ve gone rogue, by now, so anything they feed us going forward is questionable. This was the last intel we grabbed before the news went widespread. There is a chance this is some kind of trap, but I’ve had enough independent verification that I’m confident it’s solid.”

“Do we have a timeline?” Gerling asked.

“No, Boss. You know better than most what it’s like trying to get Asano to do what you want. When they went to pitch this to him, they rounded up everyone they could that he wouldn’t punch on sight. Flew them all the way out from Australia.”

“And this permanent dimensional space in France. It’s a known factor?”

“Yes, boss. It has two apertures, both of which have powerful sealing magic put in place when the Lyon branch was keeping it a secret.”

“We’re going to want to catch Asano inside,” Gerling said. “You are looking into getting us past those seals, right?”

“Of course,” Jeff said. “I’ve been looking into high-level members of the Lyon branch from that time, but after they were found out, the International Committee spirited them away. My contacts in Europe aren’t as solid as the US, so I haven’t had any luck digging them out.”

“Then why are you smiling?” Gerling asked.

“Because the guy who was running the whole secret dimensional space project for Lyon was never caught. He got out early and defected to the EOA. He’s currently one of their leaders and we have a line on him in Los Angeles.”

“He’s protected, I take it,” Gerling said.

“Yes, boss. The best protection the EOA has to offer.”

Gerling grinned.

"Is that all?"

Ingrid took Jason and Farrah to the offices in the back of the warehouse, where the rest of the department staff were still holed up. They went into a conference room where Jason and Farrah were on one side of the table while Ingrid and Travis sat on the other.

"Who are you, exactly?" Farrah asked Travis.

"Travis Noble. I know who you are, of course. You're Farrah Hurin and you were born in a whole other universe. I'd love to get your perspective on what—"

"Not the time, Travis," Ingrid said.

"Sorry," Travis said.

"This is the acting head of the Special Munition Stockpile Division," Ingrid said.

"Neither of you are the permanent occupants of your positions," Farrah observed.

"Did your bosses go off to fight the vampires?"

"My commander did," Ingrid said. "The previous department head for the SMSD went AWOL with Jack Gerling."

"Please tell me he didn't take a bunch of dangerous weapons with him," Jason said.

"That's an odd position, coming from someone looking to steal a nuclear bomb," Ingrid said. "Why not just ask the Network for it, if you're using it for legitimate reasons?"

"We don't work with the Network anymore," Jason said. "They asked us to do this and we agreed but we're doing it our way. The Network is neither trustworthy nor reliable."

"The Network has been protecting the Earth from magic for centuries," Ingrid said. "Surely you can see we're needed now more than ever?"

"Which Network?" Jason asked. "The GDN? The True Network? The Chinese, the USA? Not exactly acting on a singular purpose, are you? Which one do you even belong to?"

"This is a joint facility that ignores factional disagreements. To act with that singular purpose you wanted."

"Jason," Farrah chided, "we did not come here to make this woman question her loyalties. You're taking us further from what we want, not closer to it."

"Ingrid, you won't get them on board with the unity line," Travis said. "The Network has kidnapped Mr Asano twice, along with killing his friend, his girlfriend and his brother. They only kidnapped Miss Hurin once, but they tortured her for several weeks. Sorry to bring it up."

Ingrid looked from Travis to Jason and Farrah.

"Did that truly happen?" she asked.

“Yes,” Farrah said and looked Travis over. He looked about nine years old with his boyish features and overeager expression. She was catching the same smell off him she got from Itsuki, the Japanese essence user fascinated with Jason.

“Want to guess how much of that was for the sake of protecting the world from magic?” Jason asked.

“Jason,” Farrah said forcefully. “I get it, but that’s not why we’re here.”

“You’re right,” Jason said, standing up. “I’m not going to be helpful, here. You sort it out while I go help my pet monsters clean up the leftovers.”

Shade rose from Jason’s shadow. Jason stepped into it and vanished, after which Shade sank into Farrah’s shadow.

“Jason understands very well what it is to be powerless,” Farrah told Ingrid and Travis. “Now that he has power for himself, he finds feeling powerless increasingly intolerable. It’s something of a right of passage for the strong. Given how weak everyone in this world is, he feels a constant temptation to just do and take what he wants. He knows that it’s wrong but until we leave for the other world and he’s surrounded by people truly more powerful than him, he’s going to keep sliding.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Ingrid asked.

“Because I need you to understand that we’re not negotiating over what we came here for. We’re taking it and you don’t get a say. We’re negotiating over how smoothly that goes and you have very little to offer.”

“It’s even less than you think,” Ingrid said. “We can’t access the most dangerous weapons. They’re in an underground vault with physical and magical protections that make this warehouse look like an open-air café. The only people who can access it are dead outside.”

Farrah looked to her shadow, as if waiting for something.

“What is it?” Ingrid asked.

“I was waiting to see if Jason would come back,” Farrah said, her voice cold. “He can sense every aura on this base and individually observe them across distances that normally you don’t see until category four. Your aura control is not bad but he knows that you just lied to me as well as I do. He’s also listening to us through his shadow. I don’t know if you’re stalling for time or trying to bluff me but now we’ve reached the point where negotiations have broken down. You are going to answer my questions and if you lie to me again, I’m putting you down. If you refuse to answer, I’m putting you down. If you try to stop me, not only am I putting you down but I’m putting your people down and none of you

are getting back up again. You have no further chances to push my forbearance, is that understood?"

Ingrid stared at Farrah before finally and reluctantly nodding.

"Alright," Farrah said. "I can break into this vault but having you open it up would be much easier. What does that require?"

Ingrid looked at Travis.

"As department head, he can do it," she said. "He requires two access keys, though, which we don't have."

"Who does?"

"The commander and deputy base commander each have one, carried around their necks."

"Silver-rakers?"

"Yes."

"Shade?" Farrah asked.

"Mr Asano is working on it as we speak, Miss Hurin."

"Thank you, Shade. Next question."

Farrah turned to Travis.

"You seemed very convinced that you could help us. Why is that?"

Ingrid gave Travis a sharp look and Farrah slapped a hand down on the wooden table between them. Under Farrah's palm, the wood started to blacken and smoke. Ingrid grimaced but said nothing.

"Travis?" Farrah asked.

"I was brought here as part of a project to rework our enhanced ordnance," Travis said. "I was never meant to be in charge. I was chosen because of my college research on creating specialised weaponry using quintessence."

"You studied magic in a school?"

"My family has been Network predating the War of Independence," Travis said. "The US has had magical teaching institutions for more than a hundred years. These days we mostly pass them off as fake colleges."

"Fake colleges?" Ingrid asked, despite herself.

"Yeah," Travis said. "Usually we pass them off as scams, like those institutions that give out shady doctorates to religious nuts so they can pass themselves off as scientists. Or the ones that are straight-up confidence schemes. There are so many and they hardly ever get cracked down on, so we pass ours off as just more of them. If the FBI or someone does take a look, they get gently nudged in another direction."

