

Chapter 302

Hardline Position

Jason woke early, did his weight training and then went through his combat training. Now that Shade was able to exert an amount of physical force, he could leverage his knowledge of Jason's martial art style to use multiple bodies and spar as part of advancing Jason's skill set. As Jason's skills progressed, Shade was moving into more big-picture aspects of the training.

"You need to develop your skills in a different direction to Miss Wexler," Shade said. "She uses the versatility of the style to develop what is essentially a specialty variant tailored directly to her proclivities and capabilities. There is no way she can remember the vast breadth of techniques that the style includes, but her focus gives her a specialised expertise."

"She's been practising since she was a child," Jason said. "I can't match that experience with anything but time, skill book or no."

"Indeed," Shade said. "Your personal advantage is that you are learning the style more in line with the original intention."

"Oh?" Jason prompted.

"As should be clear from the skill books retrieved during the Reaper trials, the Order of the Reaper's techniques are designed foundationally to include skill book use. Developing that many techniques to a useable state simply isn't possible without the memory-enhancement that comes of a high-rank spirit attribute. At your rank, skill books are the only way. Of course, incorporating those skills requires a specialised training regimen in and of itself, which Mr Remore was serendipitously able to provide."

"So I should be leaning into the breadth of techniques, rather than nailing down favourites like Sophie?"

"Precisely," Shade said. "Versatility and adaptability should be your watchwords. As we continue to practise, I will endeavour to bring out your full range of techniques."

After combat training, Jason went for a run. His bronze-rank speed and stamina attributes allowed him to set a relatively distant destination like Castle Bluff. Making his way out of town, he was pounding along next to the highway when a car passed in the other direction before it turned around and drove up to him. Jason's enhanced perception had allowed him to recognise the driver as his old friend Greg, who he hadn't seen since heading for university in Melbourne, while Greg had gone to Sydney.

"Jason?" Greg asked disbelievingly after pulling over and getting out of the car.

“G’day Greg,” Jason said. “It’s been a while.”

“Since you left for Melbourne or since you died?”

“Both, I guess,” Jason said. “How’ve you been, mate?”

“Alive. Consistently. What is a dead guy doing running along a highway in the middle of nowhere?”

“Fitness and wellbeing,” Jason said. “I’m bit of an exercise nut, now.”

“Where are you going?”

“Just running out to Castle Bluff and back.”

“That’s like thirty kilometres.”

“Why do you think I was running fast?”

Greg rubbed his temples.

“This is insane,” he said to himself. “I’m going insane. I got in a car accident and now I’m in some weird purgatory with my dead friend and his surprisingly toned calves.”

“Okay, Greg, just calm down, mate. Take a deep breath.”

“Says the revenant from beyond the grave!”

“Okay, look. I’ve got an important meeting, so I need to get going, but let’s swap digits and I’ll give you a call. We can hang out.”

“Oh, we can hang out,” Greg said. “HOW ARE YOU ALIVE?”

“Because of the mystic powers I obtained in a magical alternate universe.”

Greg shook his head.

“I see you haven’t changed. Except for the beard. That does a really good job of breaking the lines of your chin. Or did you have some work done?”

“I did not have any work done!”

Annabeth was making final preparations to leave when a woman in her mid twenties knocked on the open door. She was wearing an elegant pantsuit, which stood out considerably more than the bland, off-the-rack varieties the Network typically mandated. It was not an outfit that would be mistaken as the garb of a mid-level government worker. Her Mediterranean heritage had left her with a swarthy skin tone and dark hair, which were set off attractively by the maroon of her outfit.

“Miss Karadeniz,” Annabeth greeted, continuing to transfer items from her desk to her briefcase. “What brings you back to Sydney from the vaunted heights of the International Committee office?”

“The IC wants a representative in this negotiation. And please, Anna, since when is it Miss Karadeniz?”

“But you’re all fancy now,” Annabeth said with a smile.

