

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 Although, if I sold out *that* principle, then they wouldn’t stay sold because that principle is no longer in effect, which means my principles would get unsold, meaning that particular principle was in effect, which would mean...”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 stop making your emotions less of an open book.”

Asya’s eyes went wide.

“Does Jason...?”

“Yes,” Farrah said. “His talents are more in weaponising his aura, but I gave him a solid grounding in aura skills, including emotion-reading. He could stand to refine that aspects of his abilities, but when emotions are clear and strong, they’re easy to read if you have even a basic grasp of what you’re doing. Aura manipulation has always been Jason’s strongest talent as an essence user, so even his worse aspects are a lot better than basic.”

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 I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“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 too inculcated with anti-American sentiment. He came across to me with some socialist sensibilities.”

“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 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 know 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 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 essence, 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 they’re 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.

“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...”