"That sounds incredibly corrupt," Ingrid said.

"You're surprised?" Jason's voice came from Farrah's shadow.

"Jason..." Farrah said.

Shade rose again and Jason emerged, this time with his hood up and his eerie eyes shining in its impenetrable darkness. He dropped two keys onto the table, both wet with blood.

"The gold-rank vampires got to them before we arrived," Jason said. "I'm sorry."

He vanished once again and Farrah turned to Travis.

"Tell me about your research," she said.

"Well," Travis said, "the basic premise is to not just make weapons that have enhanced power but to have the exact right properties to face specific enemies. In the last few decades, the entities appearing in dimensional spaces have grown stronger at a rate that exceeds the weapons we've developed to fight them. Many people are working on ways to make weapons stronger but the tiers of magic always present a bottleneck in advancement. My approach is to avoid that bottleneck through specialisation. Improving effectiveness without needing to increase the power."

"Through quintessence, you said?" Farrah asked.

"Exactly," Travis said. "Quintessence is perfect because it holds such specific energy. Take your standard magic energy pistol that fires off blasts of force and heat. They're efficient and effective against most things, but their power is limited. If we give up the force and heat for energy infused with sun quintessence, though, it loses out against most things but becomes much more powerful against vampires. I've already stocked an armoury here on base with anti-vampire weapons. Ingrid, could you take out your pistol?"

Ingrid pulled her pistol and placed it on the table. Her assault rifle was leaning against her thigh, her hand having not moved from it since they sat down.

"I made this gun," Travis said, tapping the pistol with a finger. "Fire quintessence like this one has is much easier to come by than sun, but it's still quite effective against vampires. Plus, it retains more general usability because fire works pretty well against most things."

"We were surprised at how well the normal soldiers were holding up against ghouls," Farrah said. "We need something a lot more powerful than a few enhanced guns, though."

"That's been my big project," Travis said. "It's why I knew I could help you. I've been working on a nuclear device where the modifications are much more comprehensive than just adding flavour to the damage output. I've been working on converting the power of a nuclear detonation into sunlight power, using a special matrix of category-three sun

quintessence. Category four would have been better, obviously, but they won't let me have any until I get a working prototype."

"If it doesn't work, why are we talking?" Farrah asked.

"It's not that it doesn't work," Travis said. "You're not from our world and I don't know if yours has an equivalent, but a nuclear device is unconscionably powerful. Too powerful to just go setting off anywhere. It's why I've been working on completely converting the output into energy that only affects vampires. The goal is to take it into the middle of a city, wipe out the vampires and leave the people and infrastructure untouched. It's not currently usable because while it will wreck vampires, it'll also turn wherever it is into a hole in the ground."

"Sounds like a winner," Jason's voice came from Farrah's shadow. "We'll take that, thank you."

"You still need our cooperation," Ingrid said. "You can take the device, but that doesn't mean you know how to use it."

"I'm willing to help," Travis said.

In a flash of movement, Ingrid had the pistol pointed at Travis's head.

"Ingrid?" Travis asked, his voice having gone up an octave.

"Now," Ingrid said, staring at Farrah. "Let's revisit that negotiating position."

"Oh, you shouldn't have done that," Farrah said, getting to her feet. "I can't help you now."

"Without him, you can't make the device work," Ingrid said.

"It doesn't matter," Farrah said. "You shouldn't have turned on your own guy. You're just one more Network lackey with no loyalty, now. Jason's not going to concede anything, whatever you or I say. To be honest, I'm fine with that."

"He doesn't have a choice. If he thinks he can teleport in here and take my gun before I pull the trigger, he's very much mistaken," Ingrid said. "I have the swift essence. I'm almost as fast as a category three."

"You're underestimating Jason's willingness to suffer the consequences of his principles," Farrah said. "Put your gun down or he'll kill you, whatever you do to Travis, here. I might even save him the time."

"Uh, I think there's a pertinent factor that both of you have already forgotten," Travis said.

"And what's that?" Farrah asked, her eyes not leaving Ingrid.

Travis snapped his fingers and Ingrid's pistol fell to pieces.

"I made that gun," he said.

Chapter 437

More of a Focus on Nipples

Travis skittered around to Farrah's side of the table.

"Ohmygodthatwasterrifying."

He warily glanced over at Ingrid.

"And weirdly kind of hot."

Ingrid and Farrah both turned flat looks on him.

"What?" he asked them.

"I get it," Jason said, appearing from the shadows and patting him on the back. "Not super appropriate, but I won't go throwing stones in that regard."

Jason turned his gaze on Ingrid. All she could see under his hood was the shifting blue, silver and gold of his eyes.

"So, this is where you kill me and all my people?" she asked.

"Yes," Farrah said.

"No," Jason said.

"But I promised," Farrah said.

"We're thieves and she's doing her duty as best she can. Who am I to begrudge someone a bold, desperate move?"

"Yours keep getting you killed. How are people going to learn consequences?"

"How does dying teach you consequences?"

"You're teaching the next person," Farrah said.

"If you kill them, how's the next person going to find out?"

"There's usually someone who gets away. I really thought you'd come down on the other side of this after she turned on one of her own people."

"She sucks, yeah, but you don't execute prisoners because they suck."

"I am never getting used to this world," Farrah said. "I want to go home."

"We will. Soon. You probably still shouldn't execute prisoners there either, though."

"What if she tries something again?" Farrah asked.

"At that point, she's just asking for it," Jason said.

Farrah turned an eager gaze on Ingrid.

"So," Jason said. "Where is that vault?"

Knowing he had limited time before Asano made his way into the astral space, Gerling had 'borrowed' the fastest magically-enhanced plane the Chinese Network had in

Europe. The Chinese Network didn't share the joint operation bases in Germany with the other Network factions, having set up their own outpost in Austria. Just across the border from eastern Slovakia, it was another zone with higher than average magic.

Gerling used the plane for a whirlwind visit back to the US, grabbing Adrien Barbou and getting back out of the country within an hour. Speed, however, came at the cost of discretion.

"You should have come along quietly," Gerling said. "Dead superheroes don't look good on the news."

Barbou was handcuffed and suppression-collared in a seat of the plane. His clothes were dusty and torn, with bloodstains being all that remained of superficial wounds that had already healed. Gerling was sitting across from him, their seats facing one another over a table.

"The Building did have a door, you know," Barbou said.

"Not on the nineteenth floor," Gerling said. "I guess it doesn't have a nineteenth floor anymore, either."

"You're a mindless thug."

Gerling sneered.

"You kept a woman in a basement and tortured her for weeks and you want to criticise me about brutality?"

"Is that what this is about? The outworlders? You've run into Asano twice now, right? Are the other category fours making fun of you because you can't catch him?"

