

## Chapter 326

### Ideal Circumstances

Jason ignored the sound and motion of the transport helicopter as he read from the book in his hands.

“Is that Pashto?” Aram asked loudly over the helicopter, peering at the open pages.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“You speak Pashto?”

“I speak everything,” Jason said. “Magic powers, you know?”

“Right. Why are you reading a book in Pashto?”

“It’s a favourite of mine. I finally get to read it in the original language.”

“What’s it about?”

“Imperialist foreign influences in nineteenth century Afghanistan.”

“Sounds like a real page-turner. The profile I read about you said you were all about terrible eighties pop-culture.”

“That’s in my profile?”

“We’re very thorough.”

“Then I imagine it included that I was, albeit briefly, a political science major in university.”

“That was in there,” Aram said. “You dropped out after one semester, right?”

“I wasn’t making great life choices in that particular stage of my life. I didn’t choose my major by picking it out of a hat, though. My interests go beyond Thundercats and the A-Team.”

“Glad to hear it,” Aram said. “The Network is laying a heavy bet on you. It’s a little worrying if the person we need to be a transformative influence is taking his own influences from the Transformers cartoon.”

“Oh, you can forget about the Transformers G1 stuff,” Jason said. “Pure nostalgia goggles. Transformers Prime is where it’s at. It’s a far superior series and has the best depiction of Starscream across the entire franchise.”

“You’re not filling me with confidence, Mr Asano.”

“You can call me Jason, Mike.”

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Jason and Farrah had been flown from Sydney to South Australia, with Michael Aram as an escort. The Sydney branch had negotiated with the Adelaide branch to let the pair accompany the tactical response team into the incursion and they were flown to a military

base in South Australia where they joined the response team in a series of transport helicopters.

Their destination was near the top end of the state, deep into central Australia. Scrubby flatland spread out for miles, red earth dotted by patches of yellow grass and pale green scrub. Nearing the astral space aperture, Jason encountered something unusual.

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- You have entered a region coterminous with a proto-astral space. You can enter the proto-astral space directly.
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Jason's new physical state came with new physical sensations. The world around him felt different, although he knew the difference was him. The wall between dimensions was thin enough that he could feel it. He ignored the sensation and didn't try crossing over, as that was a rabbit he wanted to keep in the hat.

As the response team's support unit's set up camp and prepared to open the invisible aperture, Farrah looked around at the landscape.

"This looks kind of like the western edge of the Greenstone Desert," Farrah said. She and Jason had passed through the fringes of that territory not long after Jason's arrival in the other world.

"Yep," Jason agreed. "Are you sure you're up for this?"

"I'm hungry for it," she said. "I might even try out some of these new abilities. I'm going to miss the old ones, though. Losing the personal space is rough. I would say it had all my stuff, but I think I saw some familiar-looking books floating around in your soul pagoda."

"When we cleared out your things," Jason said, "Gary and Rufus thought I should have your books. You were always trying to get me to study magical theory."

"Did you?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "I'm going with astral magic as my specialisation, for obvious reasons. Also, that's Clive's specialty, so he's taught me a lot. Rufus and Gary took the rest of your things, although I think they gave a lot of it to Padma."

"You met Padma?"

Padma was a young graduate of the Remore Academy that Farrah had taken under her wing. She had come to Greenstone with her team for Emir's competition, only to be shattered on hearing of her mentor's death. As someone Farrah had also mentored, Jason had felt a kinship with the younger adventurer.

"Your parents, too," Jason said. "They came to Greenstone with Rufus' parents."

"It feels unreal, talking about my memorial service."

"I got to watch mine," Jason said. "One of my cousins recorded it on his phone, which seems a little tasteless. My Mum made the whole thing traditional Japanese, which I am not allowing the next time I die."

Farah frowned as she thought of something, giving Jason an assessing look.

"If you have all my books," she said, "Did you look at the one bound in black leather with a rose embossed on the cover?"

"I glanced at it," Jason said. "I wasn't sure what to do with it. I mean, it felt wrong to throw it away, but I wasn't going to read your porn book."

"It's not porn. It's sex magic."

"I can't tell if that's better or worse."

"Sex magic is worth learning. Aside from the obvious benefits, it's quite multi-disciplinary. It touches on recovery magic, buff magic, aura manipulation. Specialisation is important in magic, but it pays to be at least a little grounded in other fields."

"I have been dabbling in artifice a little," Jason said. "I used a skill book so as not to soak up too much of my time."

"They're good to broaden the knowledge base," Farrah said. "Don't use them as an excuse to skimp out on theoretical studies, though."

