

Chapter 332

Not Ready to Leave

Despite their outward dismissiveness, Jason and Farrah had no trouble finding challenge from silver rank monsters, although in very different ways. Farrah was all about frontloading damage, making endurance the key for her while Jason was just the opposite.

The start of a fight was the most dangerous time for him. The enemy was at their strongest, with full reserves, while his abilities lacked immediate impact. His one instantaneous damage power required considerable setup, which left an eruption of Colin and Gordon's exploding spheres as his only blitz moves.

The longer a fight went on, the better for Jason as the enemy grew weaker and he grew stronger. The best way for Jason to challenge himself, then, was to fight weaker enemies in higher numbers, consigning himself to a constant state of the beginning portion of fights.

When he had taken such fights against bronze-rank monsters, it had been a frustrating experience. They lacked the fortitude to survive long enough for Jason's full abilities to come into play. In most instances, Jason had to work hard to even use his execute before the monsters died, making it a hard power to advance.

Even that required effort incommensurate with the results. Staring all the way back at iron-rank, his powers had often felt pointlessly elaborate, when a simple chunk of immediate damage was so much more effective. Watching Humphrey carve through monsters had been an almost emasculating experience, with his team deliberately leaving him monsters to kill on his own. Only against the toughest monsters did he feel like he was truly contributing, leaving him as an addendum to his own team.

It was once they started challenging silver-rank monsters that Jason felt his powers come into their own. Even the weakest silver-rank monster had a startling resilience, which meant that Jason was no longer racing to use all his abilities on an enemy before it died. At the same time, adventurers Jason had long envied, like Humphrey, were no longer taking down one or more enemies with a single sword-swing.

Although fighting packs of silver-rank monsters was objectively more difficult than their lower-rank equivalents, Jason finally felt like he was truly pushing himself. No longer was he reaching the end of the fight just as he was hitting his stride. In his latter days in the astral space, and now the proto-spaces of Earth, he felt that he was becoming the adventurer he was meant to be from the beginning.

“I think we told you this from the beginning,” Farrah said as Jason shared his feelings on the flight home from the latest proto-space. “Affliction specialists are kind of a waste at low rank.”

“I still need to work on fighting in the open,” Jason said. “Shade does a great job of letting me jump between his bodies, always moving where I need him. I need to work on making the most of the opportunities he sets up for me.”

“Stick to bronze-ranks for that, for now,” Farrah advised. “Until you’re better at it, taking on silvers in the open is too much of a risk unless they’re as sluggish as a yowie.”

Jason had been incorporating Shade’s mount forms into his combat style more and more against the larger, slower monsters. The new approach was a way to develop in a new direction using enemies he was traditionally strong against, which typically didn’t help his advancement.

To make the most of his superhuman coordination and reflexes, he sought out environments to practise this new methodology. He went out bush to find improvised obstacle courses for Shade’s motorcycle and horse forms, along with more alien and exotic animals.

“They have mantis beetles on Earth?” Farrah asked, having joined him on one such excursion.

“Definitely not,” Jason said.

“So, Shade can take forms from other worlds?”

“Yep,” Jason said.

“Then why can’t Shade take a heidel form?”

“Technically, the shape-changing is Mr Asano’s power,” Shade said. “You will need to ask him.”

“Magic’s very complicated,” Jason said. “Who amongst us can truly claim to understand all its vagaries?”

In Jason’s cabin, the furniture was currently configured into a pair of large armchairs in which Jason and Farrah were sitting. They were looking at the two paintings on the wall, specifically the one titled The Invasion of Pallimustus. It depicted a series of orbital cities floating around Farrah’s homeworld.

“And that woman who came by painted this?” she asked.

“Most likely,” Jason said. “She goes by the name Dawn, although she’s suspiciously elusive. The Network and the Cabal have been trying to find her for months and coming up empty.”

“She was definitely a normal person,” she said. “Unless she’s so powerful that she can fool our senses, but that would have to be diamond rank. My perception power enhanced my aura senses when it hit silver and with your soul strength, your senses aren’t much weaker.”

