

Chapter 321

Full Houseboat

Jason had his own unfortunate experiences with how essence users dealt with extreme trauma following periods of captivity. In the time he had spent recovering, he had learned a lot from the priest of the Healer and Rufus' mother, Arabelle Remore. In the weeks he had spent receiving their care, they had elucidated how the response and recovery of essence users tended to go.

Essence users went through their own variation on shock, as compared to normal people whose souls had not been magically reinforced. Following the trauma, essence users gained a grace period where their minds were stabilised by their souls. It was a defence mechanism that gave them a chance to seize a critical moment and escape their circumstances.

The price of which was that once the grace period was passed, their souls would enter a recovery state. Their powers were negatively affected and their mental state crashed, leaving them both fragile and vulnerable. Jason had experienced this himself, and it was not long into the first leg of their return to Australia that Farrah experienced that crash for herself.

Jason knew that there was little he could do for her at the moment, other than keep her safe. He didn't disembark as the plane stopped to refuel, remaining outside the sleeping cabin like a loyal guard dog. Only once he got her somewhere that she truly felt secure would she set out on the long path to recovery.

What that would look like, Jason was unsure. He didn't have access to experienced professionals like Arabelle or Carlos, the priest of the Healer that had helped him. He snorted a laugh at the irony of him, of all people, being disappointed at the lack of a priest.

Jason didn't bother waiting for the flight to arrive, portalling directly off the plane with a blank-faced Farrah. The interior of the houseboat managed to rouse a reaction as she looked around at the white and sunset colours of the cloud-stuff. He could sense the presence of his sister and her family but didn't announce his presence as he arrived in an empty cabin.

"Cloud house?"

"Yep," Jason said. "I won Emir's little contest."

"You met Emir?"

"Sure did," Jason said. "We have a lot to catch up on. I'm sorry I won't be able to help you as well as Arabelle would."

“Rufus’ mother? How much did I miss?”

“I’d love to tell you all about it,” Jason said. “Let’s get you settled in a room and I’ll make us some...”

Jason’s phone had been lost in the plane explosion and after jetting across the world and back, he didn’t even know what time it was.

“...lunch,” he guessed, based on the day outside.

Now that Farrah was secure, Jason's next concern was her recovery. Even if he could find a local trauma counsellor he could trust, the circumstances made it very tricky. Anyone who already knew about magic would still have a lot of catch-up to do and would come from one of the local magical powers. Jason didn't trust the Network or the Cabal to not view Farrah more as an opportunity than a victim, even if they did have the qualified staff.

Jason could find an unaffiliated specialist himself, but there was no way to help Farrah properly without inducting that person into the secrets of magic and alternate universes. That would cause problems with traumatising his new trauma counsellor and he needed someone who could help her with the culture shock.

In many ways, Jason himself was the best choice to help her as he had some relevant experiences, but that did not make him the equal of the people who had helped him through those experiences. He did not want to mess Farrah up more than she already was.

In the end, he decided to compromise. He would reach out to the Network and ask their healer, Gladys for potential options. First, he would need a new phone.

“Uncle Jason!”

The moment Jason appeared in the houseboat’s galley, his niece apparently confused the concepts of hugging and rugby tackles as she launched herself in his direction. He stood solid as a wall as she crashed into him, ruffling her hair affectionately.

“Uncle Jason...” she complained., straightening it with her fingers. He chuckled as he looked to her mother making lunch. Ian walked in from outside, holding the book he was reading. Ian greeted him with a welcoming smile, while Erika was giving him a scolding look.

“You have a lot of explaining to do,” she told Jason. “Like what’s going on with those sunglasses.”

“Jet lag,” Jason lied. “I’ll tell you all about my trip later. You know, it’s sometimes eerie how much you look like Mum when you’re cranky.”

“You do kind of look like Nanna,” Emi said, examining her mother’s face.

Erika’s nostrils flared and her eyes went wide.

“Now you really look like Nanna,” Emi said as her father held laughter back with tightly pressed lips.

“Explanations will have to wait, a couple of days,” Jason said. “I promised the men in black I’d stopped randomly telling people stuff before they enter into a secrecy agreement.”

“Since when do you have any respect for authority?” Erika asked.

“I’m always conscientious and respectful,” he lied, moving around the kitchen counter to catch his sister in a hug. She didn’t return it, so as not to get food stains on his clothes from her hands as she mixed spices.

“Once Emi goes off to play with Shade,” he whispered to her.

“Suffice to say,” Jason said, “that a friend of mine was in need of help and I helped her.”

“This is a mysterious magic friend?” Erika asked.

“Yes, although that requires its own explanation. I’ll make sure you’re up to speed before she’s ready to start meeting people. She’s in a rough way, right now, so don’t expect her to pop out and say hi. I’d appreciate if you could knock some food up for her. She doesn’t, strictly speaking, need to eat, but she could use the comfort in comfort food.”

“She’s here?” Erika asked.

“It’s a she?” Ian asked as sat his book on the counter and Jason glanced at the cover.

“The Shipping News,” he read from the cover. “I didn’t like it.”

“No?” Ian said. “I’m quite enjoying it.”

“It’s a problem of expectations,” Jason said. “From what I saw people saying on the internet, I was anticipating more action.”

“You know, you left Mum, Kaito and Amy in quite an uproar,” Erika said as Jason washed his hands to assist Erika. “Letting them in on it and then running off to Europe.”

“I know I need to talk to them,” Jason said, “but I have my own priorities, right now.”

“They’re coming around this afternoon,” Erika said. “I could have warned you if you had a phone. Why do you not have a phone, again?”

“I left it on the plane,” Jason said as he started chopping vegetables. “You could have told Shade. Actually, Shade could have told me.”

“Your instructions were to respect their privacy and only inform you if their activities put them in danger,” Shade’s voice came from Erika’s shadow.

“You know, I don’t love the constant surveillance,” Erika said.

“Non-negotiable,” Jason said, the usual joviality in his voice displaced by a hard edge that made them all turn their heads at him, Erika and Ian then sharing a glance. Jason kept chopping vegetables, seeming not to notice.

“Your knife skills are coming along,” Erika said, watching Jason’s hands move in a blur.

“The advantage of superhuman reflexes.”

“Uncle Jason,” Emi said, “is it fun being a superhero? I bet it’s lots of fun.”

“I’m not a superhero, Moppet.”

“You use the special powers you got in an alternate reality to protect people from danger while wearing an elaborate costume that hides your identity,” Emi said.

“She’s got you there,” Ian said. “You even have a superhero name. You know they’re still trying to figure out who the Starlight Rider is.”

“That’s not a good hero name,” Jason complained. “It sounds like a B-story hero that got cancelled in the seventies once the publisher realised it was a gay allegory.”

“Are we still going to have those people follow us around?” Emi asked.

“I’m not sure yet,” Jason said. “While I’m here, I’m all the security you need. I’ll probably be taking some trips, though, so we’ll see. I was planning to sort a lot of that out this afternoon but someone set up an impromptu family reunion. I have things to do today.”

“Yes,” Erika said. “You do.”

Kaito and Amy pulled into the marina behind a woman with long, dark hair in a classic convertible.

“Is that Asya Karadeniz?” Amy asked.

“Yep,” Kaito said. They pulled up just along from Asya as she was getting out of her car. She had a briefcase and an expensive, flattering pantsuit.

“Hello Asya,” Kaito said, getting out of the car. “You’re looking good.”

“Oh, hello Kai, Ames,” she greeted them, her eyes walking up and down Amy’s outfit as a small smile crept onto her mouth. “It’s been since the memorial, right?”

“Yeah,” Kaito said.

“Why are you here?” Amy asked.

“Work stuff,” she said. “I didn’t realise you’d be here when Jason asked me to come. Besides, I never properly thanked him for saving my life the other day.”

"Wait, what?" Kaito asked.

"Sorry, that's all classified, but maybe he'll tell you if you ask. Or maybe he won't; I don't know if he still tells you everything like he used to. I only heard what happened between you third-hand, although your marriage itself speaks volumes. Funny how things work out, isn't it? You even asked me out a few times, didn't you Kai? I'm going to go ahead, so I'll see you aboard."

They watched her set off down the dock.

"You asked her out?" Amy asked.

"What do you think she meant by Jason saving her life?" Kaito asked.

"Multiple times?"

"It was back in school," Kaito said. "It kind of threw me. I'd never been knocked back by a girl from a lower year before."

"How many lower year girls did you ask out, creeper?"

"She's seven months younger than me," Kaito said. "She's older than you."

"Oh, so you remember her birthday?"

"When did I ever not remember your birthday?" he asked.

"Fair enough," Amy said. "Don't think I didn't see you watching her sashay down the dock."

"How was that a sashay?" Kaito asked. "It was a saunter at most. Her shoes were too sensible for a proper sashay."

"She never wore heels," Amy said wistfully. "She was always an annoyingly elegant giraffe."

"You two didn't get along in school, did you?" Kaito asked.

"Not especially, no."

Jason and Erika watched Ian and Emi roar off on a pair of black jet skis.

"I wanted to have a talk," Jason said, "but we only have a few moments. Kaito and Amy are here, along with the person I'd actually planned to meet this afternoon."

Erika went to the side of the houseboat to look around at the car park where Kaito and Amy were talking to an attractive Turkish woman in a business suit.

"Did Shade tell you they were here?"

"I sensed them. I have magic powers, remember?"

She moved back and brushed his arm, as if to reassure herself he was really there.

"You feel different somehow," she said.

“I am. Come around for a drink tonight and I’ll catch you up on everything. I need a favour.”

“Sure, but you have to do one for me.”

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Wally has been bugging me about getting you on the new show. We’re filming new episodes all week, down next to the surf club.”

“Fine,” he chuckled. “If you can herd the family away tomorrow so I can get some things sorted out, I’ll be there Monday.”

Kaito and Amy stepped onto the houseboat just as an unfamiliar woman looking sleepy and with dishevelled hair stepped out of a cabin.

“Who are you?” she asked warily.

“I’m Amy, this is Kaito,” Amy said. “Who are you?”

She peered at them blearily.

“Wait, you’re the brother,” she said, pointing at Kaito before turning her finger on Amy. “Which would make you the one who...”

“Jason told you about us, then?” Kaito said.

“Yeah,” Farrah said. “Just to be clear, I’m on his side, so as far as I’m concerned, you can both jump overboard and drown each other.”

She wandered back into the cabin, the misty door sealing it off.

Chapter 322

A Wizard Did It

Amy and Kaito watched Farrah go back into her cabin.

“Do we know who that was?” Kaito asked. “She seemed kind of familiar.”

“It was hard to tell with the Japanese horror movie hair, but yeah.”

“Wait,” Kaito said. “What about that woman from Jason weird hologram recordings?

The one he said shoots lava.”

“I think you’re right,” Amy said. “What the hell has Jason got himself involved in?”

“Wasn’t she meant to be in another universe?”

“You realise how insane you sound, right?” Amy asked.

“Ames, I don’t know what’s happening. We went through a doorway that led to the other side of town. How do you explain that away?”

“That’s all I’ve been thinking about for days,” she said. “The problem is, every explanation I come up with seems less plausible than the last. If we’re talking about Jason setting up a wormhole generator in Erika’s bedroom, magic seems less ridiculous, somehow.”

“It’s past time that Jason gave us some answers.”

The arrival of Jason’s mother had not worked to alleviate Jason’s stress. With everyone in the bar lounge, he strove to explain things thoroughly. The constant stream of questions kept derailing things until he held his head between his hands and let out a groan.

“Mum, the answer is the same as it has been for your last five questions: because magic. You want to know why? Because a wizard did it, that’s why. And that wizard is me! I’m the wizard. Magic is real and I have it. I’m a magic man.”

He conjured his sinister dagger of red crystal and black obsidian.

“See this?” he continued his rant. “This is my magic knife. Don’t touch it because it’ll kill you super dead. Why? Because it’s magic.”

He casually tossed the blade away and it vanished in the air. He then tossed his sunglasses aside in the same manner.

“My eyes turned silver yesterday. That’s just what my life is now. Can you guess why? No, you can’t because it was magic, which hours of explanation is apparently insufficient to drill it into your tiny frigging brains! Asya. Could you explain how I saved us

when someone detonated a bomb in our plane? Actually, let me: it was magic. And awesomeness. All of you look around. You're sitting in chairs made of clouds."

He gestured down with both hands and all the cloud furniture sank into the floor, dumping the occupants. Jason gestured up and the furniture returned, lifting the fallen people as it arose.

"This whole houseboat is A: magic, and B: not a houseboat. It's a big magic cloud that I keep in a bottle like it's a genie."

At this point, everyone was looking on with scared expressions as Jason continued to fly right off the handle. He gestured to his left and Shade emerged from his shadow.

"This is Shade. Some of you have met Shade. His dad is what happens to you after you die, which is especially relevant to me because I've died twice already. The second time I came back from the dead, I even brought a friend. I should be with her right now because she spent the last two weeks getting tortured, but instead, I'm here teaching Intro to Sorcery to people who think I've got nothing better to do than answer their questions about the nature of the bloody universe. Well, I do and I'm sorry about catching you up in all this, Asya. I didn't realise I'd be having quite so many guests when I asked the Network to send someone. I should just let my friends take care of them. This is Gordon."

Gordon manifested on Jason's right with a surge of Jason's aura that washed over the room like a wave.

"I'm not even sure what Gordon's deal is," Jason said, "except he loves Judy Garland and he's a reality assassin. I don't know what that means, exactly, but it sounds really scary once you start to learn about reality, which I have because I'm an interdimensional warlock ninja."

Jason held out his hand, which became wet as blood seeped through it. Everyone in the room recoiled as leeches started spilling out of his hand to pile up on the floor. Bloody rags emerged from the pile to start binding it into shape.

"This is Colin," Jason said. "He needs a moment to gather himself together. When a super god was trying to possess me, he's the one who had my back. He's been with me from almost the very start and he has two purposes in life: adorable little dances and devouring every living thing on a planet."

Jason threw his arms out to his sides.

"I try to be a good guy, but it turns out I'm really bad at it and kill a lot of people. I've been back less than three weeks and I don't know how many people I've put in the ground. Asya, do you have numbers on that?"

"Uh... somewhere between thirty and fifty is the estimate," she said.

“Those people had it coming,” Jason said. “Some of them really had it coming and the only thing I feel bad about is that I don't feel bad about killing them. So here's what's going to happen now. Anyone who has questions can go to the media room and watch the recordings as much as they like. There's about a hundred and fifty hours of them and no one gets to ask any more questions until they've watched them all. If anyone tries asking me questions before then, they're getting a demonstration instead of an answer, and I showed you my portal ability instead of my other powers for a reason. You do not want a demonstration.”

Jason gestured and a portal arch rose from the floor, which he stepped through and vanished. His familiars followed, leaving a room of shell-shocked people staring at the arch, which remained in place. Erika was the first to recover, turning to Asya.

“So you and Jason went to school together?” she asked pleasantly.

“Um, yes,” Asya said.

“It's nice to reconnect with old friends,” Erika said, her voice then taking on the same flinty tone as Jason's. “Now tell me about the exploding plane.”

Jason stepped out into his soul garden. The sky reflected the sunny day outside his spirit vault, a warm breeze carrying the scent of flowers. He was glad that the garden didn't smell of blood and death, which he would have expected.

What it did smell like was Farrah. He knew that outworlders had a distinctive scent to them, which had been described as being like springtime, but it was hard to notice his own scent. It was only after catching her smell, once she was cleaned off, that he really experienced the fresh, clean scent for himself.

The garden had the same clean aroma, which combined with the unseasonal warmth to give the feel of a spring day. He took a deep, cleansing breath, something he hadn't done in a long time, and let the stress wash out of him.

The rear of the bottom deck had been lowered into the water to allow Ian and Emi to ride their jet skis directly onto it. The jet skis both burst into dark clouds that coalesced into the form of two of Shade's bodies. One disappeared into Emi's shadow, while the other vanished into the shadow of the upper deck. Ian and Emi were towelling themselves off when Erika came out, blatantly ogling her husband as he wiped down his wet body.

“Do it slower,” she said, a lecherous smile on her face. Ian started pulling the towel back and forth across his back to create what he mistakenly thought to be a sensuous look.

“Gross,” Emi said, wrinkling her nose at her parents making eyes at one another.

“Where’s Uncle Jason?”

“He got a bit frustrated with everyone,” Erika said. “I think we forgot while dealing with all the craziness he brought with him that he is dealing with his own stuff. He went through one of his arches but it won’t let anyone else in.”

“That must be his special place,” Emi said.

