

Chapter 333

Decision

As everyone packed up to go home, Greg found Jason in the kitchen.

"This was really great," Greg told Jason. "Most of our old friends left for university and never came back, and I've never been great at making new ones. There was Amy, but after what she did, forget that."

"You came back so you could inherit your dad's law firm, right?"

"Yeah, but that's not working out. David's big-city career didn't work out, so he's back. Dad hasn't exactly said it, but he was always the favourite, so..."

Jason groaned.

"I'm not a big bible guy, as you know," he said. "I'm starting to come around on the idea of killing all the firstborn sons, though. Also, your dad sucks. Is your mum still super hot?"

"Dude, that's not cool."

"I'm just saying, your mum is super hot."

"How would you feel if I went and hit on Farrah?"

"Mate, if you've got the courage, then go for it."

"I do not. She's super cute, though. Is she an athlete or something?"

"Private security contractor."

"Like a mercenary?"

"Yeah. She was one of the people that trained me."

"Wait, that's the mysterious job?"

"It's a little more complicated than that, but more or less."

"I do like your friends," Greg said. "They're a little weird, but cool weird, you know. You've always been good with people like that. Are we going to do a night like this again?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "I can't guarantee a regular schedule, but I'd like that a lot. My life is aching for some normalcy."

"Well, mine is aching for some weirdness," Greg said.

"I can probably arrange something like that."

Jason's guests left, with Shade serving as designated driver for Craig, Ian and Asya since the only ones who hadn't been drinking alcohol were Greg and Emi.

"What if a cop pulls us over and there's a shadow man in the driver's seat?" Ian asked after Greg had driven away.

“You mean Paul?” Erika asked. “Nah, he’s running bingo tonight.”

Erika remained behind as Jason wanted to discuss the family’s essence situation. After seeing the others off, Jason, Erika and Farrah settled into comfortable chairs to talk.

“I know we said that we would hold off on the family’s essences until you felt the time was right,” Jason told Erika. “We’re going to move forward with Hiro’s, though.”

“I been teaching him formation magic,” Farrah said. “He’s still a novice, but he’s far enough along that with the right essences and awakening stones, he’ll be setting himself up as a good formation specialist. After some trading with the Network, we have those ready to go.”

“Hiro has purchased some land and he and Farrah are going to start planning out the development,” Jason said.

“We need to know what capabilities Hiro will be bringing to the table before then,” Farrah added.

“He’s bought land, already?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “A nice stretch of clifftop land down the coast, nestled right in a gap between national parks. A development group bribed the Deputy Premier to get it approved for commercial development, only to pull out of the project very suddenly, for undisclosed reasons. They sold the land to Uncle Hiro for a steal.”

“And you expect the family to move there?”

“I have no expectations,” Jason said. “It’ll be available to the family, which I suspect they’ll be glad of sooner than I’d like.”

“You really think things will get that bad?” Erika asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I don’t see a scenario where magic goes public and it’s a safe, smooth transition, though. Even if there aren’t any magic complication, which seems unlikely at best, there’s no telling what kind of social upheavals could take place. If everything works out, then great. If not, we’ll have a sanctuary.”

“I’ve seen enough of your society to see that while you claim to be equal, you are anything but,” Farrah said.

“The families connected to the Network will be the new oligarchs,” Jason added. “We don’t have to join them but we don’t want to be beholden to them. We need an infrastructure in place to pass magic on to the next generation. The Asano estate will be the centre of that.”

“The Asano Estate,” Erika repeated. “This is really happening, isn’t it?”

“Everything is going to change, sooner or later,” Jason said. “I think that the reason you’re dragging your feet on the essences is that you understand that. You know that once

we start magicking-up the family, we're on a road away from normal that doesn't loop back."

"You're right," Erika said. "Ian and I have been talking about this a lot. I told you that it was hard living an ordinary life knowing everything I know, now. I don't like that feeling."

Jason narrowed his eyes at his sister.

"You've decided something," he realised.

"I don't want to dabble," Erika said. "We don't, me or Ian. I know you're looking to bring Emi all the way in..."

"I would never do anything with her you were against," Jason said. "But whatever you may want, a day will come where she has to make her own choices. I think we both know how that's going to go and I want to give her every advantage."

"I know," Erika said. "That's why we've decided that we want to go all the way in too. If we're going to live lives of magic, we want to do it properly."