“Can a diamond-ranker even survive in magic this low?” Jason asked.

“I don’t know,” Farrah said. “When it comes to diamond-rankers, the rules you and I live by are more like guidelines. For all I know, she’s somehow artificially reduced her rank. More likely, she’s fronting for someone else, though. Since when do you and I warrant the attention of a diamond ranker?”

Jason nodded at the painting.

“Since that became an issue, I suspect. Assuming it’s actually happening. If your world really is suffering an invasion, I’m guessing the painting is a metaphor. Rather than an invasion from space, I would put money on it being dimensional.”

“What makes you think that?” Farrah asked.

“I’ve already helped stop one dimensional invasion and I doubt we were the Builder’s biggest concern or he would have sent more powerful people. Plus there’s the fact that someone clearly wants us involved. Maybe because we’re outworlders.”

“Someone?”

“My money would be on the World-Phoenix,” Jason said. “Otherwise, what reason would she have to intervene in my affairs. I’m less than a speck of dust for a being like that to brush off its shoulder.”

“Do you think it’s happening right now?” Farrah asked.

“I don’t know any more than you,” Mason said. “My intuition says no. Why bother to tell us about it when we don’t have a way back, yet.”

“You still think the astral magic books will have one?” Farrah said. “There’s a lot of information about dimension crossing, but breaching an astral space is very different from crossing realities.”

“When Knowledge gave me those books, she was the only person in the world who both knew that I had the World-Phoenix token and what it would do. I suspect she chose the contents of those books very carefully. I just need to study them until I understand it. Thankfully, I have Clive’s notes to guide me.”

“You’re not ready to leave yet, though.”

“No,” Jason said. “Once we find our way back, there’s no telling if I’ll ever be able to return to Earth. Even if I can, it could easily be decades. Before I go, I want to make sure my family is equipped for whatever comes their way once magic comes out into the open.”

“You haven’t even started giving them essences, yet.”

“I’m leaving that decision to Erika. I feel like I don’t have the right perspective. I think she’s coming around, though.”

Asya and Farrah arrived at the marina together, getting out of Asya’s car.

“You still haven’t asked him out?” Farrah asked.

“The timing just hasn’t been right.”

“It’s been months. ‘Timing’ clearly means that in all this time, you’ve never worked up the nerve.”

“No!” Asya said. “Okay, yes. But it is unnerving. He knows what I’m feeling every time I stand in front of him.”

“He knows what you’re feeling right now,” Farrah said. “Your aura training is coming along nicely but Jason’s so good in that area and his soul is so strong. If it’s even still a soul anymore.”

“What does that mean?”

“The body and soul are intrinsically connected but there’s still a dichotomy between them. One is physical and temporary. The other is spiritual and eternal. Jason doesn’t have that dichotomy anymore. He’s flesh and spirit in one; the physical embodiment of his soul.”

“Does that mean his soul is now temporary?”

“I don’t know,” Farrah said. “Even he isn’t sure exactly what price he paid to come get me.”

“You can feel the difference,” Asya said. “From before and after he did whatever it was he did to get access to that astral space. He didn’t hesitate for a second. Did you and Jason really never...?”

“Why do people keep asking that. Do you not have friends in this world? There’s no one I’d rather have beside me when the world burns down, but he isn’t even close to my type. I mean, Jason’s great, but he’s also a lot.”

“Some of us want a lot.”

“Then why are you standing in the car park talking to me? He’s over there on the appropriately ostentatious houseboat.”

As they were about to head off down the dock, a car pulled up beside them and Jason’s old friend Greg stepped out. He was visibly nervous at the sight of the two startling attractive women.

“Hello, Greg,” Asya said. “It’s been a while.”

“Asya,” Greg greeted uncertainly. “Miss Hurin.”

Greg had gone to school with Asya and Jason. Farrah, he met only briefly, although he had driven past her and Jason on their insane runs to Castle Bluff. He fished a large, squared-off bag from the back seat of his car.

