

Chapter 316

Technical Issue

The transport helicopter touched down at a small airstrip in Sri Lanka. It was small and set amongst an expanse of grassland. The air was hot, thick and heavy with a tang of fuel, although the helicopter stirred it up. There was one hangar and a small, prefab office building. The runway itself was a line of hard-packed earth rather than asphalt.

Jason and the other survivors of the plane attack disembarked the helicopter and were met by Chathura, a local Network agent. He started leading them toward the smaller building.

"We're still prepping your plane," Chathura said loudly over the noise of the winding-down helicopter. "You'll be wheels up in twenty-five."

"We were negligent and only looked out for magical threats," Bruce told the him. "I hope you'll be more thorough than we were."

Bruce did not hide from his failure, being part of the security team which had failed to detect the bomb. Their oversight had gotten his team and a committee member killed, along with the crew of the plane. Once things calmed down enough that he had time to think, guilt had overtaken Bruce. He didn't shy away from it, instead owning the shame and letting it feed his resolve to do better in the future.

Jason did not feel guilt at having been the impetus for the trip in the first place. He was ready to pay the price to get Farrah back, be that a fresh stain on his conscience from a killing spree or sacrificing some pride and giving up on vengeance. Unfortunately, he wasn't the one paying.

The Network was at a body count of eight. While Jason felt responsible, as the impetus for the trip, he did not assign himself the blame. That, he placed on the people that took Farrah and planted the bomb; Adrien Barbou, anyone that worked for him and anyone he worked for.

Jason admitted to himself that he was glad his offer to let Barbou walk away in return for Farrah had been refused. He knew that he shouldn't be. Intellectually, he understood that if the offer was accepted, Farrah would be free and clear. But inside him was a visceral instinct that urge him to kill everyone between him and Farrah until she was free and all the people that hurt her were dead.

That, however, was an implausible power fantasy. He'd indulged in them before, to the cost of himself and others. He thought he could outplay Elspeth Arella and Lucian Lamprey, both season politicians. The reality was that he got himself tortured and Sophie

almost condemned to a life of exploitation and depravity. He'd only escaped through luck and protected Sophie by hiding under the skirts of Emir. He'd caused the problems and failed to be the solutions.

He was determined to avoid the same mistakes with Farrah. He was going to play it straight and clean, doing whatever it took to get her free. No tricks, no shortcuts. Any sacrifice he had to make personally, he would. His concern was the people around him. The aircrew hadn't deserved their fate, just for flying him.

He had a burning desire to make Barbou suffer everything done to Farrah ten times over but schooled himself to keep focused on the actual objective. Freeing Farrah took precedence over everything. His desires, his pride and his emotional satisfaction were nothing compared to that. He was still willing to let Barbou go if it guaranteed Farrah's safety and freedom.

First, he needed to reach France. The airstrip did not inspire confidence. The lush, tropical surrounds were gorgeous, but not what he wanted in an international airport.

"Seems a little out of the way," Jason said.

"Strictly speaking, this airstrip doesn't exist," Chathura explained. "It was built as part of a poaching operation but the poachers are long gone."

"Are you sure?" Bruce asked.

"Very," Chathura said. "Before we started working with the government, this place was a way station for us for dodging customs. We still use it when we don't want the government dogging us with questions. They like to be involved, which means slowing everything down."

"We appreciate the alacrity," Asya said. She had regained her senses on the yacht while awaiting the helicopter and all the surviving Network members had been healed up, at least physically. Emotionally, they remained shaken from the ordeal.

"Your Director of Operations is waiting to talk to you," Chathura said. "We have a video conference set up in the office. It seems that you weren't the only ones to experience some excitement."

Farrah didn't fight like Sophie or Jason. Their power sets encouraged agility and speed. Farrah's powers gave her enhanced strength and heavy stone armour, which lent itself to a very different style, more akin to Humphrey's. That was not to say that she was any less skilled, at least than Jason. What might seem like a crude, brawler style at first glance made expert use of weight, leverage and strength.

