

Chapter 438

The Job That's in Front of You

After arriving in France, Jason created a modest boat from his cloud flask on an isolated stretch of the river Furan. The plan was to get some proper rest and make plans before heading downriver to Saint-Étienne. It also gave Travis time to modify the nuke, as well as instruct Jason and Farrah on its use.

The three were out on a covered deck. It was a cold winter day but that didn't worry the essence users. Jason and Farrah were in chairs while Travis sat on the floor in front of the semi-disassembled atomic device.

"The first thing I need to do is disable the function that stops it from being placed in dimensional spaces," Travis explained. "It's a safety feature to prevent people quietly pocketing a nuclear weapon but that's exactly what you'll need to do."

"I don't think that lugging it around on my back is a good plan," Jason said.

"I'm still not sold on you going alone," Farrah said.

"The key is going to be stealth, not power," Jason said.

"I can be stealthy," Farrah insisted.

"Yes," Jason said with a wry smile. "The volcano essence is famous for its discretion. If we get discovered after sneaking into the middle of a vampire nest, we aren't fighting our way back out. If I get found, I can get myself unfound."

"Fine," she conceded. "But you have to promise me something."

"What's that?" Jason asked.

"There's going to be people in there; regular people that they've rounded up to turn into ghouls or lesser vampires. Even just to feed on. Don't try and rescue them."

"Farrah..."

"No," Farrah said. "I know what you're like. You'll go in there, see people caged up or some such and get it into your head that you can somehow get them out before you set off the bomb. You can't. You have a problem with understanding your limits and that pushes you forward, but this isn't about you. It isn't even about the victims in that astral space. It's about all the damage the things in that place will do if they aren't stopped. It's about striking a heavy blow against the vampires, especially after the attacks in Germany. This is about arresting the momentum before they sweep over countless people."

"But if I see a way—"

“No,” Farrah said. “It's not a choice of saving them or not, Jason. It's a choice of a quick, clean death in white-hot fire or being turned into a monster. Or food. That's all you can do for them.”

Jason hung his head.

“Fine,” he mumbled.

“I need to hear you say it,” Farrah said, unyielding.

He looked up at her with angry eyes.

“I said fine.”

“Promise me, Jason.”

His face twisted in a snarl.

“I promise, alright? I'll go in there and kill a bunch of innocent people who, even as we speak, are probably hoping that people like us come along and save them.”

“Okay,” Travis said, getting to his feet. “I need to go in the other room. I left my thinly-veiled excuse to leave you two alone in there.”

They watched him go, the tense atmosphere at least a little diffused.

“You're not a superhero, Jason, whatever they might say on the television. That's just an image being sold. A story you tell yourself.”

“Like adventurer? It doesn't matter what we call ourselves, Farrah. It's what we do that matters.”

“No, Jason. All that matters are the consequences of what we do. It doesn't matter if you try and save those people. It only matters if they get saved and they won't. Even if you somehow extracted them from the astral space, this is vampire territory, now. You think that the astral space apertures are just sitting out in the open with no vampires guarding them? You and I might be able to handle it, but what about the people you have somehow managed to sneak away from the army of enemies? You just told me that I couldn't go in because I wasn't stealthy enough.”

“I know all this, Farrah.”

“Of course you do; you're not an idiot. You have this bad habit of acting like one, though. That's fine when the only person you're putting on the line is yourself, but those days are behind you. Rufus told you from the very beginning that if you choose this life, you'll end up responsible for others. You can ignore that, and plenty do, but is that the person you want to be?”

“No,” Jason said.

“Of course it's not,” Farrah said, her voice softening and her shoulders losing their tension. “Look, Jason, I know that you want to be the guy who saves the day with some

crazy plan. It's nice when you can do that. You saved my life because you walked back into a sacrifice chamber full of cultists when any sane person would have run like the wind. That's amazing, but sometimes there is no crazy plan. You have to do the job that's in front of you, even when doing the job is awful."

"You sound like Rufus," Jason said.

"Sometimes I have to," Farrah said with a smile. "Look, I never liked the Network's plan to have us strike-force our way through this astral space. I don't think they ever really bought the whole saving the world thing. Their idea feels like a long shot they were happy to take because they know we're done with them and don't care if we die trying. If we do, they can just try the bloody invasion approach and spend the bodies it takes to get it done instead. But now we've got Travis and his bomb. Sneak in, sneak out is a plan that actually sounds workable."

"He's a good kid."

"Of course you like him," Farrah said. "He's basically you from when we first met. It's a good thing he's eavesdropping because he could stand to learn the lessons you have trouble taking in."

They heard the sound of someone tripping over in the cabin next to them.

Jason went over the arming sequence with Travis until he was confident he would get it right, even if he found himself doing so under extreme conditions. Without more information about what awaited him in the astral space, he had to assume things would go wrong.

"I've stripped out everything I put in to limit the physical blast," Travis explained. "The force quintessence you gave me should enhance the blast instead, although it was a bit of a rush job. Without extensive testing, I can't be sure how effective it will be. I can guarantee you a great big blast, infused with a boatload of sun magic. It's only a question of how big. The best estimate I can give you is very."

Farrah handed Jason some sheets of paper.

"Study this," she said. "If you perform this ritual before placing the bomb, there's less chance of it being discovered in the time between you setting it and getting out."

"If I'd only kept my damn tongue in front of the Builder's lackey, I could have set it off on the spot and made sure," Jason said. "There are worse ways to spend a life."