“Special place?” Erika asked, turning her attention from her husband.

“He told me about it,” Emi said. “It’s a place that’s not really real that only he can go to. I’m going to go have a look.”

Emi left her parents behind to go into the bar lounge, still wearing her swimsuit and rash shirt, with a towel slung over her shoulders. Ken had arrived with Kaito and Amy’s girls, the older of which, Hana, was telling her parents about her day with Poppy. It was a story with all the clinical accuracy one would expect from a four-year-old.

“...and then we ran under the sprinkler and a hippo came out.”

“A hippo,” Kaito said. “That must have been exciting.”

“No!” Hana said, stomping her foot. “She was a stupid hippo!”

Everyone was actively avoiding the darkness-filled obsidian arch with their eyes as if ignoring the weird magical thing in their midst could make it disappear. The only exceptions were baby Jace, who was straining her arms in its direction from within her mother’s firm grip, and Asya. Her eyes were locked thoughtfully on the arch as Emi wandered in. Emi didn’t recognise her, so immediately wandered over and stared at her.

“Who are you?” Emi asked.

Asya turned a curious gaze on Emi.

“I’m Asya. You must be Emi.”

“According to who?” Emi asked, voice filled with suspicion.

“I work for some people who’ve become very interested in your uncle. Also, you brought snacks out to our security people in their car. That was very nice of you.”

“They were healthy snacks, so it wasn’t that nice,” Emi said. “You’re one of the men in black? Aren’t you meant to try and blend into the background?”

“You think I don’t?” Asya asked.

“Oh, please,” Emi said. “No one wears an outfit that makes them look that good by accident. I like your shoes, though. They’re nice, but you can still run in them if you have to.”

“That’s the idea,” Asya said with a dry chuckle.

“Why are you here?” Emi asked.

"I was meant to be going over some points of an agreement with your uncle and my organisation, but I wandered into a family reunion."

"That was Mum," Emi said. "Nanna found out about all the magic stuff only for Uncle Jason to run off to Europe. She's been constantly pestering Mum ever since, plus she's figured out that Grandnanna was healed with magic."

"They sent me because I went to school with your uncles and Aunt Amy," Asya said. "I grew up in Castle Heads."

Emi narrowed her eyes at Asya.

"Did you make out with Uncle Kaito?"

"No, I did not," Asya said, affronted. "I was hoping Jason would have time for me today before I left," Asya said, "but I don't think things will be very productive today."

Emi turned to the archway.

"He's in there? It looks just like his teleport archways," she said.

"Have you ever gone through one?" Asya asked.

"Lots of times," Emi said. "Fourteen. I think that's a lot compared to most people, though."

"I've never travelled like that," Asya said wistfully.

"You haven't? Don't your secret magic people have a bunch of teleporters or something?"

"No," Asya said with a chuckle.

"Ask Uncle Jason. I'm sure he'll take you."

"What's it like?"

"Kind of like a theme park ride, except you get the whole ride in one second. You'll probably throw up the first time. And the second time."

"Did you?" Asya asked.

"Of course not," Emi said. "I'm not a scrub."

"Emi," Erika said with an admonishing tone as she walked into the bar lounge. "Leave Uncle Jason's friend alone, go shower off that saltwater and put on some clothes."

Emi glanced at the archway sitting dominant in the middle of the room before trotting off without another word. Erika moved closer to Asya, joining her in observing the arch.

"I always wondered how Jason ended up the way he is," Asya said absently. "After meeting your daughter, I'm starting to suspect that it's you."

Farrah didn't have Jason's connection to the cloud house, so her senses were unable to penetrate the walls to see if his family were still around. She'd been sitting in a cloud

chair in a daze, aside from the curry Jason had delivered for lunch that had briefly roused her with its vibrant scents and startling, complex flavours.

She suddenly found herself restless and left through the exterior wall that shimmered as she passed through. Jason's cloud house was far smaller than Emir's palace but the basic functions were the same. Meandering slowly around the lower deck, she contrasted the exterior of the houseboat to the interior.

The inside was familiar to her, not just from knowing Emir but from a magical aesthetic. The exterior of the houseboat, like Jason's world itself, was a façade belying the magic it secretly held.

She leaned against the wall, feeling lost in so many ways. She finally understood what Jason had felt when they first met. Captured by people with poor intentions with no understanding of what was happening or why. He had done the rescuing in both cases, which irked her, although the thought drew a smile in spite of herself.

The world around her had felt alien, as if its very nature was to reject her. The zone of magical density created by the houseboat was comforting, feeling more like home. It was an impressive feature, like a giant, perpetually active mana lamp. Emir had always been reticent about letting her poke around but perhaps Jason would be more amenable.

She resumed her slow wander, the glass exterior of the houseboat darkened from the outside to prevent anyone from seeing in. One of the walls shimmered and a dripping wet, naked child passed through it, pointing a finger at her.

"You're dead. Well, obviously you're not dead, but you died. You are Farrah, right?"

"I am. And you're naked."

The child yelped and ducked back through the wall, returning moments later with a towel wrapped around her.

"How are you alive?" Emi asked.

"I..."

"You must have come back with Uncle Jason right?" Emi interrupted.

"Yes, I..."

"But he didn't know because you didn't arrive in the same place," Emi reasoned, against cutting off Farrah's response. "You're the friend he needed to help in France, which he must have only just found out about, which is why he rushed off all of a sudden."

"You don't really need me to answer, do you?"

"You must have been in trouble and then he found out and got super-intense, which I could tell even when he was talking through Shade."

"Shade?"

“Something really bad must have happened to you.”

Emi clasped Farrah in a fierce hug as Farrah looked down at the tiny dynamo before awkwardly patting her on the head.

“I’m guessing you’re Emi?” Farrah said.

“Uncle Jason told you about me?” Emi asked, still violently comforting Farrah.

“He did,” Farrah said. “I see now that he might not have been telling me as much as warning me.”

Emi’s towel came loose and dropped onto the deck.

Chapter 323

The King of Everyone

Jason's spirit vault had undergone considerable change, which he discovered on his first entry since accepting the World-Phoenix's power. Fusing the physical and spiritual aspects of his being had a considerable impact on his spiritual space.

The garden itself didn't occupy any more space, which seemed to be a function of rank, but it was much changed from his last visit. It was now a largely hanging garden, with flower-wreathed bamboo trellises hanging over long sections of flagstone paths. The design was dense but immaculate, allowing the sun passage through the various trellis coverings and open sky areas to create artworks of sunlight and flowers.

In the section of the garden where the flowers represented his blood essence abilities, red flowers covered walls running either side of narrow pathways of blood-red flagstone. Overhead, more red flowers made a canopy that only allowed in dappled sunlight, giving the overall impression of walking through an artery.

The area dedicated to his sin essence had starkly contrasted flower beds of black, red, white and gold. Archways of hanging flowers carved the light into hard segmentations of light and shadow.

The dark essence area was now underground, the pathway leading into a subterranean cave system. Luminescent fungus and white flowers that shone like moonlight covered the walls while the floor of the cave was covered in silver grass that apparently required no photosynthesis. Even with the glow of flowers and fungi, it was hard to see in the dark and irregular natural caverns. Even Jason's power to see through darkness was suppressed, although it started working when he concentrated on it. It was, after all, his soul and he was ultimately in control.

The doom essence area used medium-sized trees to create different levels of light throughout. The paths were simple grass trails between bushes and trees. Some of the bushes were explosions of red and orange that, under the light coming through the trees looked like a fire. Other places had tall, narrow hedges covered in gold, white and silver flowers. The unobstructed light shining on them gave them an appearance reminiscent of Jason's transcendent finishing attacks.

A creek now led into the garden from under one of the walls, winding through the various sections of the garden and crossed by a series of small bridges. In the doom section, the bridges were rustic wood. The sin area had bridges of marbled black and

white obsidian. In the blood section, the creek was only heard and not seen, adding to the sensation of being inside a living vein.

The creek ultimately dropped from a small waterfall to pool in an underground fairy grotto, the only part of the dark section open to the sky. Even the dimmer parts of that chamber were filled with a rainbow of luminescent fungus, giving it an ethereal beauty.

As far as Jason could tell, the creek represented a trickle of power sourced directly from the astral. He suspected it was the reason he hadn't needed to take a spirit coin to stave off the magic deficit of Earth during the long plane flight.

At the heart of the garden, the gazebo had not only been fully integrated into the garden but transformed into a sprawling pavilion complex, centred on a three-storey pagoda. The marbled obsidian was more white than black, compared to the dark stone of the gazebo, and overgrown with vines and flowers.

Exploring the pagoda, the ground floor was the storage space for his inventory items. To outside observation the bottom floor had walls, but the inside was a different story. Instead of walls, the interior was a platform situated in a starry void. The contents of his inventory floated nearby and beyond that spread out an infinite expanse of stars, galaxies and nebulae. It was like standing in the centre of the universe.

"Bigger on the inside," he muttered. "I suppose I am too, for that matter."

There were two exits, in the form of apertures that reminded Jason of his portal arches. One was the archway through which the garden outside could be seen. The other was a ring floating in the ceiling, situated over an elevating platform, which Jason rode up to the next floor.

The second and third floors of the pagoda were open to the air, much like the old gazebo. The second story was a sitting area, complete with furniture, while the third storey was a meditation room with a luxurious floor of white moss that rivalled his cloud house for softness. Heading back down, he paused in the sitting area and looked at the chairs.

"Why more than one chair?"

He considered the changes to his soul garden had gone through since arriving back home. Until he gained the spirit vault, it had been an unchanging place, aside from the expansion when he ranked up. These new and rapid alterations were obviously a reflection of the changes to his soul. What he needed was some quiet time to adjust and consolidate but there were too many claimants on his time.

With that thought, his mind turned once more to things the new garden had mercifully distracted him from. He was soon back to dwelling on the frustration of his outburst toward the family.

“Damn it,” he scolded himself, his hands wringing impotently at his sides.

“You have a lot to deal with,” Shade said. His familiars had been comfortingly following him around like apocalyptic ducklings. “Miss Hurin’s care, the Network, your family. The changes to the very nature of your being.”

“I know,” Jason said.

“The man who tried to kidnap you and is now at large,” Shade continued to list off, “the EOA, the World-Phoenix, the mysterious painter...”

“I said I know,” Jason snapped, then his whole body sagged. “I’m sorry, Shade. Without you, I wouldn’t have kept my head above water this long. You deserve the opposite of being yelled at. How about a raise?”

“You don’t pay me,” Shade said.

“Of course I do,” Jason said. “I’ve been giving the money to Gordon every week to pass along, haven’t I Gordon?”

Jason’s nebulous familiar gave no reaction.

“See?” Jason said.

“No one will blame you for getting overwhelmed,” Shade said.

“You don’t know my mother that well,” Jason said. “I can’t allow myself to unleash like that. What if I lose control of my aura and give someone an aneurism? It’s stronger than ever and I’m increasingly finding it getting off the leash when I become emotional. The whole reason I ducked in here was that I could feel myself losing what little remained of my cool. The power disparity means that I don’t get to be the one who can’t control himself.”

He groaned, running his hands over his face.

“Shade, I don’t know what to do. I don’t see a path where I can do all the things I need to do without my head popping like a pimple from stress.”

Emi marched into the crowded bar lounge, dragging Farrah by the hand. After drying and putting on clothes, Emi had taken Farrah literally in hand and marched her into the bathroom of Emi’s cabin. She brushed out Farrah’s depression hair, returning her at least a semblance of the appearance she had in Jason’s recordings.

This allowed everyone who had seen the recordings to recognise her on her arrival in the bar lounge, leaving everyone but Asya startled by her arrival. This was double for Erika and Ian who, like Emi, had watched enough of them to learn Farrah’s fate. Asya had at least seen her when arranging Jason’s flight back to Australia.

Farrah’s gaze was drawn to Asya, whose iron-rank aura stood out amongst the normals. Farrah could feel the curiosity and nervousness of the woman, along with a faint

strain of fear and hostility. It wasn't that she viewed Farrah as a danger, but saw her as a more nebulous kind of threat. It wasn't something Farrah could unravel without knowing the woman and circumstances more.

"They've all seen Uncle Jason's recordings, so they all recognise you," Emi explained, ignoring the room's occupants as she pulled Farrah in the direction of the arch. "Not all of them know you're meant to be dead, though."

For her part, Farrah was arrested by the incongruous obsidian arch in the middle of the room. She had once found an identical one under a lake, the object of a mission her team had been sent on by Emir.

"How can this be here?" she whispered to herself.

"Oh, this?" Emi asked as they reached the arch. "Uncle Jason makes them."

"Farrah?" Erika asked, the first to gather her wits.

"That's my Mum," Emi explained.

"Jason's sister," Farrah said, turning to Erika. "He always spoke warmly of you."

"Erika Asano," she introduced herself. "Jason told us you were dead."

"I was," Farrah said.

"I thought you said we couldn't go in," Emi said to her mother. She was arm-deep in the shadow gate.

"It wasn't working for us," Erika said, reaching out herself. Her hand was stopped dead on reaching the darkness filling the arch.

"That's weird," Emi said. "Farrah, let's go find Uncle Jason."

Emi stepped through the arch, dragging Farrah through behind her. After they vanished, Asya stepped up next to Erika and likewise put her hand up against the darkness. It felt like cool, heavy crystal under her hand, completely unyielding.

"I don't suppose you can tell me what's going on?" Asya asked Erika.

"I think it might be better to watch Jason's recordings from while he was away," Erika said. "I don't think he'd mind you seeing them."

Jason was continuing to explore his new, densely packed garden.

"Mr Asano," Shade said. "I believe that something unexpected is about to happen."

"Oh?"

-
- [\[Emi Evans-Asano\] has entered your \[Spirit Vault\].](#)
 - [\[Farrah Hurin\] has entered your \[Spirit Vault\].](#)
-

"What?" Jason exclaimed. "That shouldn't be possible."

He was suddenly reminded of the moment he accepted the blessing from the World-Phoenix. At the time, his only concern had been getting to Farrah and he had closed the text wall his interface produced without looking at it. He wondered if there was a message log and his interface promptly supplied one, allowing him to find the discarded message.

-
- Ability [Nirvanic Transfiguration] has amalgamated your body and soul into a state that is both physical and spiritual. This state has altered your [Spirit Vault] ability to be a physical space that others can enter.
 - Only those who implicitly trust you will be able to enter your spiritual vault. Anything short of complete trust will prevent them from entering. You may seal the vault against any or all individuals. It is not possible to break into the spiritual vault by anyone without existing access to your soul, such as through a star seed or divinely-granted essence ability.
 - Anyone in your spiritual vault is under your power. They cannot use abilities or affect anything within the vault, including you and each other, with limited exceptions.
 - You and your familiars can affect people within your vault in almost any way, except for violating their souls, although you can attack their souls. They may be protected from your influence through a connection to a foreign element in your soul, if present, such as a star seed or divinely-granted essence ability.
 - You can expel or trap anyone within your spiritual vault, although individuals with a significantly greater soul sense than you may be able to force their way out. Individuals may resist expulsion through a connection to a foreign element in your soul.

“Damn.”

In his astral space, the normal rules of reality didn't apply and he controlled it all. He closed his eyes and the pavilion came into view, with Emi and Farrah looking around in surprise. Farrah looked much improved, the simple change of brushing her hair making a huge difference. She was still haggard but much more like her old self. That was a startling turnaround in just a day and one he didn't put much stock in. He knew that her ordeal wasn't something to simply brush off.

Jason vanished from where he was standing to appear in front of Emi and Farrah.

“Ladies,” he greeted. “I'm a little surprised to see you here.”

“What is this place?” Farrah asked as Emi goggled at Jason's teleportation.

“I've been in dimensional spaces created by essence abilities before,” Farrah said, “and this isn't that. My aura and magic senses aren't even working. Is this some spatial treasure the Order of the Reaper left behind?”

“No,” Jason said. “This is the inside of my soul.”

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Farrah said, then shrugged. “I suppose that’s never stopped you before.”

Jason threw her a grin.

“I see this one dug you out,” Jason said, ruffling Emi’s hair as she crankily pushed his hand away. “How are you doing?”

“Not the best I’ve ever been,” she admitted. “You?”

“I’m not going to complain, with everything you’ve just been though,” Jason said.

“Who am I kidding? Of course I am, but that can wait. You have no idea how happy I am to have you here.”

“Can you show us around, Uncle Jason?” Emi asked.

“Sure, although this is quite new to me,” Jason said. “I’ve been experiencing a lot of changes lately. How about we take a look around together?”

Emi slipped her hand into Jason’s and the trio started walking around the garden.

