

Chapter 392

Inevitability

As Jason and Farrah flew through the air in Shade's plane form, the sudden manifestation of Dawn's new silver-rank avatar took them aback, and they shot out of their chairs.

"I have some questions," Jason said to Dawn. "They can wait until you get some clothes, though."

"I apologise for the impropriety," Dawn said as Jason turned around and pulled some of Farrah's spare clothes from his inventory, handing them backwards.

"No worries," Jason said. "I know what that's all about. Waking up naked in other universes is kind of my thing. Welcome back, by the way."

"I made some enquires while I was using my true body again," Dawn said as she quickly slipped on jeans and a t-shirt. "I have something for you, next time you return to Australia."

"We've just come from there," Jason said. "We probably won't be back for a little while."

"It isn't urgent," Dawn said. "It's personal, rather than a part of our task."

"You told us you couldn't create an avatar above normal rank," Farrah said to Dawn. "I take it this new one being silver has an unfortunate connection to the rise in Earth's magical density."

"Yes," Dawn said. "Each proto-space that becomes a monster wave pushes more energy from the astral through the dimensional membrane of this world, degrading the membrane as it does. The inactivity of the grid only saw an increase in monster waves by a third, given how many go unnoticed in the depths of the oceans, but that increased activity appears to have crossed a threshold, accelerating the degradation."

"Which is triggering the transformation events," Jason said.

"Yes," Dawn confirmed. "They are an unintended consequence of the original Builder's designs for this universe being affected by the rising magical density and the influx of magic through the link to the other world. It also means that I can project a more powerful avatar into your world without causing further damage."

"Does the damage done already mean that the transformation events will continue, even after we normalise the link?" Jason asked.

"It's possible," Dawn said, "but unlikely. The most probable case is that the transformation events will end once any one of the three factors is removed. Since the

intrinsic makeup of your reality and the magical density can't be undone, that leaves restoring the link to its original state, or as close as we can manage. Without surges of magic coming from your world, Miss Hurin, it should stop triggering the events."

"Does this accelerate the timeline for the destruction of Jason's world?" Farrah asked.

"Yes," Dawn said. "It will still be decades before the planet becomes uninhabitable, but even if the link is repaired on the most optimistic schedule, earth's dimensional landscape will forever be altered. Dimensional instability. There is little chance of completing the work before Earth's magical density crosses the iron-rank threshold."

"Does that mean what I think it does?" Jason asked. "Direct magical manifestation?"

"Yes," Dawn confirmed. "No more proto-spaces. Monsters, as well as essences and awakening stones, will start directly manifesting. Once that happens, repairing the link on this end will be critical to prevent even more accelerated degradation of the dimensional membrane. Additionally, once the changes to the link on this end are completed, you will have slowed things down enough that you will have years in the other world to fix the link on that side."

"Won't directly manifesting monsters be good from a safety perspective?" Farrah asked. "Instead of silver and gold-rank proto-spaces, they'll be dealing with iron-rank monsters, maybe the occasional bronze."

"I mentioned dimensional instability," Dawn said. "By that stage, the dimensional membrane of this world will be poked full of holes. There will be isolated zones of bronze, silver and possibly even gold-ranked magical density that remain permanently in place."

"Like my world," Farrah said.

"It will lean more toward the lower ranks overall than yours, but yes," Dawn said.

"My world can't handle that," Jason said.

"Yet it must," Dawn said. "What I am describing is, at this point, an inevitability."

"If gold-rank monsters just start showing up," Jason said, "we don't have the people to deal with them. They'll render whole sections of the world uninhabitable."

"Yes," Dawn said.

Jason let out a groan as he slumped back into one of the planes luxurious black chairs.

"This is getting further and further out of hand. I was meant to save the world but it just keeps getting worse and all I've accomplished is leading people I care about to their deaths."

Dawn frowned.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

“The USA,” Farrah said. “The Network is currently splitting down the middle over the its role with everything that’s going on. New alliances are being formed across old branch and geographical boundaries while the rank and file versus leadership are the new fault lines. What this adds up to is someone we worked with in Australia getting her hands on the location of the US Network’s reality core secure storage and giving it to us. That’s every reality core from every US branch, aside from the ones being experimented on or use to wake up however many gold-rankers they have.”

“We’re going to steal them,” Jason said. “The hope is that will force the Americans to go all out collecting more.”

“Meaning using their gold rankers to fight for cores in transformation zones to replenish their stocks,” Farrah clarified. “Which would give them less time to get in our way.”