“I was always fancy,” Asya said, causing Anna to chuckle.

“It seems odd that they sent someone from magitech research,” Annabeth said.

“I’m just an administrator,” Asya said. “My job is to keep the people doing the real work happy and funded.”

“Don’t you come from the Mid North Coast?” Annabeth asked.

“That’s why I requested the slot,” Asya said. “I actually went to school with Jason Asano.”

“Seriously?”

“Oh, yes. I even had bit of a thing for him, but he was obsessed with some basic white girl. There’s no accounting for taste.”

“You can offer us some insight, then,” Annabeth said. “Contrast him with his pre-magic self.”

“That’s why they approved the assignment, although it has been a number of years. I went to his memorial service, so I was quite startled to hear his name in relation to the Sydney incident.”

“You’ve read the reports?”

“Oh yes,” Asya said. “His showing up in your kitchen was interesting. I wouldn’t be too worried about reading it as a threat. He always did like to unbalance others for social advantage. Also, he’s unlikely to despoil a kitchen.”

“Glad to hear it. About my wife; I don’t particularly care about the kitchen.”

Asya laughed.

“I’m more interested in the paintings he obtained from your wife,” she said.

“You think they matter?” Annabeth asked. “I figured it was just a power play, to show us we aren’t untouchable.”

“Jason prefers having more than one reason to do a thing,” Asya said. “Both paintings were by the same artist, as your wife no doubt told you.”

“Yeah, some kind of wannabe Banksy, playing it all mysterious.”

“I’d appreciate if you could task some people with looking into the artist more closely.”

“I can do that,” Annabeth said and fished out her phone to make a call.

“Aram,” she greeted. “Do a deep dive into the artist whose paintings Asano purchased from my wife. Dawn, that’s the one. Thanks.”

Annabeth returned her phone to her pocket.

“Done,” Annabeth said.

Keith arrived outside the office.

“Miss Karadeniz, always a pleasure.”

Annabeth’s office had been Keith’s when Asya was still a member of the Sydney branch.

“Mr Culpeper,” Asya greeted.

“Anna,” Keith said. “How would you feel about riding up the coast with Miss Karadeniz? The contingent has grown sufficiently that an extra car might not be a bad idea.”

“How many people are we up to now?” Annabeth asked.

“There’s us three,” Keith said, “plus the government liaison.”

“Who did they send?” Annabeth asked.

“Gordon Truffett,” Keith said.

Annabeth and Asya both groaned.

“He’s not that bad,” Keith said, at which both women gave him a flat look. “Okay, he’s a little pushy.”

“Why would they pick someone like him?” Annabeth asked.

“I heard he’s close to the Prime Minister,” Asya said.

“The Prime Minister chose him personally,” Keith confirmed.

“Then I will ride with you, Asya. If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

“Who else?”

“Gladys is coming along,” Keith said. “She’s going to check in on Asano’s grandmother. We’re also bringing Nigel.”

“What for?” Annabeth asked.

“We suspect Asano has a means to advance without monster cores. I thought bringing our own non-core obsessive might prompt Asano to open up.”

Annabeth and Asya had also never used monster cores, but that was a matter of policy. All executive-level Network personnel were given essences to raise them to category one, but cores were mostly saved for the lower-ranked enforcement team members who served on the frontline of Network activity. Only committee members like Keith were raised up to category two with cores.

“That’s a good idea,” Asya said. “Jason could be quite passionate when he got caught up in something. Nigel might get him to drop some useful nuggets without costing us any concessions.”

“How well do you know him, exactly?” Keith asked.

“It’s been a long time,” Asya said. “I think making too many assumptions based on the way he was seven years ago has the potential to cause more mistakes than playing it by ear.”

“Probably sensible,” Keith said. “Shall we go, then?”

While Keith’s car was an unremarkable sedan with government plates, Asya’s car had the appearance of a 1962 MGA Roadster. It was another hot day and they had the soft top down, Annabeth and Asya enjoying the coastal drive.