"Let me be clear, Barbou: you'll be doing two things during our time together. One, whatever the hell I tell you. Two, shutting the hell up. Note that neither of those things includes asking questions."

"They do if you tell me to ask questions," Barbou said. "You need to be more precise with your rules, Gerling."

Barbou didn't see the punch coming, Gerling's gold rank speed having him back in his seat before Barbou's senses registered impact.

"I hear Asano is mouthy too," Gerling said.

Barbou winced as he pushed his nose back into line with his cuffed hands, which were wetted by the free-flowing blood.

"You're going to help me access the permanent dimensional space in Saint-Étienne," Gerling said.

"You want to catch Asano while he's going after the vampires there?" Barbou asked with a wince. "You shouldn't be going after him, Gerling. Not yet."

“And why is that?” Gerling asked.

“He’s not lying about saving the world. I’ve learned only a little about what he’s doing and how. If he fails, we’re all done.”

“I do believe that he’s saving the world,” Gerling said. “He keeps getting distracted, though. Not only is he going to France to kill some vampires but he didn’t even head straight there. Right now, he’s in Germany. The vampires started the war by hitting up the Network strongholds in central Europe and Asano is there fighting them off.”

Gerling got up and left the cabin, coming back shortly with a beer.

“Picked up a taste for the German stuff while I was there,” he said, holding up the can. “Hard to get reliably, just now, but my assistant is a resourceful woman.”

He took an appreciative sip.

“Very nice. Now, Asano. He’s letting himself be distracted, time and again, which tells me that whatever he’s saving the world from, he’s not in a rush. And the fact that he’s always been vague at best about what he’s saving it from and why tells me that there’s a reason he doesn’t want us to know. This means that whatever he’s doing and however he’s doing it, it’s vulnerable somehow. The power can be taken from him and I’m going to take it. I’ll save the damn world myself.”

“It can’t be taken,” Barbou said. His bronze-rank recovery had repaired his nose, Gerling having held back to teach a lesson rather than do real harm. Healing did not clean the blood from Barbou’s nose, however, which had painted his mouth and chin red.

“What do you know about it?” Gerling asked.

“Not much,” Barbou said. “My boss never told me much, presumably because of a potential situation like this one.”

“Your boss Mr North?”

“Yes. He doesn’t share secrets but I’ve put some pieces together. Things he’s told me in passing or let slip in conversation. I think he’s lonely.”

“Lonely?”

“I’m quite sure he’s older and more powerful than anyone realises,” Barbou said, “and I’m certain he’s not human. I believe he’s older than the Network itself. He’s mentioned the Network founder few times and I think Mr North knew him well. Hated him, but loved him too, I think.”

“Would your boss want you telling me this?”

“I’ve ever been a vessel subject to the prevailing winds,” Barbou said. “Network, EOA. I’ll jump ship to the vampires if they win. Right now, the prevailing wind is you.”

“Then tell me more. Everything you know about Asano and his secrets.”

"I don't know what it is that Asano is using to save the world," Barbou said, "but originally it should have been possible to take it from him. Mr North always intended for Asano to have it, but it was always meant to be possible to take it away."

"A contingency if Asano didn't do what North wanted," Gerling surmised.

"Exactly," Barbou said. "I only learned any of this because North was flustered when he returned after Asano claimed the item. Told me things I don't think he otherwise would. Asano somehow absorbed the item, permanently claiming its power for himself. That disturbed Mr North. I've never seen him shaken like that, before or since."

"So, the item is gone?" Gerling asked.

"Yes," Barbou said.

"Convenient," Gerling said. "Your boss just happened to have a slip-up and reveal the exact right information to dissuade me from doing the exact thing you just told me I shouldn't do?"

"The fact that I knew that is why I said it," Barbou told him. "If you want to argue yourself in circles to do what you want, regardless of the truth, you don't need me for that."

"Very true," Gerling said and punched Barbou again.

"Madam?" Farrah asked as she shrugged on what looked like an oversized and overstuffed hiker's pack. The pack was extremely rugged, due to the hundreds of kilograms it was holding up. It was designed such that only superhuman strength could carry it as a backpack.

"Medium Atomic Demolition Munition," Travis explained. "M.A.D.M. We call it the madam. Well, I do. The base commander called it 'stop fannying about and get back to work, Travis.' Or he used to, I guess."

"I don't think he was talking about the bomb," Farrah said.

"No, I'm pretty sure he was," Travis said. "Those were his exact words when I asked him about it."

"He literally said your name," Farrah said.

"I did think that was odd," Travis admitted.

Farrah ran both hands over her face.

"I know this feeling," she complained.

"What feeling?" Travis asked.

"Never mind. Let's just get out of here."

"Okay," Travis said as they walked out of the vault. Farrah moved carefully as while the pack might have been easy to lift with her strength, the weight distribution threatened

to topple her over. Jason was keeping an eye on Ingrid in the control room of the underground bunker that contained the vault.

“You can lock it up,” Travis called out and Ingrid pressed the button that set the ponderous door to slowly shut. She looked at the two access keys in the control console but didn't take them.

“Go ahead,” Jason said. “Give them to whoever ends up in charge of this place.”

Ingrid hesitated a moment before taking the keys and hanging their chains around her neck. She ignored the blood as she slipped them under her tactical vest. All four people went up the stairs from the underground bunker, back into the main warehouse. Ingrid's security team looked unhappy but none were foolish enough to make a move.

“I'm sorry it worked out this way,” Jason said to Ingrid. “Not enough that I won't do it, but still.”

“Individuals shouldn't have the kind of unfettered power that you have,” Ingrid told him.

“You're right,” Jason said. “But institutions inevitably focus more on perpetuating their influence instead of whatever their original ideologies may have been. People and rules. The answer is somewhere in the middle but it's always in flux and never quite right. People need rules or we turn into monsters, but if we choose rules over people, people get ground up in the machine. In the end, we do the best we can with what we have.”

“Do we,” Ingrid said.

“I hope we do,” Jason said. “I'll mess it up, you can trust that.”

He glanced at Farrah.

“Find people you trust to keep yourself in check, Ingrid. Otherwise, you'll find yourself pointing a gun at the nice boy who has a crush on you.”

“What?” Travis asked as he and Farrah stepped into the control room. “I mean, who? What? I have no idea what you're...”

He sighed.

“...oh dear.”

“You need to work on that aura control, Travis,” Jason said with a chuckle. “Your emotions are a little too on your sleeve.”

“Let's get out of here,” Farrah said to Travis. “Is there anything you need to take?”

“Wait,” Ingrid said. “Travis, you're going with them?”

“Ingrid,” Travis said. “After all this, the work I came here to do isn't going to resume anytime soon. I could sit around playing stockpile administrator while whoever ends up in charge sorts out the mess, but every single person in my department would be better at

that than me. Instead of counting crates, I'd rather use what I'm good at to make a difference."