“So, this is what your soul looks like,” Farrah said. “It’s oddly tranquil. I would have expected something a little more erratic.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Jason said. “I’m a beacon of peace and harmony.”

They wandered the garden, Jason and Farrah keeping the topics light due to Emi’s presence. He thought back to the description of why they had accessed his spirit vault. The realisation that they trusted him to that degree filled him with warmth, soothing the raw nerves that had led to him hauling off on his family.

Emi delighted at every new sight, Jason saving the best for last. He finished the garden tour at the fairy grotto, then took them into the bottom floor of the pagoda to look out into the universe.

“It might be more impressive if your boxer shorts weren’t floating past,” Farrah said. Jason made a downward gesture and his inventory items dropped out of sight.

“I really needed this,” he said, squeezing Emi’s hand. “Emi, can you go tell your Mum that I’ve calmed down and I’ll be out in a while?”

“Okay,” she said cheerily, skipping out of the pagoda. The archways for his familiars and the vault doorway were still present in the pavilion. Once she was gone, Jason let his true weariness be revealed on his face.

“Something to eat?” he offered Farrah.

“Is it actual food, or will I be nibbling on bits of your soul?”

“It’s food,” Jason said. “My personal storage space is wrapped up in here.”

They took the elevating platform up to the sitting area and settled into chairs that looked like bamboo but had the soft comfort of cloud furniture. The elevating platform

descended and a tray of sandwiches came sailing up through the hole, settling onto the table in front of them.

"I'm surprised you're out and about," Jason said. "If it were me, I'd be hiding in my room for weeks. I know, because that's what I did when it was me."

"I'm not you," Farrah said. "I want to take control back. Get productive, do some good. That's not so easy in a world you don't know."

"Tell me about it," Jason said. "It was bad enough in your world, only for me to come back and discover I never really knew my own."

"You know more than me," Farrah said. "I'll be relying on you to guide me through it."

"If you're looking for productive, I think I have something. Back in Greenstone, I liked to blow off steam by monster hunting. Vent some frustration and help people at the same time by clearing off the adventure boards. The monsters here appear in proto-astral spaces, which is why no one knows about it. There's some kind of planetwide detection array they use to find and eliminate the monsters before the proto-spaces shoot them out into the world."

"A planet-sized magical array? I'd love a look at that."

"We can probably swing it," Jason said. "I was meant to be meeting with a rep from the local Adventure Society equivalent today. She is out there, but my sister decided to invite my whole family around for a big group talk about magic being real."

"The iron-ranker," Farrah said.

"She can get us into some proto-spaces," Jason said. "I still need to sort out the details, though. My family kind of took over everything and I just lost it and started yelling at them. They wouldn't have understood much and believed even less."

"Let me guess," Farrah said. "You're sinking all this time and energy into getting them caught up on magic, making sure they're safe and understand what's happening."

"Something like that."

"Well, you need to stop," Farrah said. "Just because you came home with a pile of magic powers, that doesn't mean you're suddenly the king of everyone. There's only so far you can be responsible for and to your family. They have to make their own choices and you don't get to tell them what to do."

"My coming back into their lives has caused chaos and brought danger."

"Are you an idiot?" she asked. "Life is dangerous and you can't change that, no matter how much you twist yourself up in knots trying. Do you think you're the first adventurer to bring some weird crap back to hang around their family's necks? Every adventurer that comes up from nothing has some variation on this, and yes, your story has

some surprising turns, but so does everyone else's. You're a little weird, Jason, but you aren't that special."

"So what do I do?" he asked.

"The same thing everyone does. You essence your family up, train any of them that are worth a damn and send the rest monster cores every now and again. Beyond that, you have to let them be responsible for themselves or it all goes wrong. If you're too controlling, they get stifled and inevitably someone makes a stupid choice and betrays the family, be it on purpose or inadvertently."

"It's not that simple."

"Yes it is," she said, then poked him in the forehead. "That is where things keep getting complicated. You need to get out of your own way, magic up the family and let them loose to make their own mistakes, while you focus on what you need to do."

"I'm not even sure where to start," Jason said.

"I suggest with how we even ended up here," she said. "We're in the wrong damn universe."

Chapter 324

I Came Back to Show You Wonders

Shade informed the family members who were variously preparing dinner, looking after infants or watching recordings that Jason was about to emerge and they should gather in the bar lounge. As such, they were waiting for him when he stepped out, Farrah right behind him.

“Firstly, my previous statement about asking questions before watching all the recordings stands. Second, this is Farrah. You should all recognise her by now. Let me be plain in stating that she is family. Anyone who has a problem with that can get off my boat. Third, I need most of you to sod off, so you’re getting off the boat anyway. I have important stuff to do and can’t be dealing with you every bloody hour of every bloody day.”

Most of the occupants were herded off the boat by Shade, although Jason made sure to give his dad a hug first. Erika and her family were currently living onboard, so they stayed, along with Asya. Once peace descended on the houseboat, Jason, Asya, Farrah and Erika moved to the kitchen where Jason started assisting Erika's dinner preparations. Brother and sister side by side behind the counter, finding an old, easy familiarity.

“So,” Jason said to Asya. “Did Erika shake the story of my France trip out of you?”

“I didn’t do any shaking,” Erika said, only for Jason to give her a sideways look.

“There may have been some mild jostling,” she confessed. “What she told me was insane, though. Aeroplane bombs, kidnapping, secret societies. Did you really kill that many people?”

“Yeah,” Jason said grimly.

Erika nudged him with her arm.

“Are you okay, little brother?”

“I’m heading in that direction,” he said, with a glance at Farrah.

“And you were kidnapped?” Erika asked Farrah.

“Yes,” Farrah said. “Lucky for me, they didn’t have any of the magical torture techniques from our world. An essence user can withstand mundane techniques well enough if you’ve been trained to. Especially if they’re trying to break you down mentally instead of physically.”

“You never trained me like that,” Jason said.

“You wanted us to torture you?” Farrah asked.

“No, now that you say,” Jason said. “How did they catch you in the first place? You should have been able to take those guys apart.”

“When I woke up,” Farrah said, “my brain was telling me it had only been moments but my soul had a longer story to tell. That was disorienting, to say the least, and I wasn't thinking clearly. Plus, I was in a newly-formed body and I wasn't human anymore, so it all felt very strange. My old racial gifts were gone and I felt all these blessings ready to evolve my new outworlder ones. In the state I was in, I made what turned out to be a very bad choice.”

“You accepted them all at once,” Jason surmised.

“Exactly,” Farrah said. “I wasn't exactly in a sound state in the first place and six gift evolutions at the same time were too much and I passed out. “When I woke up I was collared and in a box.”

“I'm sorry about that,” Asya said. “They were rogue elements of my organisation.”

“That's okay,” Farrah said, to Jason's surprise. “I've seen churches and Adventure Society branches go rotten from the inside. So has Jason, for that matter. The mission doesn't stop being worth doing just because some of the people doing it go astray.”

“I appreciate that,” Asya said. “The Adventure Society are the people responsible for fighting monsters in your world?”

“That's right. I'd appreciate learning some more about how you do things here.”

Asya explained the nature of the Network, with Jason occasionally contributing to help translate concepts for Asya or Farrah to understand better.

“Asya is here to nail down an agreement for working with them, so I can get to the monster hunting,” Jason said. “I also agreed to teach some of their people the things that you, Gary and Rufus taught me. I'm assuming you'll want in as well.”

“Why don't you just join their organisation?” Farrah asked.

“The Network isn't as open to independent action as the Adventure Society,” Jason said. “They tell you what to do, how to do it and expect you to obey.”

“Why would anyone agree to that?” Farrah asked.

“Because they control essence distribution,” Jason said.

“Ah.”

“This is why I've been negotiating an agreement more in line with Adventure Society standards,” Jason said.

“I definitely want to be part of that, then, yes,” Farrah said. She shared a smile with Jason as they sensed the elation in Asya's aura. After all the trouble the Lyon branch went through to forcibly extract information from the two outworlders, she was going to close the deal on voluntary cooperation. If the Lyon branch hadn't been so paranoid about their secret astral space, things might have gone very differently.

"I was thinking that we could take a trip to Sydney tomorrow," Jason said. "Finalise the details, take a look at who you want us to train, and where. Erika, I'd appreciate you helping Farrah to get some clothes."

"That works for me," Asya said. "The International and Sydney Steering Committees have essentially agreed to the current draft of the agreement and they empowered me to finalise the arrangements here unless you wanted to change things up. I daresay that the inclusion of Miss Hurin is large enough a revision to put it off, but I can't imagine them being anything but happy."

"They bloody well should be," Jason said. "Farrah's probably forgotten more than I'll ever know about magic. So, we'll meet you in Sydney tomorrow, Asya?"

"Actually, I'd like to travel with you, if I may. I'm staying with my parents for a little while in Castle Heads. The Network wants to maintain someone locally and I was the natural pick."

"Do your parents know about magic?" Jason asked.

"No, but I'll have a wing of the house to myself, so privacy won't be an issue."

"Oh, just a spare wing they happened to have hanging off the side of the house," Jason said. "We should probably take a look at the details of the revised agreement."

The current state of the agreement was dominated by loot distribution. Jason was allowed to keep any personally looted items and received merit points for anything looted by others using his ability. He could trade in loot for more merit points or his merit points for any materials the international committee had access to.

"I like it," Jason said. "This way, the Network gets the bulk of the items, which is what it needs, and I get a massive pool to select the items I need from. Who determines the merit value of goods?"

"We actually have a valuation system in place, for trading between branches," Asya said. "America exports a lot of gun essences, for example, which is why we have so many amongst our members."

"That seems fair," Jason said.

Dinner was a large affair, with Erika's family, Farrah, Jason and Asya. Hiro and Taika came back, having been out scouting potential locations for his land investment. Hiro explained his plan of building an Asano family compound to the others over dinner.

"That's a good idea," Farrah said. "If you're not going to go for combat abilities, you should get Jason to give you an essence set suited for wide-area arrays."

"I don't know what that is," Hiro said.

"It's long term or permanent magical installations," Farrah said. "That's my magic specialty, so I can teach you all about them."

"Essences are the magic cubes that give you powers, right?" Hiro said. "Are yours suited to that kind of magic?"

"No," Farrah said. "I have volcano powers."

"I was envious of her powers from the outset," Jason said. "She is seriously terrifying. It's awesome and I haven't even seen her fight flat knacker yet."

"We haven't really seen you fight, either," Asya said to Jason. "All we have is the footage of you fighting the category three, and the magical recording of your fight with the hydra."

"Hydra," Emi said. "Like what Heracles fought?"

"Yep," Jason said, wagging his eyebrows at her. "It was a river hydra, with poison breath and regenerating heads."

"Did you cut the heads off and burn the stumps?" Emi asked. "You know that lolaus was the one who did that, right? He was Heracles' nephew."

"You can be my assistant, Emi," Jason said.

"I bet I'm way better than stupid lolaus," she sulked.

"What's a category three?" Farrah asked.

"A silver-ranker," Jason said. "He got the jump on me, but he wanted me alive and was Greenstone tier."

"You beat a silver-ranker solo?"

"It was more of a no-score draw," Jason said. "He knocked me out and left me with his lackeys while he went off to get healing."

"What kind of idiot tries to take an affliction specialist alive?" Farrah asked. "You got kidnapped? Didn't they collar you?"

Jason's eyes moved in Asya's direction.

"I'll give you the details later," he told Farrah.

"You live a crazy life, Jason," Ian said. "Planes exploding, kidnapping, rolling gunfights with bikies. I don't want my daughter put in that kind of danger."

"I'm afraid the world will be facing that kind of danger, sooner or later," Asya said. "My organisation is doing their best to hold back the tide, but magic is rising in our world. It's reaching the point where we predict that containing all the monsters will become impossible sometime in the next decade. The truth is, we don't contain most of them now."

"You don't?" Jason asked.

“The grid only extends over the landmasses,” Asya explained, “and the surface of the Earth is seventy percent water. Sea monsters are real and we’ve been covering them up for centuries. Also, every year we’re covering up more and more sightings of monsters that have spawned on the moon. The people who think the moon landing was faked aren’t even close to the real conspiracy.”

“Moon monsters?” Jason said. “That’s awesome. Is there a secret Network base on the dark side of the moon?”

“No,” Asya said. “Not that they’ve told me, anyway.”

“That’s disappointing.”

“And now we’re having a serious conversation about moon monsters,” Erika said.

“Jason, you were always a source of weirdness but this is getting out of hand.”

“Can I be your assistant when I get magic powers?” Emi asked.

“How old are you?” Farrah asked her.

“I’m twelve.”

“You still have a few years until you’ll get essences. Have you started her training yet, Jason?”

Emi’s eyes went wide as saucers as her head swivelled to look at Jason.

“Absolutely not,” Erika said.

“It wouldn’t be anything strenuous,” Jason said. “A little martial arts and some free running. Really, it would just be some good exercise.”

“Farrah,” Erika said, “didn’t you say that your training involved torture resistance?”

“We wouldn’t do that,” Farrah said. “We didn’t do it for Jason. We could tell that he was soft.”

“Hey…”

“Although he did turn out to be startlingly diligent for someone who seems like he’d give up almost immediately,” Farrah continued.

“Oh, come on.”

“Frivolous,” she carried on. “Flighty. The constant barrage of inane chatter.”

“This is just getting hurtful.”

“You meet him and think he’d fold like a camp chair,” Farrah said. “We have this friend, Rufus, though. He knew from the beginning that Jason had what it took.”

“Finally,” Jason said.

“Rufus is the sexy one, right?” Ian said, having seen Rufus in the recordings.

“Really Ian?” Jason asked.

“What?” Ian said. “I’m secure enough in my sexuality to acknowledge a beautiful man.”

“Every damn universe,” Jason muttered.

Sunday morning still found the Evans-Asano family lodging in the houseboat. Erika had talked about going back to their home after Jason’s return but her husband, daughter and the idea of giving up cloud beds brought her around.

When Asya arrived for their day trip to Sydney, Jason, Ian and Emi were nowhere to be found. They managed to find Farrah, watching Jason’s recordings in the media room, but she didn’t know where they went.

“Shade,” Erika said. “Where are my brother and my suspiciously absent husband and daughter?”

“They’ve gone out.” Shade said.

“Out?”

“Yes, Mrs Asano.”

“I don’t suppose that you’d like to elaborate?”

“Correct,” Shade said. “I would not like to elaborate.”

“Meaning Jason is doing something dodgy and asked you to cover.”

“I prefer to think of it as maintaining security without compromising privacy.”

“Shade, if you don’t tell me where my daughter is right now, I’m going to have Asya and Farrah here teach me how to use magic and then shake the shadow out of you until you’re a pale, skinny white guy who I will then proceed to beat with a cricket bat.”

“That isn’t a plausible scenario, Mrs Asano.”

“You want to test me, shadow man? I don’t care who your dad is or what you’re made of because I will find something to shove my boot right up into.”

“Mrs Asano, you’re wearing deck sandals. Also, if you go to the rear deck, you will find your errant family members returning.”

The three women made the way to the rear of the houseboat and immediately spotted a trio of figures flying several metres above the water. The water below was being disturbed by the air apparently pushed out by heavy devices on their arms and backs. The three figures dropped down onto the deck, where the jet suits dissolved into darkness that disappeared into Emi, Ian and Jason’s shadows.

“What the actual hell is going on?” Erika asked.

“I don’t think there’s an actual…”

Jason was silenced by the death glare that came from his sister, grateful when it was turned on her husband.

“Emi found this video on the internet,” Ian said. “It was these mountain rescue guys in England using jets suits and we wondered if Shade could turn into something like that. It turns out he could.”

“You let our daughter go flying off in one of those things?”

“It was perfectly safe,” Ian said. “Shade took over when we were going to crash into the water or a tree or whatever. *If* we were going to. That totally didn’t happen.”

“You’re meant to be the responsible adult,” she told him, waving her arm at Jason and Emi. “It’s clearly never going to be these two.”

“Hey,” Jason said, then held up his hands in surrender as Erika turned her gaze back to him. She returned her glare to her husband.

“What were you thinking?” she asked.

“That jet suits are super sweet,” he whimpered honestly.

“And that justifies the danger you put our daughter in?”

“She wasn’t in any danger, Eri,” Jason said.

“You keep out of this,” Eri told him.

“No, Eri, I won’t,” Jason said. She open her mouth to bite back but something in his eyes stopped her cold. It wasn’t hostile but it was unflinching.