“We know the information is unreliable,” Jason said. “The information made it to Australia, there’s a good chance it was planted as a trap or the leak was discovered and the cores have already been relocated. Even so, we think it’s worth the risk for the pressure it would put on the Americans and take off us.”

“Do you?” Dawn asked. “You admitted your self that the information is questionable at best. It also distracts you from your purpose. You need to examine your own motives, both of you. Is this truly the best option or is it simply the revenge you have the strength to take since you can't go after a gold-rank enemy?”

Jason looked like he’d been slapped and was about to shoot back invective before stopping himself.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered unhappily.

“No, the objective is worthwhile,” Farrah insisted.

“Yeah,” Jason said, “but is it a plausible outcome? Honestly? Dawn’s right that we aren’t thinking straight. There are too many variables.”

“I can crack any magic protection the ritualists of this world can throw out,” Farrah said.

“But can you do it while dodging all the non-magic protection?” Jason asked.

“Drones, motion sensors, biometric locks. What if it’s an underground bunker with one way in and forty silver-rankers around it? What if we carve our way through all of that – which we can’t – and the cores are already gone. The American silver-rankers might not be Adventure Society elite standard but they’re a lot better than anyone else we’ve seen here.”

“We can scout it out. Formulate a plan.”

“And how long do you spend on this operation?” Dawn asked. “Time is more critical than ever.”

“I just...”

Farrah clenched her fists in front of her.

“...I just really want to kill someone for what they did.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” Farrah asked testily, rousing an angry expression from Jason.

“Yes, Farrah, I do. It was my brother. My girlfriend. My childhood friend. You think every fibre of my being isn't baying for blood? My family are still living inside my soul and they're scared because the sky is red and every single thing in there is razor-sharp.”

Jason's aura came pouring out in an angry wave, crashing over Farrah before he forcibly reined it in.

“I'm sorry,” Farrah said faintly. “I shouldn't have said that.”

Jason nodded.

“We're both on edge. I say some stupid things at the best of times.”

“You should redirect your destination,” Dawn said. “Start looking for the next node.”

“No need,” Jason said wearily. “We're already on course. The next place we need to look is in a sandwich.”

“What?” Dawn asked.

“You're an idiot,” Dawn said as she, Jason and Farrah emerged from a shop called the brown jug in Sandwich, Massachusetts, with a large bag of sandwiches.

“What?” Jason asked. “So, they don't capitalise the name of their shop. These sandwiches still look pretty good.”

“They do look quite good,” Farrah agreed.

“And how often do you get to eat a sandwich in a sandwich?” Jason asked. “The concept itself is like a sandwich.”

“Please stop saying sandwich,” Dawn said.

In the time it had taken them to reach Cape Cod, the Network had already set up operations and breached the aperture that Jason and Farrah were targeting. For this reason, they had decided to wait for them to wind down after killing the anchor monster.

With how thin the Network was stretched at the current time, they would not be as thorough about sweeping proto-spaces for loot and Jason was going to wait for them to go in and out before making his own intrusion. Even if there was little time left, Jason's ability would extend the stability of the space.

That left the trio meandering down the streets of Sandwich, eating what Dawn was forced to acknowledge was a pretty good sandwich. Wandering by the town pond, Jason found an unobserved spot to let his family out of the spirit vault where they had spent weeks in isolation with very few reprieves. He hadn't even risked letting them out for Kaito's funeral service and their time in his spirit vault had grown less pleasant in the time since Kaito's death. Jason might be able to hide it on the outside but his rage and shame were made manifest for the people living inside his soul to see. A summer outing in Cape Cod was a blessed relief.

"How many awful sandwich jokes has Jason made?" Erika asked as Jason handed out food from the bag.

"All of them, as far as I can tell," Farrah complained.

"I'm eating a sandwich in Sandwich," Jason said. "How can I not make a meal out of that?"

"I stand corrected," Farrah complained.

Erika watched her brother. His eyes that weren't really laughing and the smiles that didn't turn the corners of his mouth quite the way they should. She had seen him at his lowest and knew that for all he had changed, for all his power, there were still dark holes into which he could descend. She wasn't sure if the façade he was putting up was healthy but at least he was trying. She remembered the times when he hadn't been.

As they had an impromptu picnic on the grass, Erika pointed a nervous Emi toward her uncle, standing alone as he stared out over the water.

"You need to tell him," Erika said.

"Can't you do it?"

"No," Erika told her daughter. "You have to take responsibility for your own choices."