"You just want to go off and play hero with your new celebrity friend," Ingrid accused.

"Yeah, probably," Travis admitted. "But look around, Ingrid. The world could use a few more heroes."

"Oh, nice," Jason said. "We could call you Gun Man, but he's a villain."

"From Tongan Ninja?" Travis asked.

"You've seen Tongan Ninja?" Jason asked.

"Only about twelve times."

"We should watch it on the plane," Jason said. "You need to grab anything on the way out?"

"My research notes. Oh, and my sandwich from the break room. It's hard to find good food, these days and I put a lot of effort into getting the ingredients."

"Oh, nice," Jason said as the pair headed off. "You know where a guy can get some flour around here? I'm going to make a strudel."

"That makes sense," Travis said as they walked away. "We are in Germany. Do you have apples?"

"Magic apples."

"Oh, wow. Wait, aren't magic apples usually evil?"

"These are the good ones," Jason said.

"That's exactly what you'd tell someone if you wanted them to eat an evil magic apple."

Farrah shook her head and followed after them.

"Great," she muttered. "There's two of them now."

"The runway is probably damaged and there'll be ghouls everywhere, alive or dead," Travis said. "Taking off might be hard. Maybe your familiar should turn into a helicopter instead of a plane. He can do that, right?"

"He isn't a runway kind of guy," Jason said.

Darkness stormed out of Jason's shadow and took the form of a plane hovering in the air.

"Your familiar turns into a VTOL private plane?" Travis exclaimed. "It looks like a spaceship designed by a ninja. Are you Batman?"

"Batman doesn't have powers," Jason said.

“And Jason doesn’t have ice skate boots,” Farrah added. Jason and Travis turned to look at her.

“Since when do you know anything about Batman?” Jason asked her. “And why is that the first thing that comes to mind about him?”

“People kept talking about Batman,” she said. “I looked him up. There was more of a focus on nipples than I expected.”

Chapter 438

The Job That's in Front of You

After arriving in France, Jason created a modest boat from his cloud flask on an isolated stretch of the river Furan. The plan was to get some proper rest and make plans before heading downriver to Saint-Étienne. It also gave Travis time to modify the nuke, as well as instruct Jason and Farrah on its use.

The three were out on a covered deck. It was a cold winter day but that didn't worry the essence users. Jason and Farrah were in chairs while Travis sat on the floor in front of the semi-disassembled atomic device.

"The first thing I need to do is disable the function that stops it from being placed in dimensional spaces," Travis explained. "It's a safety feature to prevent people quietly pocketing a nuclear weapon but that's exactly what you'll need to do."

"I don't think that lugging it around on my back is a good plan," Jason said.

"I'm still not sold on you going alone," Farrah said.

"The key is going to be stealth, not power," Jason said.

"I can be stealthy," Farrah insisted.

"Yes," Jason said with a wry smile. "The volcano essence is famous for its discretion. If we get discovered after sneaking into the middle of a vampire nest, we aren't fighting our way back out. If I get found, I can get myself unfound."

"Fine," she conceded. "But you have to promise me something."

"What's that?" Jason asked.

"There's going to be people in there; regular people that they've rounded up to turn into ghouls or lesser vampires. Even just to feed on. Don't try and rescue them."

"Farrah..."

"No," Farrah said. "I know what you're like. You'll go in there, see people caged up or some such and get it into your head that you can somehow get them out before you set off the bomb. You can't. You have a problem with understanding your limits and that pushes you forward, but this isn't about you. It isn't even about the victims in that astral space. It's about all the damage the things in that place will do if they aren't stopped. It's about striking a heavy blow against the vampires, especially after the attacks in Germany. This is about arresting the momentum before they sweep over countless people."

"But if I see a way—"

“No,” Farrah said. “It's not a choice of saving them or not, Jason. It's a choice of a quick, clean death in white-hot fire or being turned into a monster. Or food. That's all you can do for them.”

Jason hung his head.

“Fine,” he mumbled.

“I need to hear you say it,” Farrah said, unyielding.

He looked up at her with angry eyes.

“I said fine.”

“Promise me, Jason.”

His face twisted in a snarl.

“I promise, alright? I'll go in there and kill a bunch of innocent people who, even as we speak, are probably hoping that people like us come along and save them.”

“Okay,” Travis said, getting to his feet. “I need to go in the other room. I left my thinly-veiled excuse to leave you two alone in there.”

They watched him go, the tense atmosphere at least a little diffused.

“You're not a superhero, Jason, whatever they might say on the television. That's just an image being sold. A story you tell yourself.”

“Like adventurer? It doesn't matter what we call ourselves, Farrah. It's what we do that matters.”

“No, Jason. All that matters are the consequences of what we do. It doesn't matter if you try and save those people. It only matters if they get saved and they won't. Even if you somehow extracted them from the astral space, this is vampire territory, now. You think that the astral space apertures are just sitting out in the open with no vampires guarding them? You and I might be able to handle it, but what about the people you have somehow managed to sneak away from the army of enemies? You just told me that I couldn't go in because I wasn't stealthy enough.”

“I know all this, Farrah.”

“Of course you do; you're not an idiot. You have this bad habit of acting like one, though. That's fine when the only person you're putting on the line is yourself, but those days are behind you. Rufus told you from the very beginning that if you choose this life, you'll end up responsible for others. You can ignore that, and plenty do, but is that the person you want to be?”

“No,” Jason said.

“Of course it's not,” Farrah said, her voice softening and her shoulders losing their tension. “Look, Jason, I know that you want to be the guy who saves the day with some

crazy plan. It's nice when you can do that. You saved my life because you walked back into a sacrifice chamber full of cultists when any sane person would have run like the wind. That's amazing, but sometimes there is no crazy plan. You have to do the job that's in front of you, even when doing the job is awful."

"You sound like Rufus," Jason said.

"Sometimes I have to," Farrah said with a smile. "Look, I never liked the Network's plan to have us strike-force our way through this astral space. I don't think they ever really bought the whole saving the world thing. Their idea feels like a long shot they were happy to take because they know we're done with them and don't care if we die trying. If we do, they can just try the bloody invasion approach and spend the bodies it takes to get it done instead. But now we've got Travis and his bomb. Sneak in, sneak out is a plan that actually sounds workable."

"He's a good kid."

"Of course you like him," Farrah said. "He's basically you from when we first met. It's a good thing he's eavesdropping because he could stand to learn the lessons you have trouble taking in."

They heard the sound of someone tripping over in the cabin next to them.

Jason went over the arming sequence with Travis until he was confident he would get it right, even if he found himself doing so under extreme conditions. Without more information about what awaited him in the astral space, he had to assume things would go wrong.