“In the care of me and Shade,” Jason continued, “Emi is safer in the middle of a gunfight than alone in the playground of her school. I’m done playing by Earth rules, Erika. Magic is real, magic is awesome and it’s the new reality you live in, like it or not. I know it seems strange and alien and dangerous but it’s the thing that will keep our family safe. You will never catch a disease that can’t be cured. You’ll never be permanently disabled in an accident. A hundred years from now, your family, your daughter, will be alive and well. When you’re sixty, you’ll look better than you did at thirty. If you want to give Emi a sibling at that point, you still can.”

He glanced at Farrah, who gave him an encouraging nod.

“It’s a time of miracles, big sister. I’ve been focused on the dangers but I came back to show you wonders. I got distracted and lost track of that somewhere along the way. I want you to trust me, Erika. Life is about to get amazing.”

Chapter 325

Mercy

“That’s a neat bit of work,” Farrah said, taking in the Network’s Sydney branch with her magical senses. Standing outside the building, she observed the magical array shielding the upper levels. “Whoever put this in place did a great job of working with the low magic area and interweaving low-level magical formations. You’d still need spirit coins to maintain it with the magical density this low, but it must be very efficient.”

“By necessity,” Asya said. “The Sydney branch doesn’t have its own source of spirit coins and is reliant on the International Committee. The astral space that the Lyon branch was hiding will be used to set up spirit coin farms, using records left behind centuries ago.”

“I can help you set those up,” Farrah said. “Not for free, mind you.”

“We were rather hoping that one of you would have some insight,” Asya said happily.

For the first time, Jason let himself be taken into the Network’s local headquarters, with himself, his sister, Asya and Farrah going through a conventional security sweep and being given visitor lanyards.

“This is an uncanny feeling,” Erika said. “The months I spent trying to find out what happened to you. The truth was more absurd than I could have imagined, and now I’m going into the belly of the beast.”

Jason grabbed her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. The elevator rapidly rose up through the building, Jason feeling it as they entered the area of the security arrays. Without Farrah’s expertise, he would still be hesitant about entering. Annabeth Tilden and Ketevan Arziani met them at the elevator as they reached the upper floors.

“Congratulations on the promotion, Anna,” Jason said after introductions were made.

Jason has already learned of the shifting circumstances in the Network’s Sydney branch. With the death of Keith and the disappearance of Miranda, two slots had opened on the eight-person Steering Committee. Anna, already in line for the promotion, was immediately stepped up. Her deputy, Ketevan, now occupied Annabeth’s former position as Director of Operations.

The second committee seat had been filled by someone transferred from the International Committee as an unofficial liaison. The Sydney branch’s access to the two outworlders was of eminent importance and granting the International Committee some access and influence opened up better access to resources.

“I just wanted to thank you again for saving my life,” Ketevan said to Jason. “If there’s ever anything I can do for you, please let me know.”

“Well,” Jason said, “I think my friend here would love a look at that grid of yours.”

“I wouldn’t mind meeting whoever set up the arrays here, too,” Farrah added.

“Easily done,” Ketevan said. “Our magical emplacements team normally don’t like to hear from the operations side but I’m certain they’ll be eager to pick your brain for otherworldly knowledge.”

“The intention was to finalise the agreement today,” Annabeth said, “but there’s been something of an issue.”

“Is this to do with me?” Farrah asked.

“Actually, no,” Annabeth said. “The IC and the Steering Committee had approved the final terms you worked out with Asya. The issue is that the Americans and the Chinese won’t let the agreement go through until they’ve had a chance to send representatives to meet with you both. They both have teams on route to Australia as we speak.”

“They want a chance to poach us for themselves before we make a deal with the International Committee?” Jason asked.

“That’s exactly the case,” Annabeth said unhappily.

“They have the pull to shut down the agreement until then?”

“Not in terms of codified authority,” Ketevan said. “The United States and Chinese branches are both more unified on a national level than most other regions of the world and they’ve used collective resources to incentivise high-value members into joining their branches. Add in that they’ve been doing it for a century and those two countries represent a massively disproportionate section of the magical materials supply. This is especially true of spirit coins since they spare no expense to recruit anyone with a looting power.”

“Those abilities are inevitably worth whatever it takes to recruit the people that have them,” Annabeth said. “You will be even more valuable, so you can anticipate a generous offer.”

“The International Committee would appreciate the chance to counter thereafter,” Asya said.

“That’s annoying,” Jason said. “I want to get this settled so we can get down to the business of training people up and taking monsters down.”

“What we can do today is get some of the legal issues out of the way,” Ketevan said. “Firstly, we’ve established a legal identity for you, Miss Hurin. We can take you through the details and give you the appropriate documentation today.”

“I need your help to exist?” Farrah asked, then looked to Jason. He nodded and they both leaned against the wall, to the confusion of the others. Farrah initiated her ability, gaining an understand of identity documentation from Jason.

“Okay, I understand,” she said.

“I don’t,” Erika said.

“Farrah has a power that lets her learn things that I already know.”

“Is that a special thing that the two of you have?” Asya asked.

“It requires a certain level of trust to work,” Farrah said. “Similar to entering Jason’s magical space. Since he’s the only person in this world that completely trusts me, he’s the only one it will work with here.”

“We’ll also have you sign secrecy agreements,” Ketevan said. “All of this will involve government officials. Miss Hurin’s documentation involves government bureaucracy, obviously, and the secrecy agreements are made in accordance with the Official Secrets and Unlawful Soundings section of the Crimes Act. Once that’s done, we’ll be free to tell you everything about magic without restriction since you will then be legally liable if you do the same.”

“This is the template we intend to use for your entire family,” Annabeth explained. “We suggest that once they’ve signed the agreement, we run them through the same structured information seminar we place new inductees to the Network through. It’s basically an eight-hour introduction to the magical world, and we have one tailored for the families of Network members. Once everyone has signed, we can set up a session.”

“I’d like that,” Erika said. “Jason has told us a lot but he’s been all over the shop with his explanations. Some structure would be appreciated.”

“It would be best if everyone else could sign up together,” Ketevan said. “Mr Asano did contact us to ask for a preliminary briefing just for you Mrs Asano.”

“You did?” Erika asked Jason.

“You’re going to be in charge of family wrangling,” Jason told her. “That works best if you’re ahead of the curve.”

“If you’re going to do a full seminar,” Asya said, “I might have my parents inducted as well. Since I’ll be staying with them for a while, it would be better to avoid any unfortunate surprises.”

“We’d also like to brief you, Mr Asano, on the fallout from events surrounding the France excursion,” Annabeth said.

“Well, how about we get the paperwork out of the way first,” Jason said. “Then Erika can take Farrah clothes shopping while you get me up to speed on the rest.”

“Oh, so you’re just going to send the women off clothes shopping while the important man does the important work?” Erika asked.

“Yep. Begone, woman.”

“You know sexism humour is tired and lazy, right?” Erika asked.

“Sorry,” Jason said. “I can take Farrah shopping; just give me back the money I budgeted.”

“Oh, you meant ‘begone woman’ ironically,” Erika said. “I just didn’t get it. That’s funny stuff.”

The detainment suite in which Kylie Chen had been placed was more like a motel room than a prison cell. Aside from the lack of a window, it had a bed, fridge and bathroom. A chair to sit in and watch the decently sized television or play the attached game console. The television had access to various streaming services, but otherwise, there was no internet connection.

Kylie was far from in any mood to binge-watch a TV series. After discovering that she’d been used as part of a plan that killed several Network personnel – people she knew – she had been trapped in a prison of self-recrimination. She went through the events that brought her to this point over and over in her mind.

The Frenchman’s cell had been far less nice than hers, much closer to the prison model. It also had more secure magical protections, which she had unsealed using the instructions provided by the committeewoman.

Despite Miranda Ellis’ assurances, Kylie had been wary of the French prisoner. In most cases she withheld her prodigious senses, refraining from spying on people’s emotions. More than concerns about privacy, knowing the true emotions of the people around her had always been a disheartening experience. She did not hold back against the Frenchman, however.

Examining him as she read the packet Miranda had given her to pass along, she sensed the exact moment he resolved to kill her, escaping before he had the chance. Being category three, he had not anticipated her having the perceptual strength to read his emotions.

She had raised the alarm herself, knowing that she would be punished for her terrible mistake, but Miranda’s preparations had been thorough. The Frenchman was gone by the time security dealt with the impediments Miranda had put in place, although not without killing a few of them on his way out.

Since then, Kylie had been dwelling on the fact that if she’d read Miranda’s emotions, she might not have been taken in so easily. Miranda had apparently known of her aversion, as well as the fear of Asano that had driven her to accept Miranda’s plan so readily.

The door opened and she looked at it curiously, as it was off-schedule for her meals. When she saw the man that stepped through, her blood ran cold. Asano didn't move further into the room, standing just inside the door. Kylie jumped out of her seat, retreating to the opposite side of the room from Asano.

"Can I sit?" he asked with an awkward smile.

"If I say no, will you leave?" she asked.

"If that's what you want," he said. "I asked to see you after I was briefed on the recent excitement. My sister and my friend are out shopping and I had a little time, but if you don't want to speak to me, I'll go."

He waited, and when she didn't respond for a long time, he opened the door to leave.

"Wait," she said hesitantly and he turned his head back to look at her.

"You're sure?" he asked. She nodded and he closed the door again before moving into the room. He turned the seat around so that he could face her if she sat on the bed, moving it away a little to give her space. She didn't sit on the bed, instead retreating into the corner like a scared animal.

"Have they told you what happened since you turned yourself in?" he asked.

After her experiences with Miranda and the Frenchman, she did not hesitate to explore him with her senses and was startled by what she found. He felt profoundly different from the last time she had seen him. More than just a different person, he felt like a different kind of entity altogether. It was to the point that she suspected him of being an impostor, some kind of bizarre interrogation tactic. It didn't matter since she had already told them everything, whether they believed it or not.

Looking closer she felt something in his aura. It was an aspect of his aura she had noticed before that her instincts told her would be difficult, if not impossible to replicate. It was like an authentication mark on his soul, unchanging even when his soul underwent a grand transfiguration. The man sitting in front of her was Jason Asano, but transformed from the man she met less than a week earlier.

Once she believed it was him, she started realising the similarities, alongside the differences. His aura was still domineering and resolute, with dangerous and powerful undercurrents. More powerful than ever, it felt like a solid wall in front of her. Even her powerful senses were unable to penetrate it and grasp his emotional state.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"People had my friend and I had to become something new to get her back."

She didn't ask if he succeeded. She would never put herself in between that man and whatever it was he wanted and would pity anyone that did.

“Did the Frenchman come after you?” she asked. She still had some desperate hope that Miranda’s plan and her part of it was at least partially authentic and that she wasn’t just a fool and a traitor.

“No,” Jason said. “As best they’ve been able to figure, the person who convinced you to release him never intended to send him after me. That’s what you said the idea was, right?”

She nodded.

“Miranda Ellis and the man she released haven’t been heard from since,” Jason said. “Rather than send the man for a second round with me, she had a bomb placed on the Network plane carrying me to France. I lived, obviously, but eight Network personnel did not. The entire flight crew, most of the security team and one Steering Committee member.”

She flinched.

“I didn’t know,” she said. “They don’t tell me anything, in here.”

“Did you know that the Frenchman killed more Network personnel as he escaped?”

“They told me,” she said. “Is that why you’re here? To get revenge by telling me about all the people my mistake got killed.”

“You feel responsible for the people on the plane?”

“If I’d read her aura, I might have known that she was deceiving me.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because people can be vile inside their own heads.”

“Ah,” Jason said. “Your sensitivity must almost be akin to mind-reading, except you feel people’s baser instincts instead of their loftier thoughts. You get all our ugly urges without the higher ideals that keep us from savaging each other like animals. Or capitalists.”

“Not yours,” she said. “Your aura was already too strong, too controlled. All I caught was glimpses of your emotions. Now I get nothing but what you let people see. Your aura is unlike anything I’ve even seen.”

“That makes you all the more scared,” Jason realised. They both knew that her emotions were an open book to him.

“Why are you here?” she asked again.

“I’m not sure myself, to be honest. They told me about you and I felt compelled to see you. Realising how scared you were of me in that dimensional space shook me a little. Not as much as you, obviously. I’m not responsible for your decisions. I am, at least partially, though, the impetus that led you to where you are now.”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“We’re all responsible for our own choices,” he said. “Inevitably we make bad ones. Sometimes we pay for that and sometimes others pay for us. I’ve been thinking a lot about my own choices, lately. The people I’ve killed and the smaller number I’ve let live. Once you’ve done it enough, killing becomes easy, in the moment. Satisfying, even. Vanquishing your enemies can be intoxicating.”

He paused in recollection, Kylie only watching him and not speaking.

“I was on a job, early in my career,” he said. “It wasn’t much more than a year ago, although it feels like forever. There was a man that tried to kill me and I let him live. I was still doing that, then. This man went on to be a henchman for a local crime lord and rose up the ranks rather quickly, being an essence user. When the crime lord had me kidnapped, later, I don’t know if he was aware of my connection to the man.”

Jason got up and went to the fridge, opening it up and taking a bottle of water.

“Do you mind?” he asked. She shook her head.

“Thanks,” he said, returning to his seat.

“The Frenchman wasn’t the first silver-ranker to kidnap me,” Jason said. “Sorry, that’s a category three. I was category one back then, so I didn’t resist as well as I did the Frenchman. Of course, that time I was still kidnapped but I got my arse kicked first, so maybe there’s something to be said for going quietly.”

Jason shook his head.

“Anyway,” he continued, “I was quite thoroughly at the mercy of this crime lord, and he was not a man of mercy. In fact, he had a rather unpleasant device designed to not just torment my body but also my soul. Their plan was to hand both over to a... well, that doesn’t matter. Suffice to say, I was in a bad situation.”

He opened the bottle of water and took a sip.

“One of the people guarding the location I was held turned out to be the man whose life I’d once spared. He chose to run off and tell my friends where I was, in return for not executing him when I had every chance and right to do so. His sneaking off panicked the people holding me and they had a falling out, giving me the opportunity to escape. Otherwise, I never would have been able to endure what they put me through.”

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked.

“You got the Network’s people killed, so your fate is theirs to decide. I’ve asked Annabeth Tilden to be lenient with you, for what it’s worth. The choice to be merciful saved my life once and that’s a path I’d like to find my way back to. Maybe one day you’ll have the chance to make a better choice and help others, instead of hurt them.”

“That doesn’t help me,” she said.

“I didn’t come here to help you,” he said. “I had a sense that speaking to you might assist me in coalescing some thoughts that have been floating around in my head for a while.”

“Did it?”

“Does it matter?” Jason asked, getting up out of the seat. “As you said, it doesn’t help you.”

He returned the chair to the position he found it. Kylie had not moved from her place in the corner. He knocked on the door and it was opened from the outside. He paused as he was about to leave, turning his head back towards her, still in the corner.

“I’m sorry I derailed you quite so badly, Miss Chen,” he told her. “We can never see all the consequences of our actions. Something we’ve both learned the hard way, I suppose.”

In the corridor, Michael Aram was hurrying towards him as the security guard closed the door behind him.

“Mr Aram,” Jason said with a smile. “Good to see you well.”

“Anyone who saves my life can call me Mike,” Aram said. “We’ve just got a category three hit on the grid. Kete... Ms Arziani was wondering if you and your friend were interested in jumping in.”

Chapter 326

Ideal Circumstances

Jason ignored the sound and motion of the transport helicopter as he read from the book in his hands.

“Is that Pashto?” Aram asked loudly over the helicopter, peering at the open pages.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“You speak Pashto?”

“I speak everything,” Jason said. “Magic powers, you know?”

“Right. Why are you reading a book in Pashto?”

“It’s a favourite of mine. I finally get to read it in the original language.”

“What’s it about?”

“Imperialist foreign influences in nineteenth century Afghanistan.”

“Sounds like a real page-turner. The profile I read about you said you were all about terrible eighties pop-culture.”

“That’s in my profile?”

“We’re very thorough.”

“Then I imagine it included that I was, albeit briefly, a political science major in university.”

“That was in there,” Aram said. “You dropped out after one semester, right?”

“I wasn’t making great life choices in that particular stage of my life. I didn’t choose my major by picking it out of a hat, though. My interests go beyond Thundercats and the A-Team.”

“Glad to hear it,” Aram said. “The Network is laying a heavy bet on you. It’s a little worrying if the person we need to be a transformative influence is taking his own influences from the Transformers cartoon.”

“Oh, you can forget about the Transformers G1 stuff,” Jason said. “Pure nostalgia goggles. Transformers Prime is where it’s at. It’s a far superior series and has the best depiction of Starscream across the entire franchise.”