Aram waved at them as he approached, along with an Indigenous Australian man in paramilitary gear with a silver-rank aura.

"This is the Ditto, Tom Cotsworth," Aram introduced. "Ditto means Director of Tactical Operations," he explained to Farrah.

"G'day," Cotsworth greeted.

"G'day," Jason said, shaking the man's hand. "I'm Jason Asano and this is Farrah Hurin. Do you prefer Ditto, Cotsworth, or Ditto Cotsworth?"

"Mate, if you can clean up the category threes and keep my people out of harm's way, you can call me Susan for all I care. You two are the mysterious specialists who'll be roaming about the country taking first crack at all the big ones, yeah?"

"That's us," Jason said.

"You're confident that you can do it with just the two of you?"

"I think it's more of a take turns situation, yeah?" Jason said, looking at Farrah.

"Don't get dismissive," Farrah admonished. "With a bad match up, a silver-rank monster could still take either of us down. Mostly you, but still."

"I know," Jason said. "But if they don't push us at least a little, then what's the point?"

"True," Farrah acknowledged.

“So, how do you want to arrange us?” Jason asked Cotsworth. “It’s your show and we’re at your command.”

“We are?” Farrah asked.

“Within reason,” Jason told her. “They’re going to assume a certain amount of operational discretion on our part.”

“I can tell that you two are going to be a headache if I try and keep you on a leash,” Cotsworth said. “Since it was made very clear that your inclusion is mandatory and I’m to extend every courtesy, how about you two take point and show us how they do it in wherever the bloody hell they found you two?”

“That’s exactly what I want,” Farrah said “I could really stand to kill some things.”

“Bonza,” Cotsworth said. “That doesn’t sound at all like some lunatic powerhouse gearing up to plunge my life into chaos.”

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The inside of the astral space was indistinguishable from the outside, with the same, flat scrubland.

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➤ You have entered an unstable physical reality. Your presence will decrease the rate at which it will destabilise.

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Jason ignored the message and looked around. It was almost entirely open ground, so the horde of monsters was not hard to find, some two or three kilometres off into the distance. Jason’s bronze-rank perception was more than enough to make them out clearly.

A tightly packed herd, they were grotesque mockeries of normal animals. There were horses with spider legs and mouths that split wide like a crocodile’s. Snakes, each with a mouth that ran along its back, the full length of its body. Lizards with three heads and no eyes. Floating over the herd as if swimming in the ocean were barb-tailed mantas.

Amongst the hundreds of animalistic monsters were several hulking creatures that stood three, four, even five metres high. There were giant, lumpen toads, and hairy humanoids that looked like sasquatches. One was a vaguely humanoid creature with bright red skin whose entire upper body was a bulbous cross between a toad and fish head.

“Looks like three gigantoads, two yowies and a yara-ma-yha-who,” Cotsworth said.

“Yowies” Jason said, looking at the sasquatch creatures. “No kidding.”

“No tricky powers, the yowies,” Cotsworth said. “Not real fast, either. It takes an awful lot of punishment to drop one, though, and if they hit you, you’re done. Proper done. Pulverised flesh scattered over a hundred metres of ground done.”

“I’ll take them, then,” Jason said. “What about the others?”

“The toads will shrug off little hits, but get a good enough whack to penetrate the skin and you can do some real damage. They’re not zippy but they can make a good-size jump, so make sure they don’t land on you. Aside from that, watch out for the poison spit. Big, awful gobbets of the stuff, about the size of a wheelbarrow load.”

“And that red thing?” Farrah asked.

“Yara-ma-yha-who,” Cotsworth said. “Not as tough as the others but it’s the worst of the bunch. It’s plenty strong and while it might look clumsy, it’s actually quite agile. It can also make some big jump attacks, with more precision than the toads, so watch out for that. The big danger is its tentacle fingers. They’ll latch onto you and suck out your blood like you’re a cherry smoothie.”

“I’ll take that one first,” Farrah said. “You want to start with the hairy ones and we split the toads?”

“Sounds good,” Jason said. “If you want to take the front, I’ll come in from the back. There’s bit of an army between us and them, though. I think we’ll be relying on the expertise of your people to thin out those numbers, Cotsworth.”

“Let me try something,” Farrah said. “They don’t seem to have noticed us, yet, so do you mind me getting their attention, Ditto?”

Cotsworth took a look at his teams forming up as they came through the aperture.

“We’re almost in and formed up,” he said. “Facing them as a horde like this, we’re going to set up for continual waves of fire, but we also like to make an early strike it mass horde scenarios. We have an area specialist who I’d like to put alongside you.”