"We can make that work," Farrah said. "Monster hunting isn't for you, but we can set you up with support combinations. Jason has already picked out an essence set for you, based around magical cooking."

"Magical cooking?"

"Yep," Jason said. "I picked it up while I was away, so I get to teach you for once. You can be the world's first magic celebrity chef."

"Be serious, Jason."

"I am. The Network is going to be looking for ways to normalise magic, once it goes public. The idea of dimensional pockets full of monsters is going to freak people out. A TV chef making meals from ingredients taken from those same places will let them shift the narrative."

"You want me to be a propaganda tool?"

"How else do you expect to get through to people?" Jason asked. "Facts and reasoned argument?"

"Fair point," Erika acknowledged. "I take it you've made plans for Ian, then?"

"Ian's a doctor," Jason said. "There's no reason that has to change. The Network has been integrating healing magic and medical science for decades. We're looking to give him some healing powers and take him to the clinic I work at. They can teach him to incorporate magic with the skills and knowledge he already has."

"I think he'll like that," Erika said.

"I would have discussed it with him before this," Jason said, "but I didn't want to push you faster than you wanted to go."

“What about Emi?” Erika asked. “What plans do you have for her?”

“We don’t have anything set in stone,” Jason said. “It’ll probably be three years at least before she can receive magic, so we have plenty of time. We want a power set that doesn’t waste her cleverness and also keeps her safe.”

“There’s a combination we’ve been considering,” Farrah said. “It’s a known combination that uses magic to protect other people. Unlike most protection-type combinations, it’s more about standing back and directing events, rather than getting up close with enemies.”

“Why does she have to have enemies?” Erika asked.

“She doesn’t,” Jason said. “But she will. I think you know that.”

“She already wants to do what you do,” Erika said. “She should be too old to want to fight monsters when she grows up. It all still sounds ridiculous. Not many of your recordings had monsters in them. You mostly just talked about them a lot.”

“Did you show her the recording of you murdering the Geller kids?” Farrah asked.

“What?” Erika asked.

“I didn’t murder any kids,” Jason assured her, glaring at a grinning Farrah. “It was a combat trial in sort of a magic hologram arena. No one was hurt, let alone died. And you know I hate that recording, Farrah. I definitely didn’t bring it with me.”

“She hasn’t seen you fight, then?” Farrah asked.

“I’ve seen him fight,” Erika said softly.

Farrah felt the turbulence in Erika’s emotions and threw a questioning glance at Jason.

“There were a bunch of criminals that were forced out of Greenstone,” he explained. “They went out into the veldt and turned bandit. The Adventure Society did a sweep and my team was assigned with clearing out a village that they’d completely taken over. I did the job alone and my team recorded it.”

“You showed her a recording of you killing a bunch of people?” Farrah asked.

“You know how absurd what we do sounds to people from my world,” Jason told her. “I needed Erika to know the seriousness of what you and I do.”

“Don’t try and feed me crap,” Farrah said. “You didn’t have to jump all the way to a killing spree for that. You wanted someone to tell you that you weren’t a bad person, in spite of the things you’ve done. So here you go: you’re not a bad person. Gods, Jason, you don’t go showing normals things like that.”

“I needed her to understand who I am, now,” Jason said.

“Oh,” Farrah said, shaking her head. “I forgot who I’m talking to. You’re the guy who was lecturing me about killing when he had no damn idea what he was talking about. You don’t want to be told that you’re not a bad person; you want to be told that you are. Inside that twisted mind, you still haven’t balanced yourself out, have you?”

“I’ve killed a lot of people, Farrah.”

“A lot of people have it coming. You and I are going to talk about this later. At length.”

“I’m meant to be the one helping you,” Jason said.

“Clearly, I’m a lot more together as a person than you are,” she said.

“I won’t deny that,” Jason said.

“I should probably go,” Erika said, suddenly feeling sidelined.

“You haven’t told us what your decision was,” Jason said.

“Maybe now isn’t the time,” Erika said.

“You might as well tell us,” Farrah said. “If you’re waiting for this guy not to be caught up in self-indulgent introspection about how grimdark he is, it’ll never be the right time.”

“Grimdark?” Jason asked. “You need to stop watching movies with Taika and start watching them with Gordon.”

“And you need to make it through a whole conversation without it getting repeatedly derailed,” Farrah said.

“Coming from the woman who just accused me of excessive brooding.”

“Yeah, I’m just going to go,” Erika said.

“No,” Jason and Farrah said, turning on her.