“So you’re from Casselton Beach?” Annabeth asked.

“Definitely not,” Asya. “I’m not poor.”

Annabeth gave her a sideways glance.

“My family didn’t invent capitalism,” Asya said unashamedly. “We just won it. Of course, I know my way around Casselton Beach. It’s where all the interesting boys came from. Children are so often tedious.”

Annabeth gave Asya another look.

“I won’t apologise for being exceptional amongst my peers,” Asya said.

As they reached the outskirts of Casselton Beach, Annabeth started feeling slightly ill. Gladys called her on the phone.

“Are feeling that?” Gladys asked as Anna put the phone on speaker.

“You too?” Annabeth asked.

“I’m pretty sure it’s worse for me. I think something’s wrong with the magic, here.”

“Was it like this when you were here last time?”

“I didn’t come here last time,” Gladys said. “The hospital is in a different town.”

Annabeth turned to Asya.

“Is there something weird with the magic in this town?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Asya said. “I’ve been here since getting essences, but there wasn’t anything like this.”

“Maybe Vermillion will have answers,” Annabeth said.

Vermillion’s home was a mansion nestled amongst rich bushland, just a few minutes out of Casselton Beach. The Network negotiation team arrived at his place prior to the meeting and he met them in his wide driveway. Asya parked her car, got out and gave Vermillion a quick hug.

“This is where the Burman family used to live,” Asya said. “The first time I ever got drunk was in this house.”

“Small world,” Vermillion said. “How’s the car treating you?”

“Oh, I love it,” Asya said. “I did have a few modifications made.”

“I could tell,” Vermillion said. “That engine noise is artificial, right?”

“No slipping anything past you,” Asya told him.

“If that were true, I’d still be in Sydney,” Vermillion said. “I am finding this to be a nice change of pace, though, and if it’s excitement I want, I suspect that Jason will provide more than enough, sooner or later.”

“Do you know what’s responsible for the magical deficit in Casselton Beach?” Keith asked.

“That’s Jason,” Vermillion said. “He apparently decided to monopolise the local magic. Fortunately, this place is just outside the field of magic consumption. I don’t want to fall into a torpor like those crusty old world vampires.”

“So, what do we do about the magic?” Keith asked. “It put me through a loop, and I’m only category two. I hate to think what Ms Erstweller will go through.”

“I can tough it out,” Gladys said.

“It won’t be a problem,” Craig said. “While most of the town is magically anaemic, you’ll find Jason’s houseboat to be quite comfortable.”

“He’s concentrating the magic on his house boat?” Keith asked. “How?”

“Magically, I’d assume,” Asya said. “Shall we go?”

For the trip from Vermillion’s place, the government liaison, Gordon, was displaced from the front passenger seat to make room for Vermillion. Despite his protests, he wound up in the middle of the back seat between Gladys and Nigel the combat trainer.

“What exactly is your purpose in this negotiation?” Gordon asked Gladys unhappily.

“I’m here to keep you alive when Asano pimp slaps you across the room,” Gladys said.

“You do seem to lack a basic sense of self-preservation, Mr Truffett,” Vermillion said. “Most people would be wary about offending a category three, given that they could pull you apart like toffee on a hot day.”

“Asano had something that I don’t understand, medically,” Gladys said. “He has scars.”

“Why is that unusual?” Keith asked from the driver seat.

“You don’t get into any fights, so you probably wouldn’t know,” Gladys said. “Nigel, you were a soldier. Have any scars?”

“Used to,” Nigel said. “During the change when I ascended to category one they went away. Now I don’t get them, no matter how bad the injury. Magically or naturally healed, they don’t leave a mark.”

“I’m curious as to what kind of injury leaves a permanent mark on one of us,” Gladys said. “I’d rather know what does it ahead of time than figure it out after some of our people run into it.”