"I've stripped out everything I put in to limit the physical blast," Travis explained. "The force quintessence you gave me should enhance the blast instead, although it was a bit of a rush job. Without extensive testing, I can't be sure how effective it will be. I can guarantee you a great big blast, infused with a boatload of sun magic. It's only a question of how big. The best estimate I can give you is very."

Farrah handed Jason some sheets of paper.

"Study this," she said. "If you perform this ritual before placing the bomb, there's less chance of it being discovered in the time between you setting it and getting out."

"If I'd only kept my damn tongue in front of the Builder's lackey, I could have set it off on the spot and made sure," Jason said. "There are worse ways to spend a life."

"If you'd held your tongue, you wouldn't have been you," Farrah said. "And if you weren't you, I'd have died in the desert and some blood cultist would be running around with your apocalypse monster."

“His what?” Travis asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jason said.

“She just said apocalypse monster. I worry if someone puts mayonnaise on my sandwich and you want me to ignore an apocalypse monster.”

“Stop talking about him like that,” Jason said. “You’ll hurt his feelings.”

“It’s an apocalypse monster,” Travis said. “Do its feelings matter?”

“It’s an apocalypse monster,” Jason said. “I’d say they really, really do.”

“It’s time to go,” Farrah said.

“I think this warrants more discussion,” Travis said.

Jason shook his head.

“Just tell him the story while I’m gone,” he said. “Maybe show him some recording crystals.”

“While you just casually head off for a stroll, yeah,” Farrah said. “Just remember that the priority is coming back alive.”

“Don’t worry,” Jason said. “I’m definitely not the kind of guy who goes off and gets himself killed all the time.”

The astral space had two apertures. One was in Saint-Étienne, while the other was more isolated. Jason chose the Saint-Étienne aperture because it would likely be more guarded. He could gather intel that might help him and if he couldn’t slip through undetected, the other aperture was still there to try.

Saint-Étienne was almost unrecognisable from Jason’s previous visit. It had been a major centre of Network activity from the moment it was discovered that the Lyon branch had been hiding the astral space, just weeks after Jason’s return to Earth. The Network’s International Committee had purged the Lyon branch and seized control, turning the astral space into a spirit coin farm.

The vampiric takeover in France had been one of the most hard-fought in Europe, pitting some of the Network’s most powerful people and resources against many of the strongest ancient vampires to arise. The gold-rank vampires were relatively small in number, but without gold-ranked essence users to confront them, the Network had been pushed out in a series of destructive clashes.

The Saint-Étienne astral space was a critical strategic asset, so the city had suffered more than most in the struggle to control it. Jason found it looking more like Beirut in the eighties than the French metropolis it has been. The resemblance to a war zone didn’t

stop with the destroyed buildings, either. The city was thick with an occupying force, vampires of all ranks keeping both normal humans and ghouls both penned up cages.

For the humans, their cages were more like chain-link pens that would be easy enough to escape for anyone willing to brave the razor wire at the top. The patrolling vampires were the true disincentive to escape. The ghouls were in actual reinforced cages with thick metal bars.

The magic around the astral space was very low, barely increased despite the general increase in magic levels worldwide. This meant that even low-rank vampires were largely unimpeded by the sun. Combined with the presence of the astral space, it became obvious why the vampires had fought so hard to claim the area.

Jason had no problems moving through the shadows of the ruined city, scoping out the terrible conditions. The humans in their huge pens were left largely exposed to the elements, with only a scattering of blankets. He sensed dead among them that the vampires hadn't bothered to remove; the old and young too weak to resist the winter.

Examining the ghoul cages from relatively close, Jason realised that while they looking strong, they should not have been enough to hold the ghouls. The bars were magically enhanced, with faint runes carved into the metal.

This started to answer the open question of how vampires, with their lack of ritual magic, managed to use the sealed astral space apertures. The Lyon branch had established permanent seals that could be open or closed but would take a very long time to break into with ritual magic.

The Cabal, including the vampires, had little to no ritual magic expertise. The materials were generally sourced in proto-spaces, over which the Network had held a monopoly. Jason had heard of some vampires wielding blood magic but material reinforcement rituals, while ordinary to the Network, were beyond the Cabal.

It seemed likely that the vampires had seduced away or suborned some of the Networks ritualists during their conquest of Europe. Jason had not extended his senses to search for essence users because vampires had sensitive aura senses and could possibly detect him.

Exploring the occupied section of the city for more information, he discovered that it was serving as some kind of transport hub. Along with people being trucked in and ghouls being trucked out, there were also crates with some kind of equipment. Discreetly opening one for a look, it had the appearance of medical equipment. It was imbued with magic, however, and Jason suspected it was part of the program to make ghouls on a wider scale than vampires could on their own.

While searching around, Jason spotted some of the ritualists he had postulated about. They appeared to be enslaved, iron-rankers with foot manacles being forced to perform magical tasks like checking and maintaining the ghouls cages.

Leaving them be, with Farrah's admonitions echoing in his head, Jason turned his attention to the astral space aperture. He couldn't enter a true astral space from anywhere, the way he could with a proto-space, but he could ignore the seal on the aperture. He had magically examined the seal in the past and knew that with his skill level at the time, it would take weeks to crack the seal open with ritual magic.

The essence users he'd seen around didn't seem up to the task, having observed them at work. He guessed there were more capable ones inside the astral space, probably ones who had been part of the team managing the astral space before the vampires took over.

The aperture was contained in the only newly-constructed building he had seen, which appeared to be a brick warehouse. From the crude and functional aesthetic, its construction had prioritised speed and sturdiness. The magical alarms in place were clearly slapped together, to the point that Jason could bypass them just by manipulating his aura a little.

From listening in on the vampires, Jason discovered that the aperture was only periodically unsealed, at which point there would be a flood of activity in and out. During those periods, the aperture was heavily guarded and could be resealed at a moment's notice, should anything like a Network attack take place. Outside of those times, the guard was reduced but not entirely removed.

It was not hard to infiltrate the building and Jason slipped through the aperture without so much as a ripple of aura.

Chapter 439

Going Suspiciously Well

The astral space was a fog-filled realm of dilapidated manors and ruined castles, rising from a sea of mist. They were connected by crumbling stone bridges that spanned between them and Jason's instincts told him that descending into the mist would be a Very Bad Idea. With poor visibility and murky light, it looked like a place that should have had vampires all along.

Jason's previous visit was one of his most violent episodes, slaughtering Network personnel and EOA superhumans alike in his bloody determination to rescue Farrah. The environment was perfect for a shadowy stalker of Jason's ilk, which had not changed. This time he didn't slaughter his way through but moved unnoticed; another unremarkable shadow in the mist.

As he and Farrah had surmised, Jason found pens for humans, like those outside. For good or ill, these were mostly empty, while the ghoul cages here were filled to capacity. He estimated they would likely open up the astral space to ship out more people, soon. Jason unhappily but resolutely left them be, seeking out the place where the conversion process took place.

