

## 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.

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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.”

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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?”

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“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 amulet 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.”

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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.”