

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 and 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.