

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 fanning 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.”