“You’re not filling me with confidence, Mr Asano.”

“You can call me Jason, Mike.”

Jason and Farrah had been flown from Sydney to South Australia, with Michael Aram as an escort. The Sydney branch had negotiated with the Adelaide branch to let the pair accompany the tactical response team into the incursion and they were flown to a military

base in South Australia where they joined the response team in a series of transport helicopters.

Their destination was near the top end of the state, deep into central Australia. Scrubby flatland spread out for miles, red earth dotted by patches of yellow grass and pale green scrub. Nearing the astral space aperture, Jason encountered something unusual.

-
- You have entered a region coterminous with a proto-astral space. You can enter the proto-astral space directly.
-

Jason's new physical state came with new physical sensations. The world around him felt different, although he knew the difference was him. The wall between dimensions was thin enough that he could feel it. He ignored the sensation and didn't try crossing over, as that was a rabbit he wanted to keep in the hat.

As the response team's support unit's set up camp and prepared to open the invisible aperture, Farrah looked around at the landscape.

"This looks kind of like the western edge of the Greenstone Desert," Farrah said. She and Jason had passed through the fringes of that territory not long after Jason's arrival in the other world.

"Yep," Jason agreed. "Are you sure you're up for this?"

"I'm hungry for it," she said. "I might even try out some of these new abilities. I'm going to miss the old ones, though. Losing the personal space is rough. I would say it had all my stuff, but I think I saw some familiar-looking books floating around in your soul pagoda."

"When we cleared out your things," Jason said, "Gary and Rufus thought I should have your books. You were always trying to get me to study magical theory."

"Did you?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "I'm going with astral magic as my specialisation, for obvious reasons. Also, that's Clive's specialty, so he's taught me a lot. Rufus and Gary took the rest of your things, although I think they gave a lot of it to Padma."

"You met Padma?"

Padma was a young graduate of the Remore Academy that Farrah had taken under her wing. She had come to Greenstone with her team for Emir's competition, only to be shattered on hearing of her mentor's death. As someone Farrah had also mentored, Jason had felt a kinship with the younger adventurer.

"Your parents, too," Jason said. "They came to Greenstone with Rufus' parents."

"It feels unreal, talking about my memorial service."

“I got to watch mine,” Jason said. “One of my cousins recorded it on his phone, which seems a little tasteless. My Mum made the whole thing traditional Japanese, which I am not allowing the next time I die.”

Farah frowned as she thought of something, giving Jason an assessing look.

“If you have all my books,” she said, “Did you look at the one bound in black leather with a rose embossed on the cover?”

“I glanced at it,” Jason said. “I wasn’t sure what to do with it. I mean, it felt wrong to throw it away, but I wasn’t going to read your porn book.”

“It’s not porn. It’s sex magic.”

“I can’t tell if that’s better or worse.”

“Sex magic is worth learning. Aside from the obvious benefits, it’s quite multi-disciplinary. It touches on recovery magic, buff magic, aura manipulation. Specialisation is important in magic, but it pays to be at least a little grounded in other fields.”

“I have been dabbling in artifice a little,” Jason said. “I used a skill book so as not to soak up too much of my time.”

“They’re good to broaden the knowledge base,” Farrah said. “Don’t use them as an excuse to skimp out on theoretical studies, though.”

Aram waved at them as he approached, along with an Indigenous Australian man in paramilitary gear with a silver-rank aura.

“This is the Ditto, Tom Cotsworth,” Aram introduced. “Ditto means Director of Tactical Operations,” he explained to Farrah.

“G’day,” Cotsworth greeted.

“G’day,” Jason said, shaking the man’s hand. “I’m Jason Asano and this is Farrah Hurin. Do you prefer Ditto, Cotsworth, or Ditto Cotsworth?”

“Mate, if you can clean up the category threes and keep my people out of harm’s way, you can call me Susan for all I care. You two are the mysterious specialists who’ll be roaming about the country taking first crack at all the big ones, yeah?”

“That’s us,” Jason said.

“You’re confident that you can do it with just the two of you?”

“I think it’s more of a take turns situation, yeah?” Jason said, looking at Farrah.

“Don’t get dismissive,” Farrah admonished. “With a bad match up, a silver-rank monster could still take either of us down. Mostly you, but still.”

“I know,” Jason said. “But if they don’t push us at least a little, then what’s the point?”

“True,” Farrah acknowledged.

“So, how do you want to arrange us?” Jason asked Cotsworth. “It’s your show and we’re at your command.”

“We are?” Farrah asked.

“Within reason,” Jason told her. “They’re going to assume a certain amount of operational discretion on our part.”

“I can tell that you two are going to be a headache if I try and keep you on a leash,” Cotsworth said. “Since it was made very clear that your inclusion is mandatory and I’m to extend every courtesy, how about you two take point and show us how they do it in wherever the bloody hell they found you two?”

“That’s exactly what I want,” Farrah said “I could really stand to kill some things.”

“Bonza,” Cotsworth said. “That doesn’t sound at all like some lunatic powerhouse gearing up to plunge my life into chaos.”

The inside of the astral space was indistinguishable from the outside, with the same, flat scrubland.

-
- You have entered an unstable physical reality. Your presence will decrease the rate at which it will destabilise.
-

Jason ignored the message and looked around. It was almost entirely open ground, so the horde of monsters was not hard to find, some two or three kilometres off into the distance. Jason’s bronze-rank perception was more than enough to make them out clearly.

A tightly packed herd, they were grotesque mockeries of normal animals. There were horses with spider legs and mouths that split wide like a crocodile’s. Snakes, each with a mouth that ran along its back, the full length of its body. Lizards with three heads and no eyes. Floating over the herd as if swimming in the ocean were barb-tailed mantas.

Amongst the hundreds of animalistic monsters were several hulking creatures that stood three, four, even five metres high. There were giant, lumpen toads, and hairy humanoids that looked like sasquatches. One was a vaguely humanoid creature with bright red skin whose entire upper body was a bulbous cross between a toad and fish head.

“Looks like three gigantoads, two yowies and a yara-ma-yha-who,” Cotsworth said.

“Yowies” Jason said, looking at the sasquatch creatures. “No kidding.”

“No tricky powers, the yowies,” Cotsworth said. “Not real fast, either. It takes an awful lot of punishment to drop one, though, and if they hit you, you’re done. Proper done. Pulverised flesh scattered over a hundred metres of ground done.”

“I’ll take them, then,” Jason said. “What about the others?”

“The toads will shrug off little hits, but get a good enough whack to penetrate the skin and you can do some real damage. They’re not zippy but they can make a good-size jump, so make sure they don’t land on you. Aside from that, watch out for the poison spit. Big, awful gobbets of the stuff, about the size of a wheelbarrow load.”

“And that red thing?” Farrah asked.

“Yara-ma-yha-who,” Cotsworth said. “Not as tough as the others but it’s the worst of the bunch. It’s plenty strong and while it might look clumsy, it’s actually quite agile. It can also make some big jump attacks, with more precision than the toads, so watch out for that. The big danger is its tentacle fingers. They’ll latch onto you and suck out your blood like you’re a cherry smoothie.”

“I’ll take that one first,” Farrah said. “You want to start with the hairy ones and we split the toads?”

“Sounds good,” Jason said. “If you want to take the front, I’ll come in from the back. There’s bit of an army between us and them, though. I think we’ll be relying on the expertise of your people to thin out those numbers, Cotsworth.”

“Let me try something,” Farrah said. “They don’t seem to have noticed us, yet, so do you mind me getting their attention, Ditto?”

Cotsworth took a look at his teams forming up as they came through the aperture.

“We’re almost in and formed up,” he said. “Facing them as a horde like this, we’re going to set up for continual waves of fire, but we also like to make an early strike it mass horde scenarios. We have an area specialist who I’d like to put alongside you.”

“You’re the host,” Farrah said. “I would appreciate going first, though.”

“No worries,” Cotsworth said.

“Let me set up communication, first,” Jason said. “You’ve been briefed on this, Ditto?”

“Yep,” Cotsworth said. “I spoke with Koen Waters, my Sydney counterpart. He said good things, which is why I’m willing to be accommodating. He also told me not to keep you on the shelf.”

Jason sent out party invitations to the two platoons of Network personnel, which was one less than the Sydney team. While Cotsworth ran the sections through comm checks, he sent one of his silver-rankers to move forward with Farrah.

“I’m Farrah.”

“Melinda. Just Mel is fine.”

“What’s your approach?”

“Chains of fire spears. You?”

“Fire bolt chain.”

“Oh, classic,” Mel said. “You must have it up to category three, if you’re chaining.”

“Yeah,” Farrah confirmed.

“I thought you felt close to ranking-up from your aura. There’s a pair of category threes up in Darwin who’ve got fire bolt and it’s apparently something to see. It’s not often we get them all gathered up like this for big chains. You should start, because my spears do more damage if the targets are already burning. Normally I get the fire essence users in the ranks to spray things down first, then move in to sweep up. This should be much more convenient.”

“That works out nicely,” Farrah said.

The two women made an odd pair, both with the refined good looks of multiple rank-ups. Farrah was dressed casually wearing jeans and an open check shirt over a white tee, hair cinched back at the neck. Melinda had short-cropped hair and was covered neck down in what Jason continued to think of as death squad apparel. The black tactical armour worn by the Network’s silver-rankers was magical, although only bronze-rank gear.

“Time to try something new,” Farrah said as Jason moved forward to join them.

“Mind if I take a look?” Jason asked.

“Go ahead,” Farrah said and Jason pulled up her ability description through his party interface.

Ability: [Ghost Fire Mystic]

- Transfigured from [Outworlder] ability [Spiritual Flame].
- Create threads of ghostly flame. Flames are incorporeal and non-harmful to ordinary individuals but are highly effective against incorporeal entities. Threads can be used as a whip, rope, web or other cord-based objects.
- This ability gains an alternate function to draw magic diagrams, including ones that float in the air. Power-amplifying diagrams for fire abilities have increased effect when created with this ability.

Farrah drew a magic diagram in the air with her finger, reminding Jason of the many times he had seen Clive do the same. Instead of Clive’s golden light, though, Farrah drew in threads of red and yellow flame that glistened like liquid.

When she was done, she used an ability from her potent essence, Boost, which caused an amber light to shine from within her body. Boost was similar to the Bolster power that Neil possessed, in that it enhanced the next ability used. The key difference was that Boost only worked on the user.

Only after drawing out the ritual diagram and using her support ability did she hold up her hand and chant a quick spell.

“Fire Bolt,”

Fire Bolt was from a family of ultra-quick attack spells commonly possessed by spell casters and used as a basic attack. It could be fired as far as the eye could see and was very quick to use, but traditionally lacking in power. Stacking enhancement effects the way Farrah had done was common practice.

The ball of flame that shot out of Farrah’s hand was larger than what Jason had seen from other fire essence users, due to the Boost ability. Once it hit the ritual circle, the circle was consumed as the ball grew larger still, trailing flames like a comet as it shot low over the ground in the direction of the monster horde. It also changed colour, moving from orange through yellow to a bright yellow-white.

“That’s a strong one,” Mel said.

In the distance they heard the roar of monsters as the higher-ranked enemies sensed the approaching magical attack.

“My Fire Bolt ability has already gotten to silver,” Farrah said. “Even so, it should only kill the lowest-rank stuff outright. You want to follow on so you can chain off the weak ones while they’re still burning, Mel?”

Mel grinned, not bothering to respond. She raised her hand and chanted a spell.

“Blazing Spear.”

A spear that looked to be made of molten metal appeared in front of her and shot off after the fire bolt. It didn’t appear to have any concerns about gravity, flying in a perfectly flat trajectory.

The fire bolt reached the monsters first, landing on a spider-legged horse that let out an alien shriek as flames engulfed it, as if it had been covered in accelerant. New bolts of fire shot out from the burning monster at other nearby monsters, who suffered the same fate. Fire bolts then emerged from them, continuing to chain from creature to hideous creature as flames overtook the horde like a rising tide.

The blazing spear propagated in much the same way, striking a burning monster, around which more spears were conjured to spread out and out, chasing after the wave of fire bolts. The collaboration of the two basic attack spells, chaining over and over, was devastating to the weaker members of the horde.

“Uh...” Jason said, watching the carnage. The iron rankers amongst the horde were falling like raindrops, with the bronze-rankers mostly surviving but in such a wrecked state that the Network team with their firearms should have little trouble mopping up. The larger

monsters were burning, but they seemed largely unfazed. The fires on them soon went out, revealing some discoloured skin and scorched hair, but little more than superficial damage.

“Now for the finishing touch,” Farrah said. She held her hands out to her sides, palms up, slowly raising them as she chanted a spell.

“Let the fires rise and claim their ashen due.”

In the distance, the horde was a sea of flame emitting horrifying shrieks of agony, heard, even from so far away. With Farrah’s spell, the fire started burning brighter, the screams growing louder before starting to fall silent. Jason took another peek at her abilities.

“What spell was that?” Jason asked.

“Look for yourself,” Farrah said.

Ability: [Rising Flames] (Potent)

- Spell
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 3 minutes.

- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Damage dealt by all instances of [Burning] inflicted by you slowly increases.

- Effect (bronze): Shortly after an instance of [Burning] reaches maximum damage potential, it detonates, consuming the instance of [Burning] and dealing all potential damage immediately.

- Effect (silver): When instances of [Burning] detonate, they inflict damage in a small area around the victim.

“Strewth,” Cotsworth said, walking up to Jason as he looked into the distance, scratching his head. “Looks like the rest of us can knock off. Good luck with the big ones.”

Aside from a few bronze-rank monsters barely clinging to life, only the silver-rankers were left.

“You know,” Jason said to Farrah, “I have a power that, when you stab someone, makes the bleeding slightly worse. How is that fair?”

“Always with the complaining,” Farrah said. “The circumstances just happened to suit my abilities.”

“The circumstances being an army of monsters.”

“Exactly,” Farrah said. “You have your own ideal situations. Put three people in the dark and you’ll probably kill them. Eventually.”

“Oh, that’s hilarious,” Jason said as he was shrouded in dark mist. “At least my ideal circumstances can include having mana left four minutes into the fight.”

“Your fights take longer than four minutes?” Farrah asked. “Maybe your abilities are terrible.”

When the mist dispersed moments later, Jason’s casual outfit had been replaced with his combat robes, his starlight cloak already draped over him.

“Shade, if you would?” he asked.

Two of Shade’s bodies emerged from Jason’s shadow to take the form of robust dirt bikes, naturally all in black.

“I don’t know how to ride this,” Farrah said as Jason mounted up.

“Do not be concerned, Miss Hurin,” Shade said. “Straddle me firmly and I will take good care of you.”

“Shade,” Jason admonished. “Time and place.”

“Mr Asano, that level of innuendo is beneath you. Or, at the very least, it should be.”

“Fair point,” Jason said. “That was low humour and we need to focus on the job at hand. Farrah, go ahead and put Shade’s throbbing machine between your legs.”

“I’m feeling very uncomfortable,” Farrah said.

Chapter 327

The Blood and Death Guy

Three black, oversized dirt bikes roared across the red landscape. One had an uncertain-looking woman, another a shadow figure and the third a man in a robe trailing a cloak of darkness and starlight behind him like a comet's tail.

"Your vehicle forms aren't normally this loud," Jason shouted.

"I will remind you that I transform through your power," Shade said. "If any of the traits I take on are yobbish in nature, while I might be the one bearing it, you are the one responsible."

"Are you calling me a yobbo?"

"I've seen the maternal side of your family, Mr Asano. Your mother may try and hide it, but you come from bikes and beer stock."

"Wait, I like that side of my family."

He pumped a fist in the air.

"TEAM YOBBO!"

"What is wrong with you?" Farrah yelled at him.

"I'm a man of the land!"

Farrah shook her head, turning her attention back to not falling off her bike. The supernatural suspension of Shade's dirt bike form made it a minimally taxing endeavour but she still didn't trust the artificial mount. Even with magical assistance, the rough ground made for occasional sharp bumps.

"Couldn't you have turned into a heidel?" Farrah yelled at her bike.

"Mr Asano's power allows me to take forms appropriate to the environment," Shade said. "A heidel is out of the question in this world, but I could manage a camel."

"What's a camel?"

"It's like a horse's gangly, awkward cousin," Jason shouted from alongside her.

"What's a horse?"

They were drawing closer to the few surviving monsters. There was a candy red fish-toad with tentacle fingers, four giant toads, and a half-dozen of the looming, hairy yowies.