The primary goal of Jason's mission was to eliminate the infrastructure that allowed the ghoul creation process to be franchised out. The secondary target was the operation already pumping out undead monstrosities, along with the man behind it all.

The people of Makassar were victims twice over; once when they were killed and again when turned into the unquiet dead. They still haunted Jason's dreams and he would very much like to send the man who desecrated them to meet Shade's father. His preference would be for a long, personal encounter but he would accept nuking the man into atoms. Any ghouls and vampires that died in the process were gravy.

Gerling and his small team of silver-rankers chose differently from Jason when it came to invading the astral space. They chose the more isolated aperture and they chose assault over stealth. After eliminating the vampires guarding the entrance, they put Barbou to work cracking open the seal.

"I can't even be certain that I will still be able to access it," Barbou warned as he finished drawing the ritual circle. "Unless they haven't reconfigured the seal at all since..."

The moment he completed the seal, the invisible aperture shimmered into being.

"I guess they haven't," Barbou said. "That's just unprofessional."

The Chinese gold-ranker, Chen, was travelling along a French road in the back of a van. His fellow occupant was very unusual, but someone Jason would have recognised.

"You have executed the design adequately," Shako said, looking at the device in the van with them, strapped in place.

"And if I do this, you will deliver me the power that Asano is using to save the world?" Chen said.

"Yes," Shako said. "While Asano is still able to act, I am unable to intervene. He stole the device to repair this world from its creator and antagonists prevent him from making another. Only if Asano dies and the device is lost will he be permitted to create another, for this world will still need to be saved."

"Asano is elusive and resourceful," Chen said. "The place he has created for himself is a stronghold for him. This is a rare chance to catch him exposed, but could we not just send gold rankers into the astral space?"

"Asano is slippery," Shako said. "Even death has failed to stop him. He must be annihilated by forces that make sure his soul leaves for the realm of the dead, never to return."

"Couldn't you go in yourself to make sure?"

"I am restricted twice over," Shako said. "This avatar you see before you is merely a weak projection. The entry of my true self would damage your already fragile world. I am also bound by the same restrictions that protect Asano. I can teach and guide, as I have in helping you construct this device, but I cannot act."

"I'm worried that this will be dangerous if our world truly is as fragile as you say," Chen said. "A dimensional bomb, fuelled by a reality core."

"It is not a bomb, as you understand it," Shako said. "It will break down the astral space, annihilating everyone and everything inside. Asano will be gone, Gerling will be gone and you will have struck a great blow against the vampire threat. Your nation will be on the path from leading the world to dominating it. Then you will save it, not just solidifying this outcome but positioning you as the most prominent member of the most dominant force on this planet."

"I don't do this for my own glory," Chen said.

"Of course not," Shako said.

“Loud explosions are for the outside,” Gerling said. The vampires just inside the aperture had been eliminated with speed but Gerling held off on using his abilities. His explosive powers would be like sending up a signal flare.

“We move fast and take down who we must as quick and quiet as possible,” Gerling said. “The objective is to find Asano.”

Gerling had recruited someone very specific for the purposes of chasing down Jason. A silver-ranker with the light and trap essences, he was an expert in purging shadows.

“You realise this plan is idiotic,” Barbou said. “You think you can just randomly find him by checking shadows? You don’t even know if he’s here yet, or been and gone.”

“We’re doing more than checking shadows,” Gerling said. “We’re going to lace the shadows around this aperture with light traps that will reveal his location to us.”

“And if he uses the other aperture?” Barbou asked.

“My second team is attacking it from the outside,” Gerling said. “They’ll use a device that destabilises apertures, making it unusable for hours.”

“You have a second team? Are you sure they can handle the forces at the other aperture?”

“They’re silver-rank elites from the US,” Gerling said. “They scouted it out and signalled me the good-to-go before we came in.

“And if Asano doesn’t show up in your window?”

“He’s already inside. You see, all those people studying the magic town Asano made haven’t been idle. They might not have deciphered much, but they did find a way to tell whether Asano was in direct contact with the town. Something about magical resonance; I don’t pretend to understand. What it means, though, is that they can detect when Asano goes out of range, and they’re confident that Asano’s range covers the planet.”

“So, if he’s out of range,” Barbou realised, “he’s entered a dimensional space.”

“Now you’re getting it,” Gerling said.

“Surprisingly well-prepared, for a semi-shaved ape.”

Gerling punched Barbou in the face again.

When Gerling had assaulted the area external to the astral space aperture, he had used his powers to full effect. With the aperture sealed, no communication was possible so he had been free to go all out. It had originally been a nondescript spot by an empty road, outside the city. After it was revealed to the International Committee, a secondary outpost was built, which had been taken over by the vampires. The outpost was now in ruins, and

what was left was painted red by the combination of Gerling's explosive powers and the vampires that previously occupied it.

Chen's van arrived after the fact. The normal van was not as fast as a gold ranker but was far less suspicious should a gold-rank vampire be around with their powerful senses. There were plenty of delivery vehicles on the road since the humans the vampires held prisoner needed to eat or die.

"He hasn't changed," Chen said, looking around the ruined outpost. "Such a barbarian."

The van had contained only Chen, Shako and a silver-rank driver, who was carrying the drum containing the dimension collapsing device.

"My information is that the seal is sophisticated and difficult to open," Chen said as he and Shako looked at the spot in which the invisible aperture resided. Shako snorted disdain and held out a hand. Stone lines in the shape of a ritual circle rose from the concrete floor and the aperture bloomed into being.

"Didn't even need an incantation," Shako said derisively. "What passes for magic here is an embarrassment."

Chen went through the aperture to make sure nothing was waiting for them on the other side, found the vampires there dead and came back.

"Do we need to take it deep into the dimensional space?" Chen asked.

"No," Shako said. "You can set it off right on the other side."

"You heard him," Chen told the driver. "Set the timer for ten seconds and get out."

"This is going surprisingly smoothly," Jason whispered. There was no one close by but he was not going to tempt fate and the hearing of gold-rank vampires.

"This appears to be the least trafficked room within this central area," Shade said.

"The bomb is unlikely to be discovered in the time it takes to exit the astral space."

They were in an old wine cellar, the racks mostly rotted and the only bottles remaining in shards on the floor. What had once been a manor above had been completely wiped away and replaced with the most disgusting place Jason had encountered since the kitchen of a cannibal cult. Somewhere between an abattoir and a manufacturing plant, it combined grisly exsanguination with industrial production.

Jason completed the ritual to hide the bomb's presence then activated it according to Travis' instructions. He had gone over it again and again until he remembered the relatively simple process perfectly but he checked it against his notes anyway. Once he was certain, he set the timer and left.