Emi had a hesitant path to Jason, slipping her hand into his. He smiled sadly as he continued to stare out at nothing.

"Uncle Jason."

"Yes, Moppet."

"I... don't think I want to fight like you do. I don't want to be an adventurer."

Jason turned to look at his niece, looking back with fearful eyes. Jason crouched down, gave her his first unabashedly happy grin in a long time and swept her up in a hug.

"After Uncle Kai," she explained as Jason continued to hold her tight, "I don't think I want to kill things."

"Good," he said.

"You're not disappointed?"

"Not even a little bit," he said. "You have to do what you want to do, Moppet. Not what you think I want you to do."

"But you spent so much time training me. You even took me out of school."

Jason let go of the hug and held her by the shoulders, locking eyes with her to convey his sincerity.

"You think that was a waste? You got lots of exercise, learned self-discipline and magic. What's wrong with that?"

"Does this mean I have to stop learning magic?"

"Don't be silly," Jason said, tussling her hair. "The other world has a whole Magic Society, you know that. Farrah's already a member. They'll be ecstatic to get a brilliant young lady like you on the books."

"I can still go to the other world?"

"I need you where I can keep you safe, Moppet. I have friends I can trust there."

Jason felt lighter as he let his niece walk him back to the group. He knew there was a lot of himself in her and was happy that she wouldn't insist on following his path and paying the price it cost to walk it. Even so, he would see her trained properly. He knew that he likely had a little Clive on his hands and she would inevitably want to explore a world full of mystery and magic. He would make sure she was ready.

Jason's family were only out a short time, for the sake of caution, before returning to the spirit vault. Farrah went with them, so she could be carried into the proto-space with Jason. When he entered a proto-space alone, he didn't even need an aperture. They had only used apertures in the past to let the rest of the team in but Jason was not going to do that again.

The reason he hadn't directly entered proto-spaces in the past was that he needed space and uninterrupted time to conduct the rituals that would help him find the next node. This had been the main role of the team and their absence would make things harder, especially without Greg and his excellent zoning abilities. Now, half the team was dead and Jason would no longer risk anyone else. That left no reason to use apertures and deal with the Network.

Shade had been keeping an eye on the Network's operation, notifying Jason as it wound down and they withdrew. They even sealed the aperture back up to avoid mishaps, leaving only a pair of guards behind at the aperture site.

Jason took that as his opportunity to enter, picking a spot well away from any essence users he could sense due to his inability to hide his aura while transitioning through the dimensional boundary.

Jason let his aura blend into the ambient magic until he felt almost indistinguishable from the world around him. As he reached what felt like a oneness with the universe, his body blurred and vanished as he slipped through the membrane of reality. He let Farrah out of the spirit vault immediately on arriving in the otherworldly space. It was a primordial realm of rocky terrain, turgid water, stunted plants and hot, heavy air.

“That was weird from the inside,” she told him. “It was like your whole soul garden suddenly expanded off into the horizon for a moment. There was this strange sense of being connected to the whole of reality. Is that’s what it’s like for you?”

“I’d more describe it as tingly,” Jason said.

“Tingly?”

“Yep.”

“You have the soul of a poet.”

“Didn’t you just say I had the soul of a connectedness to all things?”

“Just shut up and get on with saving the world.”

Jason and Farrah had been forced to devise new approaches to making sure the ritual was not interfered with by wandering monsters. What they came up with was a trio of solutions, the use of each being predicated on the strength of the proto-space. The first option was for low-ranking proto-spaces where the monsters were weak. In such cases, Jason would just blast out his aura at full strength and range, which would scare off any low-ranked monsters. Farrah would mop up the monsters that still approached.

The next approach was for more powerful proto-spaces where the monsters could pose a potential threat. In this case, Jason would still project his aura, but modulated to seem weak and vulnerable. Then he would open up a can of afflictions on the would-be predators and let butterflies of doom deal with them, clearing out a large enough space for Jason to work.

The final approach was for the strongest, gold-rank proto-spaces, should they run into one. If possible, they would avoid them altogether, with alternate avenues being worth more than the risk of being eaten.

Whatever the approach, Farrah’s role was playing cleanup and intercepting any monsters that still wandered by. It wasn’t as reliable as having a team patrol the zone, but even if there were some interruptions, they were confident they could make it work. In this particular instance, they were lucky in that the Network had abandoned it and the monsters were low-ranked. It was only the first of many times they would go through the process, but this time, at least, it went off without a hitch.