Farrah's bike slowed to a stop while Jason and the other dark rider swerved wide in the direction of the hairy giants. Shade turned from a bike to a cloud of darkness that disappeared into Farrah's shadow as she conjured a set of full body armour around her. It was made of glossy obsidian shards swept into wing shapes with a red glow shining from between the segments.

In her hands she conjured a giant, obsidian weapon that only vaguely resembled a sword. The double-edged blade was segmented like her armour, with sections of serrated obsidian teeth over a magma-red glow.

As the two remaining motorcycles swooped around the toads, one of the humungous creatures leapt in their direction. Despite having the size and mass of a quaint rural cottage, it hurtled itself through the air with alarming speed. It was on target to crash into Jason, whose bike exploded into darkness. The dark cloud engulfed him just before the creature landed and smothered it.

On the second motorcycle, Jason emerged from the shadowy rider, occupying its place as the rider vanished into his shadow. Taking control of the bike, he swerved it hard to circle the huge toad. It didn't move, sedentary outside of its ability to make repositioning leaps. Rather than move into the attack, it struck out via the bulging pustules all over its body, which burst explosively to spray pus over Jason.

-
- You have been afflicted with [Congealing Toad Venom].
 - You have resisted [Congealing Toad Venom].
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
 - You have gained an instance of [Integrity].
-

Resisting silver-rank poison was nothing new to Jason, with his ability to ignore rank disparity and his stacked resistance bonuses. That made the worst part of the attack the stench, which was akin to rotting whale blubber. It wasn't rainbow smoke bad, but it was enough that Jason had once cancelled a beach holiday over a similar aroma.

Not letting the bursting pustules bother him, Jason made a quick lap around the creature, his shadow arm stretching to score its skin with his dagger while he chanted spells. The dagger barely penetrated the coarse, damp skin, but Jason had never needed deep cuts. In the short time it took him to loop the toad and ride off in the direction of the yowies, he had locked in his full suite of afflictions.

"This mounted combat thing might really work out."

Farrah was squaring off with her own leaping monster. The bright red fish-toad-humanoid abomination called a yara-ma-yha-who launched itself toward her. She didn't have the mobility of the bike or even the mobility of not being encased in stone armour, so she didn't dodge. Instead, two halves of an obsidian dome rose from the ground to close over her.

The three metre tall monster landed on the dome, the impact spreading spiderweb cracks across its surface. Perched on the dome, the monster immediately started hammering away with tentacle hands balled into fists. It clearly had the strength to smash through in short order, but the dome exploded outward, tossing the monster back and peppering it with obsidian shards that dug into its flesh, although not deeply.

From within the expanding cloud of obsidian fragments, Farrah pointed to a spot on the ground.

“Flame of the earth, await the call.”

The monster’s agility was incongruous with its awkward-looking physique, but it twisted in the air to land on its feet. Farrah, predicting its landing point, had used her spell to create a glowing sigil on the ground, right under its feet. She snapped her fingers, no mean feat in a stone gauntlet, and a magma geyser erupted from the ground. The force of the magma stream staggered the monster, the molten rock clinging to its body.

Farrah strode forward, three flaming orbs manifesting and floating over her head. They each shot fiery beams at the monster, which ceased scraping at the magma with its hands and rushed forward at her instead. Farrah stomped her foot as she moved and obsidian shards erupted from the ground in a curtain, adding to the fragments already embedded in the monster’s flesh.

The creature quickly moved aside, dodging much of the cloud of shards only to see another ability coming for it. Something underground was rapidly digging its way forward. The monster moved again but the burrowing thing changed tack to keep pursuing. Finally, the monster grabbed a huge rock like it weighed no more than dollhouse and hammered it down, trying to kill whatever was hidden in the ground.

After the rock slammed into the ground, it was broken apart as a two metre obsidian column smashed through it as it rose from the ground in front of the monster. The column then shattered, burying yet more shards in the monster as Farrah chanted a follow-up spell.

“Children of the volcano, be reborn in fire.”

All the shards of obsidian, almost a patina coating the front of the monster, suddenly turned into molten magma. The small globules of molten rock started merging together burning all the hotter with each addition.

The entire front side of the monster was turned to molten slag, catching fire and drizzling onto the ground like syrup to reveal the creature’s hideous innards. Even so, the monster did not die. Monsters may have lacked an essence user’s arsenal of powers, but

their resilience put all but the most indestructible essence users to shame. At silver rank, any monster took a lot of killing.

Farah didn't let up, approaching now with her sword. Swinging it in a wide, horizontal sweep, the segments of blade whipped away, strung along a cord of glowing magma. It wrapped around the monster twice, the serrated edge digging into flesh. It was especially vulnerable in its ruined front. The sword retracted, cutting into the monster like a saw as it shrank back to the hilt.

Even that didn't kill the monster, but the creature was no longer a threat, laying almost helpless on the ground.

"Time to try another new trick," Farrah said to herself and the sword in her hands transformed. Instead of a sword, it became an unwieldy saw blade on a heavy handle, the glowing hot edge spinning rapidly. Too awkward for a fight, it was just the thing for dismembering a monster already all but done.

Physically tougher and stronger than the other monsters, the yowies were still less powerful, lacking the speed or special abilities to leverage that might. At silver-rank, strong and tough wasn't enough anymore, which was perfectly highlighted by an enemy like Jason.

Literally riding rings around them on his bike, he quickly loaded them up with afflictions before leaving them to percolate, heading after the remaining toads. He started with the one he had already gone to work on. Loaded up with afflictions that built up while Jason handled the yowies, the toad's flesh was already covered in ugly splotches of dead flesh. Jason's Punition spell delivered an immediate burst of necrosis for each affliction, which was enough to finish the toad off.

Farah was coming away from having killed the most dangerous monster and was eyeing off the two toads closest together.

Leaving them to her, Jason took the last one. Once again, he rode around the monster on his bike, shadow arm flicking out to land a pair of knife wounds. He had the arm emerge from his cloak, using his own hands to keep control of the bike as he rode it wildly over the uneven ground. This was more familiar to him than his fight against the bikies, having learned to ride dirt bikes on Uncle Robbo's farm as a boy.

The toads had thick skin, but as Cotsworth had told them, their insides were much more vulnerable. Jason's afflictions ravaged the toad's insides and he didn't wait long before switching to the second phase. After hitting it with his Punition spell, he used his

Feast of Absolution to drain the noxious afflictions. For each instance of curse, unholy affliction, poison and disease removed, three holy afflictions were left in its place.

Penance inflicted inescapable transcendent damage that diminished over time. Legacy of Sin made the target count as more damaged than they were for execute attacks, which only added to the fact that by the time Jason laid it on, the target was already plenty damaged.

Against lower-rank monsters, Jason had needed to work to use his finisher. Most monsters were done by the time he was ready to pull it out. Finally faced with silver-rank enemies, the power of the finisher was truly something he could use to close out a fight.

"Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death."

A column of transcendent light crashed down on the toad, descending like the judgement of the heavens.

Ability: [Verdict] (Doom)

- Spell (execute).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (99%)

- Effect (iron): Deals a small amount of transcendent damage. As an execute effect, damage scales exponentially with the enemy's level of injury.

- Effect (bronze): Damage scaling is increased by instances of [Penance] on the target.

As of bronze rank, the triple-stack scaling of damage and the two afflictions made Jason's finisher a force of absolute annihilation, wiping the toad from existence.

-
- You have defeated [Gigantoad].

 - [Gigantoad] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.

 - 8 gobbets of [Silver Toad Jelly] have been added to your inventory.
 - [Healing Unguent (Silver)] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Monster Core (Silver)] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Since his Punition spell had a cooldown, it would take him a moment to go through each of the yowies he had left behind, so after felling the toad, he pointed a hand in their direction.

“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”

One of the yowies stumbled as clumps of hair started falling out of stricken flesh.

Farrah didn't bother messing around with the last two toads, deciding to go all out. She started by drawing a fire diagram in the air and then activating a power. Amber light shone from her body, before turning silver as her aura went from bronze-rank to silver. Then she cast a spell.

“Burning heart of the world, show your might.”

The first toad had leapt at her while she was drawing the diagram, but she didn't dodge, raising an arm in its direction. A metre-wide stream of lava erupted at the toad, coring its weak insides like an apple after punching through its tough skin. Pus and jelly rained down on her as she pointed her hand at the second toad. Another burst of lava made short work of it.

Afterwards, she dismissed her armour. Lava Cannon was a mana-devouring spell at bronze-rank, but artificially raising it to silver with her Limit Break power made her mana drop off like a calving glacier. She stood bent over in a recovery position, hands on knees as Jason arrived on his bike. Seeing her covered in toad goo, he cast his cleansing spell.

“Feed me your sins.”

“How do even your healing powers sound evil?” she asked as Jason tossed her a recovery potion.

“I used it on the fourth toad,” Jason said. “That should tell you what you need to know.”

“I saw that big column of smiting power,” she said. “Was that transcendent damage?”

“That's my finisher,” Jason said.

“What happened to you being the blood and death guy?”

“I also offer absolution,” Jason said. “But absolution comes at a price.”

“I see you're still the melodrama guy,” she said, looking in the direction of the yowies.

“What about those ones?”

Jason glanced back and cast another Punition spell.

“I'll finish them once they get over here,” Jason said. “Let me just loot this lot, first.”

“You don't have any more crystal wash, do you?”

“I've got two left,” Jason said. “I figured I'd save them for rank-ups.”

“Good idea.”

Speaking of rank-ups, though, I’ve got that feeling…”

Amber light started shining out of his body.

“Didn’t even wait for me to meditate,” he said. “That ability was right on the cusp.”

-
- Ability [Verdict] (Doom) has reached Bronze 3 (100%).
 - Ability [Verdict] (Doom) has reached Bronze 4 (00%).

 - All [Doom Essence] abilities have reached [Bronze 4].
 - Linked attribute [Spirit] has increased from [Bronze 3] to [Bronze 4].
-

Jason leaned forward on the bike, letting Shade support him through the disorientation

“Mid-fight rank up?” Farrah said. “It seems that you aren’t taking these monsters seriously or your soul wouldn’t be relaxed enough for that to happen.”

“The fight is basically over,” Jason said.

“Looks like your monsters feel the same way.”

Jason turned to take a closer look at the hairy monstrosities.

“Have they turned around?” he asked. “It’s hard to tell with all that hair and how slow they are.”

“I think they have,” Farrah said.

“Oh, come on,” Jason said. “Why would you run when you can’t actually run, you stupid monsters?”

He took off on his bike, leaving Farrah with Shade, who emerged from her shadow to take the form of a black horse with a white mane. It was sleek and beautiful, with hair so shiny Farrah could vaguely see her reflection in it.

“Now, this is more like it,” she said.

Chapter 328

A Lot of Anomalies

While Farrah and Jason fought the silver-rank monsters, Cotsworth looked on through the monitor displaying what the camera drone above the fight recorded. Although the transmission was occasionally spotty due to magical interference, he had a fairly clear vantage on what was taking place. Mel was standing next to him, likewise looking on.

"They certainly don't fight like us," she said. "Taking on multiple category threes is incredible. I can't imagine keeping up that kind of output over the long term, though."

"Hurin is probably exhausting herself quite quickly," Cotsworth observed. "She's well-suited to blitz-attacking the most powerful enemies but would fare worse in a general DE sweep. Asano is a different beast altogether. At a glance, he doesn't seem to be doing anything."

"Poison?" Mel posited. "He only ever makes two attacks against an enemy, which are presumably special attacks."

"I believe that affliction specialist is the term," Cotsworth said. "The Perth branch has one. It's hard to even notice that their abilities are taking effect, but they also shine against the most powerful enemies, although it does take longer to drop them. The advantage is that they are highly resource-efficient, which is presumably why we're seeing Asano move from one fight to the next, here."

"There's talk of new strategic approaches based on the way these two fight," Mel said. "Any truth to the rumours, sir?"

"I believe that is the idea. What do you think?"

"I don't see throwing out our existing approach," she said. "Her methods are too resource-intensive and he's too slow for a large scale sweep and clear. They are taking us to school on the big stuff, though. Developing some strike teams specialised in eliminating ADE targets could really do some work. To be honest, I don't see why it hasn't happened already."

"There's been a lot of push for it from the branches," Cotsworth said. "The International Committee has been pushing back, though. Threats of reduced resource allocation for branches employing what they call 'unnecessary high-risk' practices."

"That sounds like a load of crap."

"It is," Cotsworth said. "The IC doesn't like it any more than we do. It's the Chinese and the Americans threatening to withhold resources if the rest of the world doesn't play by their rules."

“Bunch of pricks,” Mel said. “They poach all the looters, then leverage them to hold it over the rest of us.”

“That’s why Asano represents a chance to make a change,” Cotsworth said. “Word is, the Sydney branch is willing to share him and his looting abilities with the rest of the country.”

Even as they spoke, the tactical teams were using their connection to Jason to clean up the loot from the army of dead monsters. They stuck to the periphery, making sure to stay clear of Jason, Farrah and the silver-rank monsters.

"These two can also provide specific tactical guidance," Cotsworth continued. "If we're trying to work up new strategies blind, it's not worth the backlash. If we can quickly and efficiently work up new approaches, though, suddenly it's a lot more viable."

“And what happens if the US or China swoops in and takes these two away?” Mel asked.

“Then we’re back where we started,” Cotsworth said. “At the beck and call of the superpowers.”

As they continued to watch the fight play out, the head of the support team approached.

“Ditto Cotsworth,” she said. “We’re getting some odd readings off the dimensional space.”

“Odd how?” Cotsworth asked.

“We’ve been observing the integrity of the space, as per normal. A dimensional space normally takes forty-three hours to break down, with a natural variance. When we first came in, our readings came back normal, but now our projections are off. It’s looking like this space might last as much as sixty hours, maybe a little over.”

“Explanation?”

"I only know of one-dimensional incursion phenomenon that has operated outside of the normal time frame," she said, looking into the distance at the ongoing fight. "I can't confirm that the change happened when they entered the astral space, but I can't rule it out, either. I will say that the Sydney branch didn't record anything like this the last time Asano entered a dimensional incursion space. It could be the other one or it could be unrelated."

“Alright,” Cotsworth said. “Just record everything so we can hand it off to...”

He trailed off as a blinding column of light appeared in the distance.

“Uh, sir,” Mel said. “I think I may have noticed the effect of his abilities.”

“Eleven silver rank monster cores,” Jason listed as he lay the loot out on the table. “Thirty-one tubs of toad jelly, not sure what that’s for.”

“You put it in tubs?” Cotsworth said.

“It came that way,” Jason said. “We took our cut of the silver spirit coins and we’re keeping the lower rank ones we looted ourselves. I daresay the army of monsters will give you enough to be going on with. Three tins of healing ointment, that’s the good stuff, so save it for your category threes. Lucrative loot, from those toads. A spool of bark-thread hair from one of the yowies. The big red thing didn’t cough up anything too special, sadly.”

“We’ll make sure everything is tallied up,” Cotsworth said. “I understand you’ve got a preliminary arrangement with the International Committee about the harvest results.”

“It won’t be finalised until I tell the yanks and the Chinese to get on their bikes,” Jason said.

“You don’t anticipate being tempted away?” Cotsworth asked.

“I don’t see what they have to offer that I’m not already getting from the International Committee. Sure, they could offer me more of it but if I wanted more I would have negotiated harder. Maybe they have some big secrets they could bring me in on but that doesn’t sit well with me. At the end of the day, the job is to protect people from monsters and that means all the people. We have a lot to offer and the rising tide should raise all ships. From what I’ve heard, that isn’t the way the US and the Chinese will want to go.”

“I won’t lie, that’s exactly what a lot of us wanted to hear,” Cotsworth said.

By the time the plane returned Jason and Farrah to Sydney it was late in the evening. Erika had refused the ride home offered by the Network in favour of a hastily-arranged induction briefing on magic. She had a lot of questions.

Jason portalled them back to Casselton Beach, with a ten-minute mid-way pause on the secluded beach he had been using as a discreet stopover point.

“Maybe you should have dropped us closer to the chip shop,” Erika said.

“I’m trying not to be too blatant about magic,” Jason said. “Any more.”

After returning to the houseboat, he set up a video call with the Network headquarters in Sydney.

“Gladys,” he greeted. “I’m sorry our meeting today got put off.”

“Getting interrupted by alien invasions from another dimension is something you get used to around here,” Gladys said.

They spoke for a while about Jason’s grandmother and her ongoing treatment, which was going well.

"I still wouldn't go dropping any bombs about magic being real quite yet," Gladys advised. "With her advanced stage of Alzheimer's, her grasp of reality was fragmentary at best. Give her time to adjust before letting her know that everything she knows about actual reality is wrong."