Slinking through the dark, he restrained his aura as much as he could, knowing there were gold-rank vampires about. Restraining his aura diminished his supernatural senses that relied on it, but he only needed to sense far enough to avoid danger. As he made his way from the most populated, and therefore dangerous, area, things were going suspiciously well. Just as he had that thought, he sensed a powerful wave of dimensional energy move across the astral space like a tsunami.

“Oh, come on,” he complained. “I didn’t even say it out loud.”

-
- A dimensional event has triggered the collapse of the astral space you are in.
 - Your ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has a stabilising effect on the immediate space around you and will maintain a section of physical reality around you that will not collapse.
 - The presence of physical space that cannot be collapsed has anchored the collapsing astral space. Due to conditions in the physical reality to which the astral space is connected, a transformation event has been triggered.
 - A transformation zone has been triggered. Due to being coterminous to an area of disintegrating dimensional space, the transformation zone will demonstrate abnormal properties.

“Are you kidding me? Again?”

Jason looked around as the ubiquitous fog started to take on a rainbow hue. He was standing atop a stone spire rising from the fog and covered by a castle, most of which had collapsed away. The fog started to coalesce, almost into a liquid, and started rolling away from him to reveal more of the collapsed castle.

The castle itself started to change, dissolving into mist as well, but this did not share the rainbow colour of the space around him. It even retained the shape of the castle from which it had dissolved and then expanded to replace the missing sections.

-
- The transformation zone has formed an abnormal genesis space. Your ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has stabilised a section of that space.
 - Your ability [Spirit Domain] is asserting authority over the stabilised space and forming a spirit domain. Abnormal effects will not occur within your spirit domain but anomalous effects will attack your spirit domain in an attempt to homogenise it with the remainder of the transformation zone.
-

Jason watched as a castle made of clouds was made from the ruins of what came before. The rainbow energy forming from the fog became a bubble surrounding the castle.

- You have established a permanent spirit domain. The maximum total area your spirit domains can cover is limited by your soul strength and your rank. Current amount of maximum spirit domain established: 3287%. Increase your rank to increase your maximum total spirit domain size.
 - Once genesis space had formed territories, abnormalities will begin to attack your spirit domain. You may expand your spirit domain by expanding it into other territories within genesis space.
-

Jason ran a hand over his face.

“Farrah is going to be so mad I didn’t bring her. Wait, what about the nuke?”

Outside the astral space, Shako looked at the dissolving aperture, his face filled with rage.

“No! What is this? WHAT DID YOU DO?”

“We have to go!” Chen yelled.

The mass of dimensional energy was plain for both of them to sense, like the outer edges of a tropical storm. Shako ignored him and Chen shot away, as fast as his gold-rank speed would take him. Only when he was well clear of the dimensional forces did Chen stop and turn around. Initially invisible, those forces had taken on a rainbow hue before being sealed away inside the dome of a transformation zone as it shimmered into being. Chen trembled as he looked at it.

“What did I do?”

Chapter 440

One of Asano's Secrets

By the time Jason expanded his spirit domain into a fourth territory, the enemies were growing truly dangerous. Although extremely weak for their rank, they were still gold-rank entities and with each territory Jason claimed, the attacking anomalies grew stronger. In the previous transformation zone, Jason had sent off the gold-rankers before the transformation zone reacted by making the anomalies that rank as well. Jason assumed that since the anomalies here were gold rank, the transformation zone was reacting to the most powerful of the vampires caught up in it.

If it weren't for the fact that Jason retained all his essence abilities this time, he would have struggled to handle even the first territory. Possessing the spirit domain power from the inception of the transformation zone shielded Jason's territory from the negative effects of the transformation zone at large.

The fourth territory was similar to the astral space it had been formed from, being filled with eerie, obscuring mist. It lacked the chasms spanned by crumbling bridges, but there were still crumbling gothic buildings. Most of it was made up of woodland, though, the mist drifting between trees with ethereal silver leaves. Every so often, Jason would find one with a pale white peach dangling from a branch, which he plucked and stowed away.

Item: [Ghost Fruit] (gold rank, common)

Fruit that contains an otherworldly power (consumable, food).

- **Effect:** For a moderate period after consumption, any magical damage inflicted by essence abilities or other innate powers adds disruptive-force damage in addition to the normal damage.

It would have been useful for confronting the ghost-like anomalies that appeared to attack Jason but consuming gold-rank food would do him more harm than good. Fortunately, his powers were able to treat the incorporeal entities as if they were flesh and blood using the afflictions he had picked up at silver rank.

-
- **[Mortality] (affliction, magic):** Negates immunity to curses. This includes intrinsic immunities such as from not having a soul or not being alive. Cannot be cleansed while any curse affliction is in effect.
 - **[Blood From a Stone] (affliction, magic):** Negates immunity to blood and poison effects. This includes intrinsic immunities, such as from not having a biology or

corporeal form. Entities without blood can bleed while under this effect. Cannot be cleansed while any blood or poison affliction is in effect.

- [Weakness of the Flesh] (affliction, magic): Negates immunities to disease and necrotic damage. This includes intrinsic immunities, such as from not having a biology or corporeal form. Cannot be cleansed while any disease affliction is in effect.

The afflictions led to the odd sight of ghosts dying like living creatures, leaving behind ectoplasm laced with blood and rot. With the sheer number of them, it left the misty forest dripping in foul goo.

When the final ghost fell, Jason waited for the zone boss to appear, fingers crossed. “Please be the marshmallow man. Please be the marshmallow man.”

When he sensed another almost featureless ghost appear, only much larger, Jason was disappointed. He held his hands out to his sides and cast a spell.

“As your lives were mine to reap, so your deaths are mine to harvest.”

By making them vulnerable to blood effects, Jason could drain the energy from the ghost-like anomalies as if it were life force, drawing it in and absorbing it in a huge wave.

-
- You have gained instances of [Blood Frenzy] through the ability [Blood Harvest].
 - You have reached the maximum number of instances of [Blood Frenzy]. Further instances will be converted to instances of [Blood of the Immortal].
 - You have gained instances of [Blood of the Immortal] through the ability [Blood Harvest].

This was the secret to Jason fighting the gold-rank anomalies as they grew stronger. Blood frenzy was a buff that increased his speed and recovery, allowing him to at least partially keep up with a gold-ranker’s speed, even if he couldn’t quite match it. The heightened recovery attribute boosted the effectiveness of his many self-healing powers, including the potent healing of blood of the immortal. Triggered when Jason suffered damage, it was a potent but short-lived healing effect that would sustain Jason in the face of powerful attacks.

Jason looked at his familiars.

“Alright, gents. Back to work.”

“Normally essence users caught in a transformation are rendered unconscious throughout the process but aren’t changed,” Barbou said. “The fact that we’re awake tells us that this is an abnormal transformation zone, similar to the one in Slovakia.”

He looked at Gerling.

“You’re the only one with any experience inside a zone like this.”