“Sorry, Sis,” Jason said. “You’ve made an important decision and I want to hear it.”

“Alright,” Erika said nervously. “You intend to go back, don’t you? To the other world.”

Jason and Farrah shared a glance.

“Yeah,” Jason confirmed, “but we don’t know when or even if that will be possible.”

“Well,” Erika said, “when you do, we want to go with you.”

Jason opened his mouth to respond, then closed it again as the ramifications of his sister’s simple statement of intent played through his mind.

“Great,” Farrah said. “There’s a lot you should know before making a final choice like that, though. For one thing, we don’t know if or when we’ll ever come back here.”

“We’ve thought about that,” Erika said. “Ian doesn’t have any close family, and if Uncle Hiro’s plans work out, we can go without worrying about ours. I don’t love the idea of never seeing Dad again, but even so, we want to do it.”

Erika watched Jason’s expression, which held a deep frown.

"Farrah's right that there's a lot you need to know before even considering it," Jason said. "I've only seen a tiny fragment of that world myself and I've seen how dangerous it can be."

"Jason and I aren't important there, the way we are here," Farrah said. "We would be much less able to protect you."

"You can tell Ian and me all about it," Erika said. "I don't think we'll change our minds, though. We don't want to spend our lives in the house I grew up in. It was the comfort we needed after you died and Mum and Dad got divorced, but we always intended to show our daughter the world. It just turns that the world is a lot bigger than we ever realised. If there's a magical world, we want to see it."

"This world will be getting more magical in the years to come."

"That's not the same and you know it," Erika said.

"Yeah," Jason admitted.

"If nothing else," Erika said, "Emi will want to go with you. I don't want to tell her she can't when I feel the same way, and I won't let you take my daughter away."

"I would never do that."

"I know," Erika said, shining a warm smile on Jason.

He stared at his sister for a long time, searching her face. He could feel the resolve permeating her aura.

"We can look into it," he said. "There's a ridiculous amount to go over, while we don't know if we even will find a way back. Even if we do, there's no telling if we can bring you along."

"If you can get back, the rest of us can," Farrah said. "All we have to do is trust you."

Jason looked at her for a moment, then nodded. He made a gesture and an archway rose from the floor.

"When I first showed you this," Jason said to Erika, "You couldn't go in."

"That goes to the special place that Emi talked about?" Erika asked.

"Yes," Jason said. "The only way in is to trust me completely. Back then, there were still a lot of mysteries surrounding me. You didn't understand what I'd been through or what I was doing since getting back. Now, you've seen all the recordings and asked me all your questions. So here's my question: can you trust your little brother?"

Erika stood up, reaching for the arch with a trepidatious hand. She inched it forward, but unlike the past, it didn't stop. Her finger passed into the darkness and vanished. She looked over at Jason, who gave her an encouraging nod. She stepped through.

"This is really your soul?" Erika asked as they roamed through the gardens of Jason's spirit vault.

"A representation of it, anyway," Jason said. "Is it so hard to believe?"

"Not really," Erika said. "It's ostentatious and full of twisty paths."

"Oh, that's lovely," Jason said.

"To get in I have to trust you," Erika said. "Not put up with your nonsense."

They reached the edge of the garden, where the walls showed signs of battle damage, revealing an eerie darkness within. Erika ran a hand over a ragged gash in the dark brickwork, as if she could feel the brutal attack that made it.

"If you really want to go to the other world," Jason said softly, "then you have to understand that there will be dangers. Threats unlike anything in your world."

"You mean our world," Erika said.

"No," Jason said. "The brother who was a part of your world died. I belong somewhere else. If you want to as well, I'm willing to help you. Tomorrow we'll sit down with Ian and really talk about the ramifications of you doing this. Then we get onto essences. We need you as full of magic as we can get you."

Jason frowned, tilting his head. Since his transfiguration, his senses were able to extend outside the spirit vault and he sensed an aura approaching the houseboat.

"What is it?" Farrah asked.

"The painter," Jason said. "She's back."

Jason had Erika wait behind while Jason and Farrah left the spirit vault. They found the woman waiting on the dock, ruby hair shining in the moonlight.

"Are you a celestine in disguise?" Jason asked.

"I am," Dawn said. "Permission to come aboard?"

"Give me a moment," Jason said. "I need to deal with something."

"Perhaps you shouldn't portal your sister home," Dawn said. "I think you should let her know the stakes you're playing for."