"Thank you for taking such good care with her treatment."

"Thank you for saving at least some of our people. I knew that Miranda was a sea skank but I didn't think she was bad enough to murder our own. Keith wasn't a bad young lad and he didn't deserve to go out like that."

"Any trace of her yet?" Jason asked.

"No, it's like she dropped off the face of the Earth. Anna said the Lyon branch is missing a portal user and we haven't caught that Sebastian guy's scent either. Best estimate is that they either have or still are portal hopping to whoever is behind it all."

"Any movement on figuring out who that is?"

"Still just postulation at this point," Gladys said. "Barbou sacrificed EOA and Network personnel. It could be some faction in either organisation, the Cabal or some smaller group looking to make a big play. Don't anticipate learning more until they make their next move."

"I really don't like that Barbou got away," Jason said. "I'm worried enough about Farrah without having the guy who tortured her still out there somewhere."

"She's the reason you wanted to meet with me, yes?" Gladys asked.

"Yeah."

"How is she doing?"

"To all appearances, like nothing happened," Jason said. "That just worries me all the more. As much as she might brush it off you don't go through something like that – for weeks – without it leaving an impact. I'm worried she's burying a psychological cancer that won't show itself until it metastasises."

"Well," Gladys said, "the first thing you need to do is put away your assumptions. Culture plays a huge role in our psychological makeup and she's from an entirely different world. We also don't know how much having magic affects the way we process trauma. The short-term effects seem positive, but the long-term implications remain a mystery because we don't have the research base yet. It could be that our minds just handle it better, or we may pay for those short-term protections down the road."

"So you're saying no one knows and there's nothing I can do."

"I'm saying don't push her to respond the way you think she should. Listen to what she tells you. Watch for what she shows you. Be there for her if and when she needs you."

And don't underestimate the power of shared experiences. You went through some stuff yourself, while you were on the other side, right?"

"Where did you hear that?"

"I didn't need anyone to tell me when you're running around like an angry thorn bush," she said. "Your friend isn't the only one in need of recovery. My recommendation is for you both to take things easy for a good long while. Springtime is coming to that nice little town of yours. Enjoy it."

He didn't respond, his mind churning over.

"I know it's not what you wanted to hear," Gladys said. "You want to be active and do something for your friend. Sometimes, the best thing you can do is step back and not make things worse."

Lance Houseman entered the hotel room in Sydney where his assistant, Franklin, was waiting. Lance was a broad-shouldered man whose silver rank made him look thirty, while his true age was almost double that. Franklin was a slender, iron-rank, black man holding a computer tablet. Both men wore impeccable suits.

"Room's clean, sir," Franklin said. "The locals didn't try anything, magical or otherwise."

"They'd be stupid if they did," Lance said. "You've gone over the materials?"

"Yes, sir," Franklin said.

"Then let's take a seat and go over them. Did anything happen while we were in the air?"

"Asano worked with the tactical team of another branch. This time he brought the woman he liberated with him."

Franklin handed over a file as they sat down, side by side, in the large suite's comfortable armchairs.

"This is everything we have on her, which is, essentially, nothing. The most concrete thing we have is an analysis of her abilities, courtesy of a drone recording. I've put the raw footage and an analysed break down of it to your laptop but, in brief, she's a blitz attacker. Highly capable, extreme damage output. She seems to have an ability to ignore rank barriers as there was no noticeable damage impedance from the silver-rank monsters. That's possibly just a factor of the poor video source, however."

"She's another Trelawney, then."

"Initial assessment is that she's potentially more capable than Trelawney, although that assessment has received some pushback."

"Of course it has," Lance said. "Our people aren't used to not having the best there is, but this woman comes from a world where our best is the norm. Value assessment?"

"Our best guess is that she's very close to crossing the line to silver-rank. Tactically she would be an asset, but no more than any other top-flight silver. It's the knowledge she brought back from the other world that's valuable. Our assets inside the Sydney branch claim that Asano has asserted that her value in this regard is higher than his."

"And what about him?" Lance asked. "Did we finally get a look at his abilities?"

"Yes, sir, although not a good one. We believe he's an affliction specialist so his abilities have limited visual effect. Most of them, anyway."

"Oh?"

"His abilities appear to work in stages. Initially, his powers inflict a rapidly accelerating necrosis, which he puts in place before moving on to other combatants. Then he comes back and switches to attacks based around what we believe to be oblivion energy."

"He's wiping stuff out of existence?"

"Yes, sir. Allow me to show you a clip."

Franklin pulled up a video file on his tablet, showing a man on a motorcycle trailing a dark cloak of stars behind him as he circled some stricken-looking hairy giants. A huge column of light crashed down on the giants, one after another, wholly eradicating each one.

"That's a lot of oblivion energy, if that's really what it is," Lance said. "We're sure this guy is bronze-rank?"

"There are a lot of anomalies in that regard," Franklin said. "He also seems to ignore rank suppression, which is possibly due to items or a learned ability from the other world. We have no information on anything like that existing, but our knowledge of the other world is centuries out of date. It may well be a more recent development. The analysts think it's more likely a result of individual abilities, though. We do have one of our own who can do that, after all."

"What else?"

"His aura is highly anomalous. He did something we don't understand while he was in France that had a physiological effect similar to a rank-up. Since then, he appears different, magically. His aura was already reported to be significantly more powerful than his rank suggested and now it's something else entirely. It apparently still reads as bronze rank but with a strength that easily matches silver. One of our informants referred to it as feeling like..."

Franklin scrolled through his notes on the tablet.

“...being bludgeoned to death by the Ten Commandments,” he read.

“How colourful.”

“As best we can tell, he’s bronze-rank. With the unusual factors surrounding him and the borderline strength of the other outworlder, our analysts suggest treating them as silver, from a tactical perspective.”

“What do they make of Asano’s tactical value?”

“We don’t have a full handle of his abilities yet, but early assessment places his value at extremely high. High endurance, escalating damage, oblivion energy. He’s built for taking down ADEs. His high mobility and stealth capabilities are just sweeteners. The problem is his behavioural profile.”

“Oh?”

“He’s erratic. Rash. It’s hard to predict when he’ll fight versus when he’ll talk. He’s willing to accept extreme consequences for bold moves. Strongly anti-authoritarian. Even so, he’s made connections in the Network and the Cabal. He values friendship over alliances. He also appears to be suffering from post-traumatic stress we believe stems from an extended period in some kind of combat zone.”

“They think he’s been to war?”

“Or something like it,” Franklin said.

“What’s the suggested approach?”

"Personal benefits won't win him over," Franklin said. "He seems to value relationships, so offering benefits for the other outworlder and his family will be better received. It's all in the packet I left in your room. He doesn't respect politeness. Be honest, show strength. He'll respect that. Do not threaten him, however. He cannot be intimidated and he'll see it as a challenge."

“He sounds like a huge pain the ass.”

“That sums up his behavioural analysis, quite neatly, if more colloquially than the written report.”

Chapter 329

Pitch Meetings

The film crew set up next to the Surf Club, with a crowd of onlookers gathered around. The kitchen set was put out, with the fridge and oven hooked up.

“Today we have a special guest,” Erika said to the cameras. “As viewers of my previous program may remember, I would occasionally have my little brother on before his untimely passing. As it turns out, he faked his death in circumstances he is yet to adequately explain, so for the first time on Beachside Kitchen, please welcome my brother, Jason Asano.”

“What kind of introduction was that?” Jason asked, walking into shot.

“Well, if you’d like to explain to the viewers what you’ve been doing for a year and a half?”

“Time and place, Eri!”

“Then I hope you’ve got a better recipe than you do an explanation,” Erika said. “It’s dessert week on Beachside Kitchen and Jason will be helping me make a Russian honey cake. Before that, though, we’ve each picked out a simple dessert recipe that we’ll each be making. What do you have for us, little brother?”

“I’m going with a brioche frangipane apple pudding, how about you?”

“I thought I’d pay deference to the lovely warm spell we’re enjoying here in Casselton Beach by making a simple and summery key lime pie.”

“West Indian lime pie,” Jason corrected.

“Most people will know it as a key lime pie, Jason.”

“We’re in Australia, Eri, and in Australia they’re called West Indian limes, not key limes. Ergo, West Indian lime pie.”

“Ergo? Are you trying to make the viewers hate you? Key lime pie is universally acknowledged as a delicious summer dessert, while the internet will tell you that West Indian lime pie is a gross sex thing.”

“It’s the internet, Eri. Everything is a gross sex thing,” Jason said, pulling out his phone. “You probably made that up anyway, so I’m going to look it up.”

His expression froze for a moment, then he put his phone away and flashed the camera a big smile.

“So today, Erika will be making a delicious key lime pie...”

Out of shot, standing next to the executive producer, Taika leaned over to whisper a question.

“You don’t put the bickering in the show, do you?”

“We edit it back for the airing,” Wally said, “but we do a special cut for the website. It’s a massive traffic driver every time he’s on. The audience love them together. I’d have him co-host if he’d just agree to it. Selling stationary and he doesn’t want to be a TV star. I don’t suppose you could try talking him into it?”

“I don’t think so, bro. He doesn’t sell office supplies anymore.”

Several hours later, Jason was dealing with a group of stern Chinese men who did not look like big Beachside Kitchen fans. The man at the front was the leader of the group and one of only two that had spoken during the meeting. The only flower among the rocks was being the leader’s beautiful, young-seeming daughter, wearing the same sharp suit and sharp expression as the rest.

“You are a fool to reject our entreaties, Mr Asano,” he said.

“I was already a fool, Mr Li, so it wasn’t out of my way.”

A smile teased the corner of his daughter’s lips but she quickly schooled her expression. They were standing in the conference lobby of Castle Head’s largest business resort, although the only other one was just marginally smaller. Li and his daughter were both silver-rankers, while their unspeaking flunkies were all iron.

“You will come to regret being so flippant,” The elder Li said and marched away. The flunkies followed in lock-step, but his daughter remained behind.

“I always do,” Jason confided in her. “Actually, that’s a lie; I thought it would sound cool. To be honest, I’m killing it.”

“You are an unconventional man, Mr Asano,” the younger Li said. “Although we have not come to an agreement today, I hope you will consider yourself open to perhaps a more modest collaboration in the future.”

“Modest isn’t really my thing, but I’ll try and be open-minded. You know, I respect the approach you’re taking. You figured out that you didn’t have anything that would swing me, so your Dad comes in all bluster, making me feel powerful in rejecting him. Then you step in, reasonable, graceful and measured, to keep the door open.”

She gave him a wry smile.

“Did it work?” she asked.

“Definitely,” Jason said with a grin. “I’d give you my phone number but something tells me you already have it. How about you give me yours?”

She gave him a sunbeam smile and handed him a business card with both hands. Jason looked it over, seeing her work numbers on the front. He chuckled as he turned it over and saw another number, hand-written in pen and labelled 'personal.'

"Is your dad really like that, or was it a show for my benefit?"

"This approach was his design," she admitted, "although he was playing to his strengths."

"I think you both were," Jason said.

"And what do you think my strengths are, Mr Asano?"

"Most things, from what I can tell. Not blending in, though. I have trouble imagining a crowd where you don't stand out."

"Daughter!" her father barked from the lobby entrance. "We are leaving!"

"I have to go, Mr Asano."

"I am genuinely disappointed, Miss Li. I look forward to seeing you again."

As the Beijing Network delegation left, Jason wandered over to one of the lobby couches and crashed down.

"Strewth, that was a good plan." Jason said. "I think they may have sent the most beautiful woman in China."

"She is silver-rank, Mr Asano," Shade pointed out. "She most likely heard what you just said."

"Oh, you're right," Jason said. "Whatever will I do now she's heard me call her the most beautiful woman in China."

"Ah, you intended her to hear. I may have spoiled your intentions by drawing attention to it."

"No, I expected you to point that out."

"Then why say it?"

"Because she doesn't need me to tell her how gorgeous she is. But this way I get to do it while demonstrating that I thought things through this far, knowing that she's listening to us right now."

"Aren't you concerned she might see you as smug?"

"I am smug, Shade. I find it best to put that right out there, given it's a core character trait."

"When will you let her know about the melodrama?"

"Ideally while I'm rescuing her as she's falling off a building."

"She's a silver-ranker, Mr Asano. I imagine she would rescue herself."

“That does make it tricky,” Jason agreed. “How hard would it be to arrange another rolling motorcycle shootout?”

“I believe events of that nature are best left to occur organically,” Shade said.

“How often does something like that happen organically?” Jason asked.

“Well, Mr Asano,” Shade said, “how has your week been so far?”

“I was hoping we could meet on your remarkable houseboat,” Lance Houseman said in a neutral accent. It reminded Jason a little of Farrah, whose translation ability made her English somewhat flat. Not everyone had Jason’s aptitude for forcing some local flavour through the sieve of a magical translation.

The American’s accent was not the result of a translation power, however. It was the classic mid-Atlantic banality, designed not to offend anyone yet slightly annoying everyone. Or perhaps that was the work of the smug self-confidence, Jason considered. He wondered, for a moment, if that was how people saw him, then dismissed the thought.

They were sitting in a Castle Heads café, the American with a long black and Jason with an iced chocolate, piled high with cream. Houseman had chosen to meet him alone.

“Your people have been examining my houseboat for days,” Jason said. “You should ask them.”

“That wasn’t us,” Lance said. “You might want to look to the Chinese for that.”

“You just lied to me, Mr Houseman,” Jason said. “Not a great start.”

Jason sipped at his ice chocolate, getting whipped cream on his nose but seeming not to notice. The American’s attention was drawn to it, distracted, but he didn’t say anything.

“Why don’t we get straight to the point,” Lance said. “My understanding is that you’re not a man to beat around the bush.”

“And you’re not a man to act incautiously,” Jason said. “All those category threes lurking around. Do you really think I’m that dangerous?”

“If you weren’t, you wouldn’t be worth my time, Mr Asano.”

“Sure I would,” Jason said. “I could be a bumbling fool and you’d be here, so long as I was a bumbling fool with a looting power. Even if that’s the only worthwhile thing I picked up over there, that’s money in the bank.”

“I don’t think you want money, Mr Asano. We can offer you more than the locals, no question, but you don’t care because you don’t need it. You’re waiting to hear what we can give you that they can’t.”

“Actually, I’m waiting for you to leave. I made a deal that I can’t close because you and your people are obnoxious enough to insert yourselves where you aren’t wanted. I guess I am the magical equivalent of an oil-rich nation.”

“That’s a cheap shot, Asano.”

“You present such an easy target. I’ve heard that the Chinese and US branches are a lot more unified than most of the Network.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a strong national identity.”

“Fair enough. You know I’m Australian, right?”

“Australia is the kiddie pool. We look at you and see a man with infinite potential, but you’re stuck teaching the children to swim. You need come and join the adults who already know how or you’ll never fulfil your potential.”

“Oh, I didn’t realise you could explain it with an easy to understand metaphor; you’ve totally turned me around.”

“Sarcasm is also cheap.”

“And you’re treating me like an uneducated white voter. We may keep voting our own idiots in, Mr Houseman, but we’re not America yet.”

“You seem to have a problem with my country, Mr Asano.”

“Mate, everyone has a problem with your country. You made children fear the sky and that was your last president. Do I even need to talk about this one? We know you haven’t read him in on magic because it’s still a secret.”

“Mr Asano, you sound like a hipster art student. One semester of political science does not make you Noam Chomsky. Whatever you may think of my nation’s politics, our magical community is something else entirely.”

“For now.”

“If you remain here, Mr Asano, you’ll spend all your time lifting others up. Come with us and you’ll be the one who rises.”

“That’s a very capitalist pitch,” Jason said. “You’re proposing I choose selfishness over helping others.”

“You’re very high-minded for someone who tried to sell gold to Armenian gangsters.”

“Everyone’s a hypocrite, Mr Houseman. I’m not responsible for the largest military and the largest economy on the planet, so my selfish choices can only hurt so many people. Selfish choices is your country’s political doctrine at this point.”

“We need to move on from this unproductive topic, Mr Asano. You can hate our politics all you like, but as you just pointed out, we have the money and we have the power. This is as true of magic as it is of everything else. If you ever want to get your

friend home, you'll need the greatest knowledge base and the largest pool of magical resources on the planet. That's us."

"Speaking of my friend," Jason said. "You should call off your people looking for the chance to approach her separately. You won't like what happens if you if they do."