“Our abilities were sealed away in the last zone as well,” Gerling said. Given the circumstances, he wasn’t going to keep giving Barbou a hard time. The Frenchman might only be bronze-rank but he was a better ritualist than anyone Gerling had managed to recruit.

“What about ritual magic?” Barbou asked.

“We never tested it in the other transformation zone.”

“That should probably be our first step, then,” Barbou said. “I’ll try a loot ritual on one of these things that attacked us.”

“Asano called them anomalies,” Gerling said.

“He has a power that gives him information on the things he encounters, so he’d know,” Barbou said.

They were in a strange village that looked like a tourist attraction because it was scaled for knee-high people. The anomalies that attacked them were tiny villagers with farm implements, although there had been a carpet of them they had to eliminate. Without powers, they had been forced to physically crush them, which was surprisingly difficult.

While the power level of the anomalies was only around that of a low-end silver-rank monster, their true rank was gold and they proved rather resilient. Many of Gerling’s silver-rank minions had been injured, as well as rather disturbed after killing all the tiny people with their bare hands. Barbou had carefully avoided the fight, atop one of the diminutive buildings.

“What are these things?” one of Gerling’s men asked, holding up an orb swirling with black and red energy.

“PUT THAT DOWN,” Gerling roared. “You want to be a goddamn tentacle monster?”

“That’s where that thing came from?” Barbou said. “Interesting. Did you learn anything from Asano about them?”

“I think he had some way of using them to claim territory,” Gerling said.

“Which is presumably how he created his magic town,” Barbou surmised.

“I don’t think he used them in their current state, though,” Gerling said. “I think he changed them, somehow, but he never told us how.”

“In fairness,” Barbou said, “I wouldn’t have told you either.”

Jason returned to the cloud castle at the centre of his new spirit domain before he expanded into the next territory. Under Jason’s control, the castle had morphed from its

original design in the classic Western-European style to more of a palace. It was now made up of wings centred on the same pagoda to be found at the heart of Jason's first domain.

Rather than head for the pagoda, Jason went to check on the people housed in one of the palace wings. Jason had found more people turned into celestines, much like the farming family from his first domain. This time there were many more, the people who had been caged up in pens. Thus far, he had not encountered any of the ghouls that had been near them at the time.

Jason would have liked to bring out his grandmother to take them in hand but his spirit vault wouldn't open in the transformation space. Being a part of his spirit domain ability, it was tied up in reshaping the space around him. Jason could take items for his inventory, though, so he provided what food he could and left them to their own devices.

After checking on them and fending off most of their questions, he made his way to the pagoda. He rode the elevating platform to the top floor and surveyed his new domain from the balcony. Immediately around the palace were deep pools of water, spanned by narrow strips of land. When claiming that territory, anomalies had crawled up out of the water to attack.

The subsequent territories were quite disparate, from the fog forest to a city reminiscent of Prague, but not the real Prague. It was more like Prague from espionage movies, all shadowy corners and cobbled streets glistening from rain that always seemed to have just happened.

Jason took out one of the items he had taken from the ghost boss.

Item: [Dark Orb] (unranked, uncommon)

Contains the power to unseal the power of darkness. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Sealed [Dark Essence] ability.
- Effect: Unseals a random [Dark Essence] ability.
- You have 0 sealed dark essence abilities.

Like all bosses, its loot included an orb to unseal one of Jason's abilities, but this time he didn't need them. It was useless for its intended purpose but Jason took out another item; a doom orb left over from the last transformation zone. Jason completion of the transformation zone had changed it, however.

Item: [Eye of Doom (dormant)] (unranked, legendary)

Contains the potential to bestow spirit domains with the power of doom. Requires more energy before it can be used (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Spirit domain, [Doom] essence.
- Effect: Adds an additional passive effect to the wielder's spirit domains.
- Current power: 36%
- Consume essence orbs in order to increase power.

The eye of doom looked just like one of Gordon's eye orbs. Jason touched the two orbs together and the dark orb melted into the eye.

-
- Eye of Doom has accumulated power.
 - Effect: Adds an additional passive effect to the wielder's spirit domains.
 - Current power: 48%
 - Consume additional essence orbs in order to further increase power.

Jason put the orb away and leaned on the railing, his mind troubled. He was unsure if the Earth's dimensional boundary could handle another shake-up, meaning that Jason would need to completely stabilise the transformation zone to prevent it from punching a hole in the universe. Even with his full powers, he was uncertain about his chances.

With the anomalies growing closer to the strength of an ordinary gold-rank monster with each new territory, Jason was uncertain if he could claim it all. He had grave concerns about what awaited him in the final territories, which he had not risked claiming in the last transformation space.

Jason had two points of consolation that gave him hope for success. One was that his spirit domain already had its defences in place, helping fight against the anomalies in great number. It was growing harder with each expansion, though, as the anomalies became more resilient to the silver-rank effects. The second consolation was the most powerful weapon at Jason's disposal.

At first, Jason thought premature detonation of the nuke had triggered the transformation space, but while exploring the territories he found it again. Not only had the detonation sequence been cancelled but, like most things in the transformation zone, it

had been changed. Jason took it out from his inventory to examine it again. No longer a backpack nuke, it now took the form of an unwieldy rocket launcher.

Item: [Travis' Big Rocket] (silver rank, rare)

Definitely not compensating for anything (consumable, bazooka).

- **Effect:** Launches a rocket containing vast and destructive powers of solar and kinetic energy.

It was silver rank, as the original device had been, allowing Jason to make use of it. He just hoped that when the time came, it would be enough.

Gerling was looking at two orbs, sitting on the ground in front of him. They were identical in size but differed in the colour of the energies swirling within. One was black and red, the unstable cores Gerling was familiar with. The other was filled with blue, silver and gold light.

“So this is how he did it,” Gerling said.

“We can’t be certain,” Barbou said.

“No, this is it,” Gerling said with certainty.

Barbou’s loot ritual had produced the refined version of the orb.

“This is what Asano used to claim the transformation zone for himself,” Gerling said. “He has a loot power, so it was easy for him, but now it’s my turn. I’ve finally dug out one of Asano’s secrets.”

“Even assuming you’re right,” Barbou said, “which is quite an assumption, by the way. There is limited power in this orb. You’re going to need a lot of them if you want to start affected all this space around us.”

“So, you’ll loot more,” Gerling told him.

“I’ll need more spirit coins for that many looting rituals,” Barbou said.

Gerling grinned.

“We still have our racial powers,” he said. “And as it happens, Bennett, here, has a storage power as a racial gift, like Asano.”

“Sure do,” said Bennett, one of Gerling’s minions.

“Bennett,” Gerling said. “Adrien, here, is going to need some spirit coins. How many coins did we take from the base stockpile in Germany?”

“Roughly?” Bennett asked. “A metric ass-ton.”