“I, uh, didn’t realise you’d be here,” Greg said to Asya.

“Jason said you were bringing some board games for us to play,” Asya said. Somewhere inside of Greg, his fifteen-year-old self let out a whimper.

“Yep,” he said, his voice oddly high.

Craig Vermillion pulled up on the other side of Greg, also getting out of his car. Greg looked from Asya’s 1962 MGA Roadster to Craig’s 1967 Maserati Ghibli, then at his 2017 Ford Taurus.

“I’m the boring one, aren’t I?” he asked. “This is high school all over again.”

Asya gave him a smile.

“Come, on, Greg. If all your friends are cool, what does that say about you?”

“That they need a designated driver.”

They made their way along the dock to the houseboat. As Greg was still in the dark, magic-wise, the houseboat’s interior was disguised. Jason had turned the bar lounge into a bar and game room, with two large game tables with the tops that had been removed to reveal sunken, felt-lined interiors. Another table was covered in snack trays.

Jason and Taika were waiting when they arrived, Jason mixing up cocktails behind the bar as Taika clipped cup holders onto the sides of the tables

“Your houseboat comes with a dedicated board game room?” Greg asked.

“It’s kind of modular,” Jason said. “At this point, it pretty much comes with everything.”

“This houseboat is crazy.”

“He has a whole other superyacht he has moored at Castle Heads,” Asya said.

The EOA, as it turned out, took Jason at his word when he told them he was taking the yacht he took over following the plane attack. As part of a scramble to avoid retaliation for their participation in Farrah’s incarceration, they had signed it over and sailed it to the east coast. Not knowing what to do with it, Jason left it at the Castle Heads marina. There he didn’t have to rent a second slip, for the huge vessel, the way he did with the houseboat at Casselton beach. Giant yachts were much more the norm there.

“Jason,” Greg said, “not to put too fine a point on it, but are you a drug dealer?”

“No, although funny story: you remember how we used to play El Grande all the time back in school?”

“Sure,” Greg said.

“Well,” Jason said, “not long after I got back, I was selling some gold to these Armenian mobsters and they had El Grande set up. Proper game table and everything; I thought of you immediately. Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Armenian mobsters?”

“Yeah, bro,” Taika said. “I was there for that. All these hardcore-looking blokes hanging about, looking like they’re going to break your legs. Then you spot the board game and realise that we’re not all so different after all. It was kind of heart-warming.”

“Selling gold?” Greg asked, still looking at Jason like he was an alien.

“I did some work out of town while everyone thought I was dead. That’s where I met Farrah, actually. Anyway, I came back with a bunch of gold bars I picked in the Kalahari – not really meant to talk about that – and I needed some walking around money. You know my uncle Hiro was always a bit shady and he hooked me up.”

“This all sounds completely ridiculous.”

“You’ve got no idea, mate,” Jason said. “I can’t even begin to tell you the big stuff. Can I?”

“No,” Asya said firmly. “Like I told you when you wanted to tell the butcher: you made a confidentiality agreement.”

“But the anecdote didn’t really work unless...”

“Then the answer is to not tell the anecdote,” she said.

Greg took the games out of his bag, one of them catching Jason’s eye.

“That one’s about hunting a vampire, right?”

“Yeah,” Greg said. “It’s an all-versus-one game.”

“That’s a bit insensitive,” Jason said, glancing at Craig.

“Why?” Greg.

“Uh, no reason,” Jason said, Asya glaring at him again.

Shortly thereafter, Ian, Erika and Emi came aboard, Emi moving straight to Jason.

“Virgin piña colada,” Jason said, handing her a readied drink. “At least, I think that’s the virgin one. If not, don’t tell your Mum.”

“Stop corrupting my daughter,” Erika scolded. “Greg, it’s great to see you. I meant to tell you how amazing that costume was that you wore to my fancy dress party.”

“Thanks,” Greg said. “I was worried an elaborate Iron Man costume might make people think I was lonely enough to have time to make it.”

“No,” Erika said with a straight face. “Nobody thought that.”