“And we front-liners appreciate the concern,” Nigel said.

It only took a few minutes to drive into Casselton Beach and down to the marina.

“Is that thing Asano’s houseboat?” Annabeth asked as she stepped out of Asya’s roadster.

“Now we’re talking,” Asya said. “I wonder where he picked it up?”

“I suspect availability is limited,” Vermillion said as he got out of Keith’s sedan.

They made their way along the dock to find an eerie shadow figure waiting on the lower deck. It had the shape of a man wearing a cloak. but seemed to have a negative presence. It was as if instead of existing, it was a hole in the fabric of the universe.

“I am Shade,” it said in a cold, oddly British voice. “Given the warmth of the day, Mr Asano is taking a swim after his morning run. Please come aboard.”

The Network group glanced at one another while Vermillion stepped aboard.

“Hello, Shade,” he said.

“Good day, Mr Vermillion.”

The others stepped onto the lower deck and felt a sensation like stepping from the desert heat into an air conditioned room.

“Oh, wow,” Gladys said. “It’s like I just ate a spirit coin.”

“You should find the condition on board quite acceptable,” Shade said. “Please follow me.”

The group followed the floating shadow around the lower deck to the far side of the houseboat where they found Asano relaxing on a pitch black air mattress in the water. He was wearing only a pair of boardshorts, with his toned torso marred with scars on full display. The peppering of smaller scars were dominated by a large, ugly line running from his right hip, across his abdomen and around his left midsection. It looked like the kind of wound that a person was unlikely to survive to have scar over.

The air mattress turned onto a cloud of darkness and Asano vanished into it, immediately emerging from their shadowy guide like he was stepping through a door. He grabbed a towel hanging on the deck rail, rubbing it over his head before draping it over his shoulders.

“Best come in, then,” he said, moving up to the tinted glass wall, which slid open to access the bar lounge. “Lovely to see you, Asya. If I recall correctly, you had ambitions to join ASUS.”

“I was headhunted for a more exciting opportunity,” Asya said as the group followed him in. The interior of the houseboat simply but expensively appointed in white leather and rich wood.

“I can imagine,” Jason said, moving behind the bar. “Fighting monsters is definitely more exciting than exploiting our international neighbours to enrich the government’s corporate donors.”

“I have to protest to that description,” Gordon said.

“Protest away,” Jason said, putting a series of glasses on the bar and scooping ice into them. “Who are you, exactly?”

“I represent the government in these negotiations. Gordon Truffett.”

“Well, now you’re Other Gordon,” Jason said. “I’ve already got a Gordon, and he’s more important than you.”

“Is this how you start a negotiation?” Other Gordon asked indignantly.

“You’re right,” Jason said. “Give and take is part of the process. Hey, Gordon.”

Another dark, cloaked figure appeared, although this one was quite different to Shade, who seemed to have vanished when no one was looking. The new presence was a disembodied cloak, within which swirled an eye-shaped nebula. Four glowing orbs floated around it.

“This guy thinks you should be Other Gordon,” Jason said, pulling a large pitcher from one of the two large refrigerators. Gordon responded by turning on Other Gordon, making a slow, menacing approach. Nigel stepped between them.

“Alright, Gordon,” Jason said and the figure vanished. “Sorry, Other Gordon. Looks like actual Gordon’s taking a hardline position.”

Other Gordon was holding himself stable with a white-knuckle grip on the back of a chair. Jason poured lemonade into each of the glasses, taking an approving sip. Vermillion and Asya took glasses without hesitating.

“This lemonade is incredible,” Asya said. “I definitely want to stock some of this. Where did you get it from?”

“Lemons,” Jason said. “The secret is to put the lemon peel in with the sugar for about twelve hours so the sugar soaks up the fruit oil. That’s where the flavour is. Now, I need to show Anna how to make a proper sandwich, but we can talk while I do. Why don’t we start with introductions?”