"You can't threaten me, Mr Asano. We aren't some half-baked French traitors trained in the worthless strategies that we forced on them. Our silver-rankers are more than capable of fighting on your terms. I know you aren't stupid enough to think you can beat one of them, let alone a small army of them. You can feel them around us. This is how many silver-rankers we had to spare for this trip."

"I'm not going to fight you," Jason said. "I'm going to give the world the tools to stand up to you."

"You aren't as valuable as you think, Mr Asano. Don't throw away a golden opportunity out of stubbornness. Think about your family. You can essence them up here, but we can make each and every one of them a powerhouse. They can all have mansions in Miami with a cupboard for monster cores in every one. We'll turn them all into silver-rankers, guaranteed. No expense spared."

"And all I have to do is clip a leash on my neck."

"I'm not looking to put you in a box," Lance said. "I'm offering you freedom. Freedom, within a much larger framework."

"So, a big box, then."

Lance shook his head.

"It pains me to look at someone like you, with all you could be, running around like a racehorse with blinders on. All you can see is the narrow path someone else has put in front of you. I want to open your eyes and let you see the world."

"As long as I follow the tour guide's directions," Jason said.

Lance sighed.

"I didn't want to bring this up," he said, "because I knew it would be a delicate topic. Your friend, Farrah. She's been through a lot. I wanted this to be a pleasant surprise after you signed on. We have expert counselling services that specialise in magic-related trauma. Our people can help her recover after the terrible circumstances she experienced because they have the training, the knowledge and the experience to give her the help we both know she needs."

"You seriously think that I would trust your people to crawl inside her head?" Jason asked. "I think we're done here."

"Negotiation is a long road," Mr Asano. "We'll talk again."

“Mr Houseman, I apologise for my ambiguity. I don’t actually think that we’re done here. I know we are. Definitely. This is a hard no.”

Houseman stood up and adjusted his jacket.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Mr Asano. You’ll come to realise that we aren’t trying to recruit you because we need you. We’re doing it because you need us.”

Jason remained seated, spooning some cream into his mouth.

“That’s alright, Mr Houseman. The hard way is kind of my thing.”

Houseman went outside and got into the back of a black Mercedes that drove away. Jason felt the nearby silver-rank auras retreat.

“He said silver-rank, rather than category three,” Shade observed.

“I noticed that, too,” Jason said. “Did you spot that one aura?”

“The silver-rank one that was free of monster core residue?” Shade asked. “Yes, I did. It was holding back, mostly likely outside of what they believed to be the range of your aura senses.”

“It seems that he wasn’t lying when he said that I’m not as valuable as I think. The Americans already have the training methods for non-core advancement.”

“It’s not overly surprising,” Shade said. “If they could figure out the right meditation techniques it wouldn’t be that hard. It’s unlikely they have a means as quick as using cores unless they have information from another world like you, but it would at least be an acceptable pace.”

“That makes sense,” Jason said.

He had learned that many branches had someone like Nigel who attempted to muddle through advancement without cores. They even had an informal network where they shared insights. Jason highly suspected that, like anyone with looting powers, the Americans snatched up anyone who made real progress.

Being in Castle Heads already, Jason offered to pick Emi up from school. Erika agreed, especially since they were still living in Jason’s houseboat. When Jason and his niece arrived home, they heard music blasting from the rear of the houseboat.

Jason sensed Hiro in his cabin with the soundproofing to maximum, while Farrah and Taika appeared to be dancing on the rear deck. Farrah shut off the sound system as Jason approached, rushing up to him.

“Tina Turner is old!” she said.

“I’m aware,” Jason said.

“We need to get her essences, now.”

"I don't think the Network will be okay with that," Jason said.

"Did you ask?"

"Did I ask if it was okay to give Tina Turner a set of essences? No, I did not."

"Well, you have the speaky thing in your pocket, right?"

"You want me to call up a secret society of wizards whose core purpose includes hiding magic to ask if we can give magic to an internationally famous singer?"

"That would be great, thank you," Farrah said.

"It wasn't a suggestion," he said, running an exasperated hand over his face.

"It can't hurt to call, can it, Uncle Jason?"

"You too?" he asked Emi. "Don't give me the puppy dog eyes, that isn't going to ... oh bloody hell."

He jabbed a finger at his niece as he fished out his phone to make a call.

"I cannot believe I'm doing this. It's only because I need to call Anna anyway, and you both owe me for... Anna, G'day."

"What can I do for you, Mr Asano?"

"You can just call me Jason. Look, I've been asked to check if it's at all possible to give essences to Tina Turner."

"I'm afraid not," Annabeth said with a laugh. "The international Committee had to put a stop to giving celebrities essences in the eighties."

"It did happen, then?" Jason asked.

"Oh, yes," Annabeth said. "Willie Nelson, Christie Brinkley. They should have been more careful with the essences they gave Ozzy Osbourne."

"Is that why he's not dead? What about Australians?"

"Well, the Perth branch is almost entirely made up of Cricketers everyone thinks are dead. They keep proposing to magic up Steve Waugh and I know at least one instance they tried to give Boonie essences on the sly."

"So, that's a no on Tina Turner?"

"Maybe take it up with the Americans. Did you talk to our foreign guests, yet?"

"I did, but found their proposals unappealing. I'll come to you and finalise our agreement tomorrow."

"Oh, that's fantastic," Annabeth said, not hiding the relief in her voice. "They couldn't tempt you away?"

"You helped me get Farrah back," Jason said. "I know you and the International Committee had your own agenda, but you helped us and lost people in the process. I won't forget that."

Chapter 330

Moving Forward

On the top deck of the houseboat, Asya, Farrah and Jason were enjoying lunch as they looked over the final version of the agreement with the Network.

“While we have the agreement documented,” Asya said, tapping the papers on the table, “it’s a fiction, legally speaking. What court could we pursue violations in? In the end, it’s just a symbol of intent.”

“I like that though,” Jason said. “For all intents and purposes, it’s a handshake deal. It’s held together by integrity, and I’m all about integrity.”

“You are?” Farrah asked.

“Yep,” Jason said. “When I sell out my principles, they stay sold. Although, if I sold out *that* principle, then they wouldn’t stay sold because that principle is no longer in effect, which means my principles would get unsold, meaning that particular principle *was* in effect, which would mean...”

His ramble trailed off as he scratched his head in confusion. “Ethics is hard.”

Farrah shook her head.

“You know,” Asya said to Jason, “I never gave you a proper thank you for saving my life.”

The mock confusion dropped off Jason’s face as he looked her square in the eyes.

“I know that you were the one that pushed to get my chance at freeing Farrah. You never have to thank me for anything again. Ask and I’ll be there.”

“An infinite supply of favours?” Asya asked.

“Friends don’t count favours,” Jason said. “They just show up.”

“Is that what we are?” Asya asked.

“Don’t look down on friendship,” Jason said. “It’s the foundation of every positive relationship. I love my dad, I love my sister and my niece. While I love my Mum and my brother too, even after everything, it isn’t the same with them. They’ll always be family, but the friendship isn’t there. Some family you want to see every day, and some you only see at Christmas. That extends to every relationship, from lovers to co-workers to people you escaped a cannibal cult with.”

“That was weird way to meet,” Farrah said. “One of these days I’ll be the one saving you.”

“Friendship,” Jason continued, “is having people to share the best and the worst days of your life with. Friendship is knowing there will be someone you can rely on, no matter what. Friendship can let you travel back in time.”

“What?” Asya asked.

“Wait,” Jason said, frowning. “That last one might just be Final Fantasy VIII.”

“Don’t underestimate having Jason as a friend,” Farrah said. “When I was a stranger he risked everything to save me, when he had every expectation of getting killed. Once I was a friend he brought me back from the dead.”

“I don’t think that was technically me,” Jason said.

“Shut up, I’m telling a story.”

“As you were,” conceded an admonished Jason.

Farrah walked Asya off the boat.

“I’m not a threat to you,” Farrah said.

“I never thought you were,” Asya said, drawing a chuckle from Farrah.

“I can help you with aura control,” Farrah said. “It’ll make your emotions less of an open book.”

Asya’s eyes went wide.

“Does Jason...?”

“Yes,” Farrah said. “His strongest talent is weaponising his aura but he excels in every facet of aura manipulation, including reading emotions through auras. He restricts himself, of course, to respect the privacy of others, but when someone is weaker than him and has poor control, clear and strong are like shouting. He cannot help but overhear.”

Asya buried her face in her hands.

“Don’t walk off the deck,” Farrah warned. “I wouldn’t worry about it. It’s not like you’ve made any secret of your intentions, even disregarding magic.”

“Should I just ask him out?”

“I don’t know,” Farrah said. “I think there’s a good chance he’d say no for the simple fact that he doesn’t need any more complications in his life. On the other hand, do you want someone else sweeping in and taking your opportunity?”

“No,” Asya said firmly.

“Then make a social overture. The worst thing that can happen is he says no.”

“What if it makes things weird?”

“Your biggest risk is him feeling smug that a woman like you would be interested in him. It would just get lost in his regular smugness, so it’ll be fine.”

“He’s always been very confident.”

“Or seemed that way,” Farrah said. “He’s good at masking his fear and uncertainty, even in his aura. It’s like the first person he convinces is always himself.”

“Well?” Cleary asked.

Houseman was talking over a secure video link with the Assistant Director of Operations, Los Angeles Network branch.

“He’s too inculcated with anti-American sentiment. As if his government was any different. They’re just worse at it.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Cleary said, “but we’ve come across principled people before. We don’t land every fish.”

“I’m not sure we can afford to let this one off the hook. I think he intends to democratise some of the advantages that we’ve been keeping to ourselves. He potentially poses a threat to our position.”

“We can live with that,” Cleary said. “We anticipated leaking some of this in the next few years anyway. Things are coming to a head and we’ve heard China was looking to make some overtures to the world at large as part of their goals to become the sole hegemon once magic goes public. If we can’t beat them to that punch, we can at least take some wind out of their sails by letting the treasures they were going to bestow come from a source that doesn’t pose us any threat.”

“You’re saying we should walk away? We don’t want to consider taking the outworlder off the board?”

“Are you advocating that?”

“No,” Houseman said. “The guy unnerves me. I was told about his aura beforehand but nothing prepares you for experiencing it for yourself. If he stands and fights, we can put him down, no question. If he runs, though, our security team isn’t confident of containment. My instincts tell me that he is not an enemy I want out there in the dark.”

“You’re the man on the ground, so your opinion holds a lot of weight. It also aligns with our own concerns. The International Committee knows what the outworlders represent. The IC may just be there to rubber stamp the things we want but they’ve had a taste of the good stuff, now. They’ll buck if we’re that blatant about snatching it away from them. If the outworlders come to us on their own, that’s one thing, but us taking them out is another.”

“We could blame it on the Chinese.”

“Too risky. That’s my sense, anyway. Our response will have to be decided above the branch level, so we’ll take your report to the National Council. Anticipate them wanting a video briefing from you. I imagine the response will be to let it go, though. We have no idea what kind of tricks he brought back from the other world. In the meantime, hold tight, stay quiet and don’t cause trouble.”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s not like we won’t get any nuggets of gold that he drops on the International Committee anyway,” Cleary said. “In fact, we get first pick off the pile. Most likely we’ll shift our approach to dominating the International Committee’s interactions with the outworlders.”

“I know that decision is above my head,” Houseman said, “but I think that would be the sound approach.”

Jason and Farrah were sat at a table in the houseboat, going over lists.

“You’ll need to trade some of these essences with the Network,” Farrah said. “You have far too many growth and plant essences. You can certainly use some of them, but you should swap them out for a selection of common essences before we take a proper look at what we give to your family.”

“The renewal essence I have I want to give to Taika,” Jason said. “I was thinking an immortal confluence.”

“That’s generous,” Farrah said. “Renewal essences can sell for as much as top-rarity ones.”

“Taika has already agreed to be the head of security for my family,” Jason said. “I want him to have top flight powers, plus I feel responsible for dragging him into this.”

“That puts him on the list of people we train instead of feed up with cores,” Farrah said. “We need to determine which members of your family go on that list.”

“The only ones I’m willing to consider are Erika, Ian and, eventually, Emi. The rest get cores, end of story. My guess is that Erika and Ian won’t go for it, though. Just convincing them to let us train Emi will be a thing.”

“They’re too old anyway, to be honest,” Farrah said. “Even with a power to use skill books to catch up with, this world doesn’t have the skill books. If you want family members who are trained properly, you need them to be Emi’s age or younger and start training them now.”

“That would mean expanding the pool of family members who know the truth,” Jason said. “We just promised the Network to be careful about that.”

“We also promised to train up a group of young people from the Network’s families,” Farrah said. “You and I will do better to retain a level of independence, but your family joining the Network as a whole would be nothing but beneficial.”

“You think the Network would go for that?”

“They’d do it just to sink their roots into you,” Farrah said.

“Good point,” Jason said. “They have the experience and resources for a mass induction, too. All I could do would be to set up a movie theatre and show them all my holiday vlog.”

“I’m going to train Hiro in array magic,” Farrah said. “That should be more manageable than adventurer training, especially with the right essences.”

There was a whiteboard next to them with two columns labelled trade and keep. As they went through Jason’s essences, picking combinations for his family, they had been sorting the essences into the two columns.

Jason glanced at the keep column, where the first three listed essences had been reserved by Farrah for Hiro. Two were amongst his highest-rarity essences, the vast and rune essences. The third was the common, but still valuable, magic essence. That would produce the Prosperity confluence, which was shared by Neil from his team back in the other world. The resulting powers would be very different, though, being a combination hand-picked by Farrah to synergise with array magic.

“I’d love to have a set like that myself,” Farrah said, “but it’s not suited for adventuring. It’s a classic crafting combination, with almost everyone who has it being a core user. Not to say that it can’t be used in a fight, although it seriously lacks efficiency when operating on less than a battlefield-scale conflict.”

“It’s common, then?”

“The vast essence is of the highest rarity, so common isn’t the right word. It’s probably the most widely-used combination involving that essence, though. Anyone who has it is never lacking for work in any high-magic regions. You’ll see why as Hiro and I work on your family compound project together.”

The park at Castle Bluff had an oddly elaborate obstacle course, courtesy of a town councillor obsessed with fitness. Since he was so adamant about acquiring funding for healthy school lunch program and child fitness initiatives, he had no concerns about retaining his seat year after year. Now in his seventies, he could still be found using the obstacle course himself every week. Jason and Farrah knew him enough to say hello after using the park for mobility training every day for weeks.

They picked up Emi from school and, wary of being seen using portals, drove to Castle Bluff Park. On this day there was a pair of people mover vans following them around.

“Is this the best use of our time?” a man said as people clambered out of the van. “I don’t see why we couldn’t do all this in Sydney.”

“You’re the ones who rocked up early and I’m not shifting my schedule,” Jason said.

“If you’re not on a monster hunt, you don’t skip training,” Farrah added. “You can either join in or stand around and complain.”

“Bugger it, I’m in,” Cotsworth said. “I want to see what kind of routine you get up to.”

The Director of Tactical Operations for every Network branch in Australia had descended on Casselton Beach to discuss a nationwide training program. They arrived three hours early, which was how they ended up trailing along behind Jason and Farrah.

“Who are they?” Koen Waters asked Jason. He inclined his head in the direction of a gaggle of teenagers holding up phones. Around half of them were wearing uniforms from local private schools.

“High school students,” Jason said. “They started filming us last week. I had Shade check them out but they’re just putting our training up on line. We make sure not to show them anything too outlandish. Are you going to join us?”

“No thank you,” Koen said. “I have my own routine.”

“Well if you’re just hanging about, take the others and try out that food truck over there,” Jason advised, pointing. “I recommend the kimchi fries.”

That evening, the assembled Network personnel were gathered in the media room of the houseboat.

“Can I buy one of these chairs off you?” Cotsworth asked, luxuriating in the cloud furniture.

“No,” Jason said. “Technically, they’re not chairs. They’re part of the houseboat, which is not technically a houseboat.”

Behind him was a screen with paused footage from one of his most recent forays into a proto-astral space.

“I know you’ve all been analysing the way Farrah and myself fight but tonight we’re going to go over that together, along with comparisons of our approach versus the standard Network tactics. We have two goals to achieve before you leave at the end of the week. One: build a framework to train your future tactical units to include strike teams specialising in the elimination of high-rank dimensional entities. Two: develop a retraining

program to establish those specialist teams using existing tactical personnel in the short term.”

He sent a mental command and the media player produced by the houseboat started producing an image.

“We’re going to start by looking at Farrah. In the fight we’re about to watch, observe how many different essence abilities she uses and contrast that with your standard tactics. Note that instead of using her abilities to occasionally supplement attacks, she chains abilities, one after the other...”