"If you'd held your tongue, you wouldn't have been you," Farrah said. "And if you weren't you, I'd have died in the desert and some blood cultist would be running around with your apocalypse monster."

“His what?” Travis asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jason said.

“She just said apocalypse monster. I worry if someone puts mayonnaise on my sandwich and you want me to ignore an apocalypse monster.”

“Stop talking about him like that,” Jason said. “You’ll hurt his feelings.”

“It’s an apocalypse monster,” Travis said. “Do its feelings matter?”

“It’s an apocalypse monster,” Jason said. “I’d say they really, really do.”

“It’s time to go,” Farrah said.

“I think this warrants more discussion,” Travis said.

Jason shook his head.

“Just tell him the story while I’m gone,” he said. “Maybe show him some recording crystals.”

“While you just casually head off for a stroll, yeah,” Farrah said. “Just remember that the priority is coming back alive.”

“Don’t worry,” Jason said. “I’m definitely not the kind of guy who goes off and gets himself killed all the time.”

The astral space had two apertures. One was in Saint-Étienne, while the other was more isolated. Jason chose the Saint-Étienne aperture because it would likely be more guarded. He could gather intel that might help him and if he couldn’t slip through undetected, the other aperture was still there to try.

Saint-Étienne was almost unrecognisable from Jason’s previous visit. It had been a major centre of Network activity from the moment it was discovered that the Lyon branch had been hiding the astral space, just weeks after Jason’s return to Earth. The Network’s International Committee had purged the Lyon branch and seized control, turning the astral space into a spirit coin farm.

The vampiric takeover in France had been one of the most hard-fought in Europe, pitting some of the Network’s most powerful people and resources against many of the strongest ancient vampires to arise. The gold-rank vampires were relatively small in number, but without gold-ranked essence users to confront them, the Network had been pushed out in a series of destructive clashes.

The Saint-Étienne astral space was a critical strategic asset, so the city had suffered more than most in the struggle to control it. Jason found it looking more like Beirut in the eighties than the French metropolis it has been. The resemblance to a war zone didn’t

stop with the destroyed buildings, either. The city was thick with an occupying force, vampires of all ranks keeping both normal humans and ghouls both penned up cages.

For the humans, their cages were more like chain-link pens that would be easy enough to escape for anyone willing to brave the razor wire at the top. The patrolling vampires were the true disincentive to escape. The ghouls were in actual reinforced cages with thick metal bars.

The magic around the astral space was very low, barely increased despite the general increase in magic levels worldwide. This meant that even low-rank vampires were largely unimpeded by the sun. Combined with the presence of the astral space, it became obvious why the vampires had fought so hard to claim the area.

Jason had no problems moving through the shadows of the ruined city, scoping out the terrible conditions. The humans in their huge pens were left largely exposed to the elements, with only a scattering of blankets. He sensed dead among them that the vampires hadn't bothered to remove; the old and young too weak to resist the winter.

Examining the ghoul cages from relatively close, Jason realised that while they looking strong, they should not have been enough to hold the ghouls. The bars were magically enhanced, with faint runes carved into the metal.

This started to answer the open question of how vampires, with their lack of ritual magic, managed to use the sealed astral space apertures. The Lyon branch had established permanent seals that could be open or closed but would take a very long time to break into with ritual magic.

The Cabal, including the vampires, had little to no ritual magic expertise. The materials were generally sourced in proto-spaces, over which the Network had held a monopoly. Jason had heard of some vampires wielding blood magic but material reinforcement rituals, while ordinary to the Network, were beyond the Cabal.

It seemed likely that the vampires had seduced away or suborned some of the Networks ritualists during their conquest of Europe. Jason had not extended his senses to search for essence users because vampires had sensitive aura senses and could possibly detect him.

Exploring the occupied section of the city for more information, he discovered that it was serving as some kind of transport hub. Along with people being trucked in and ghouls being trucked out, there were also crates with some kind of equipment. Discreetly opening one for a look, it had the appearance of medical equipment. It was imbued with magic, however, and Jason suspected it was part of the program to make ghouls on a wider scale than vampires could on their own.

While searching around, Jason spotted some of the ritualists he had postulated about. They appeared to be enslaved, iron-rankers with foot manacles being forced to perform magical tasks like checking and maintaining the ghouls cages.

Leaving them be, with Farrah's admonitions echoing in his head, Jason turned his attention to the astral space aperture. He couldn't enter a true astral space from anywhere, the way he could with a proto-space, but he could ignore the seal on the aperture. He had magically examined the seal in the past and knew that with his skill level at the time, it would take weeks to crack the seal open with ritual magic.

The essence users he'd seen around didn't seem up to the task, having observed them at work. He guessed there were more capable ones inside the astral space, probably ones who had been part of the team managing the astral space before the vampires took over.

The aperture was contained in the only newly-constructed building he had seen, which appeared to be a brick warehouse. From the crude and functional aesthetic, its construction had prioritised speed and sturdiness. The magical alarms in place were clearly slapped together, to the point that Jason could bypass them just by manipulating his aura a little.

From listening in on the vampires, Jason discovered that the aperture was only periodically unsealed, at which point there would be a flood of activity in and out. During those periods, the aperture was heavily guarded and could be resealed at a moment's notice, should anything like a Network attack take place. Outside of those times, the guard was reduced but not entirely removed.

It was not hard to infiltrate the building and Jason slipped through the aperture without so much as a ripple of aura.