Constrained by the collar Farrah did not have her full, power-driven might, nor the mass of her stone armour. That was not enough to invalidate her fighting style, though. Her peak bronze attributes were superior to those of the EOA thugs, and even if they weren't, she'd fought monsters and people both that met or even matched her strength and weight.

There were more ways in which Farrah was unlike Jason. She didn't stop to banter, immediately leaping into action. She hurled herself forward, charging toward the closest thug like a freight train. Dropping her centre of gravity right before impact, he tumbled over her like she'd hit him with a car, the impact barely slowing her down. As he fell to the ground behind her, she was already crashing into the next thug. It was a glancing blow as she spun around and behind him, with an elbow to the ear as a going away present.

Her goal was Barbou and the key to her suppression collar. She knew that if she didn't get it off, there was no overcoming this many enemies. Breaking through the two thugs opened a path and she made straight for him, who raised a hand and blasted air in her direction.

Recognising the shimmer of a compressed air attack, she juked left. If it had caught her square she would have been sent tumbling back. As it was, it still arrested her forward momentum. It was enough time for the rest of the thugs to charge in for the attack while Barbou launched himself into the air and started hovering out of her reach.

Farrah was not a large woman, but she was stronger than the burly men coming at her. Where Jason or Sophie might dance around them, Farrah met offence with offence. The first thug was left staggering off, clutching an elbow now bending the wrong way. The next collapsed with a knee in the same condition while the third one hadn't guarded his face well enough and had a pair of thumbs dig into his eyes.

Despite her good start, Farrah was fighting against the inevitable. The leader of the thugs ordered half his men to dose up and they injected themselves with a boost that ramped them from bronze-rank to false-silver while the rest kept her occupied.

This was a special purpose squad, made up entirely of elite converted. They did not lose their rationality when they boosted and they had magic tattoos, adding a handful of magical abilities to their options. One used a power to conjured a rope that he used to catch one of Farrah's arms it. Once Barbou was out of reach the fight was already over. She made them pay a blood price for victory, though.

When she was finally unconscious on the ground, Barbou descended back down.

"Thanks for your help," the leader of the EOA said sarcastically. His name was Pavel and his French was lightly accented with Russian.

“Your elite team leaves a lot to be desired,” Barbou said, looking around. “One small woman with her powers suppressed took out half of your team.”

Fully half of the thugs were sitting or lying around, being tended by the rest. One of the ones that hadn’t boosted himself had been killed outright.

“If only we had an essence user to help us,” Pavel said. “I lost a team member because you lacked the courage to fight one power-suppressed woman. The survivors of my team will heal in time, but I think you need to supply some of those famous magic potions the Network has.”

“You think I just carry a bunch of healing potions around?” Barbou said.

“A self-serving prick like you?” Pavel said. “Yeah, I think you do.”

Barbou gave Pavel a flat look, then broke into a chuckle.

“Yes, very well.”

The abandoned water treatment plant had the two large vans that the EOA team had arrived in parked just inside the gate. Barbou moved over to a storage shed that looked like it hadn’t opened in decades, but the door slid open on a perfectly lubricated rail with barely a rumble of ball bearings. Inside was Barbou’s own car, a high-end Mercedes. He retrieved a padded box from the glove compartment containing a rack of vials, which he handed over to Pavel.

“Get your men on their feet and we’ll head straight for the fortress.”

“...we have her in custody,” Annabeth continued, “but Sebastian was out of the building before anyone was the wiser. Miranda was quite thorough in her preparations. Miranda herself was long gone before any of it happened and we have no idea where she is. If she’s smart she’ll stay under whatever rock she’s crawled under and never come out. If I get my hands on her I’m going to tear her hair out and strangle her with it.”

“So, what now?” Ketevan asked.

“Asano,” Annabeth said. “I assume that your intention is to continue to France?”

“It is,” Jason said.

“A plane is being made ready as we speak. The good news is that the Lyon branch had contacted the IC and is ready to fully cooperate. The bad news is that their operations director has gone rogue. The international Committee is assembling a response force to hunt him down; a multi-branch group from across Europe. If he’s defected to an EOA cell then he will potentially hand off dangerous secrets. Not just those of an Operations Director, either.”

“He’s trying to pass my friend off to the EOA since she has limited value to the Network?” Jason asked.

