

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? Thank 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.”