“That may only be the beginning, from what I’m learning,” Annabeth said. “You’ll be briefed further on landing. For now, get on your plane and go. If the rest of you would go, I’d like a word with Asano.”

Chathura led the other out, leaving Jason alone with Annabeth on the screen.

“Thank you for getting our people out,” Annabeth said. “Mr Corwin said that if it weren’t for you, you and he would have been the only survivors.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do anything for the others,” Jason said. “And don’t let Bruce sell his contribution short. My familiar was only able to stop one of the rockets that went by me. If Bruce hadn’t stopped the others, they would have found targets. Without him, there really wouldn’t have been other survivors.”

“Thank you for saying,” Annabeth said. “There was one other thing I wished to discuss, which was the security of your family. It’s unlikely but not impossible that Miranda, Sebastian or both will attempt to use them as some kind of leverage. I’ve dispatched a security team to watch over them and I suggest you enact whatever measures that you have in place.”

“Thank you, Anna. I set things in motions the moment you told us that Sebastian was loose.”

Emi arrived in front of her mother’s Castle Heads restaurant on a jet black motorised scooter. As she was taking off her helmet, she was approached by a pair of uniformed police officers.

“Miss, I’m afraid you can’t ride a motorised scooter in New South Wales, especially at your age. I know that a lot of stores are claiming it’s legal, but that isn’t the case.”

Emi absently meandered with a thoughtful expression, placing the officers between herself and the scooter. They turned to watch her.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about, officers,” she said, scratching her head with one hand while the helmet was tucked under the other arm.

“The scooter you were just riding,” one of the officers said.

“What scooter?” she asked, the picture of innocent confusion.

“This scoo... where did it go?”

While the two officers were looking at the spot the scooter had vanished from, Shade took the helmet from Emi and placed it into his storage space before snaking back into her shadow. The officers turned back to Emi.

“What happened to the scooter?” one of them asked.

“Are you alright, officers?” Emi asked. “Has it been a long shift?”

“Where’s your helmet?” the other officer asked.

“What helmet?”

“Young lady, what’s your name?”

Emi pulled out her phone and started recording video.

“Put that away,” one of the officers said.

“If you’re going to fine me for riding an imaginary scooter,” Emi said, “then I’m going to film this interaction for the hearing where I contest it. Would you please point to the scooter than you allege I was riding?”

“You little…”

“It’s not worth it,” the other officer said, putting a restraining hand on her partner’s arm. Just let it go.”

“You could have handled that in a much less provocative manner,” Shade told her.

“You seemed to go along with it quite smoothly,” Emi said.

“I know a man with similar proclivities. We should go talk to your mother.”

Behind her restaurant, Erika was talking to Jason through Shade while Emi was inside, devouring a panna cotta.

“This might take some getting used to,” Erika said.

“Well, there’s some stuff going on, so you’ll need to raise the bar for how quickly you can adjust to things. Talking through Shade is like using a phone, except he’s way, way better. Also, could you give me a panna cotta too?”

“Aren’t you on a plane to France?”

“I’m in Sri Lanka right now,” Jason said. “There was a technical issue with the plane and they’re switching us to a new one. Just give one to Shade, who can store it there, and bring it out here. It’s super handy.”

“You can teleport a dessert to Sri Lanka?”

“I have the power. Like He-Man, but with desserts instead of startling homo-eroticism.”

“Jason, I’m doors open in less than two hours. I don’t have time for you to be you. What’s this about?”

“You promise not to freak out?”

“No. Tell me anyway.”

“Okay, so this didn’t really come up in conversation, but last week I got a little bit kidnapped.”

“What?” Erika exclaimed.

“It’s fine. I unkidnapped myself almost immediately, and the guy responsible has been locked up ever since.”

“You were kidnapped?”

“I know,” Jason said. “It’s a whole thing, but we need to push on to what’s happening now. The guy escaped, which is not great, obviously. It’s just a precaution, but some security people will be arriving very soon to make sure he doesn’t come after you.”

“Why would he come after us?”

“I don’t think he would,” Jason said. “He may even think I died when my plane blew up.”

“WHAT?”