“You’re the host,” Farrah said. “I would appreciate going first, though.”

“No worries,” Cotsworth said.

“Let me set up communication, first,” Jason said. “You’ve been briefed on this, Ditto?”

“Yep,” Cotsworth said. “I spoke with Koen Waters, my Sydney counterpart. He said good things, which is why I’m willing to be accommodating. He also told me not to keep you on the shelf.”

Jason sent out party invitations to the two platoons of Network personnel, which was one less than the Sydney team. While Cotsworth ran the sections through comm checks, he sent one of his silver-rankers to move forward with Farrah.

“I’m Farrah.”

“Melinda. Just Mel is fine.”

“What’s your approach?”

“Chains of fire spears. You?”

“Fire bolt chain.”

“Oh, classic,” Mel said. “You must have it up to category three, if you’re chaining.”

“Yeah,” Farrah confirmed.

“I thought you felt close to ranking-up from your aura. There’s a pair of category threes up in Darwin who’ve got fire bolt and it’s apparently something to see. It’s not often we get them all gathered up like this for big chains. You should start, because my spears do more damage if the targets are already burning. Normally I get the fire essence users in the ranks to spray things down first, the move in to sweep up. This should be much more convenient.”

“That works out nicely,” Farrah said.

The two women made an odd pair, both with the refined good looks of multiple rank-ups. Farrah was dressed casually wearing jeans and an open check shirt over a white tee, hair cinched back at the neck. Melinda had short-cropped hair and was covered neck down in what Jason continued to think of as death squad apparel. The black tactical armour worn by the Network’s silver-rankers was magical, although only bronze-rank gear.

“Time to try something new,” Farrah said as Jason moved forward to join them.

“Mind if I take a look?” Jason asked.

“Go ahead,” Farrah said and Jason pulled up her ability description through his party interface.

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#### Ability: [Ghost Fire Mystic]

- Transfigured from [Outworlder] ability [Spiritual Flame].
- Create threads of ghostly flame. Flames are incorporeal and non-harmful to ordinary individuals but are highly effective against incorporeal entities. Threads can be used as a whip, rope, web or other cord-based objects.
- This ability gains an alternate function to draw magic diagrams, including ones that float in the air. Power-amplifying diagrams for fire abilities have increased effect when created with this ability.

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Farrah drew a magic diagram in the air with her finger, reminding Jason of the many times he had seen Clive do the same. Instead of Clive’s golden light, though, Farrah drew in threads of red and yellow flame that glistened like liquid.

When she was done, she used an ability from her potent essence, Boost, which caused an amber light to shine from within her body. Boost was similar to the Bolster power that Neil possessed, in that it enhanced the next ability used. The key difference was that Boost only worked on the user.

Only after drawing out the ritual diagram and using her support ability did she hold up her hand and chant a quick spell.

*“Fire Bolt,”*

Fire Bolt was from a family of ultra-quick attack spells commonly possessed by spell casters and used as a basic attack. It could be fired as far as the eye could see and was very quick to use, but traditionally lacking in power. Stacking enhancement effects the way Farrah had done was common practice.

The ball of flame that shot out of Farrah’s hand was larger than what Jason had seen from other fire essence users, due to the Boost ability. Once it hit the ritual circle, the circle was consumed as the ball grew larger still, trailing flames like a comet as it shot low over the ground in the direction of the monster horde. It also changed colour, moving from orange through yellow to a bright yellow-white.

“That’s a strong one,” Mel said.

In the distance they heard to roar of monsters as the higher-ranked enemies sensed the approaching magical attack.

“My Fire Bolt ability has already gotten to silver,” Farrah said. “Even so, it should only kill the lowest-rank stuff outright. You want to follow on so you can chain off the weak ones while they’re still burning, Mel?”

Mel grinned, not bothering to respond. She raised her hand and chanted a spell.

*“Blazing Spear.”*

A spear that looked to be made of molten metal appeared in front of her and shot off after the fire bolt. It didn’t appear to have any concerns about gravity, flying in a perfectly flat trajectory.

The fire bolt reached the monsters first, landing on a spider-legged horse that let out an alien shriek as flames engulfed it, as if it had been covered in accelerant. New bolts of fire shot out from the burning monster at other nearby monsters, who suffered the same fate. Fire bolts then emerged from them, continuing to chain from creature to hideous creature as flames overtook the horde like a rising tide.

The blazing spear propagated in much the same way, striking a burning monster, around which more spears were conjured to spread out and out, chasing after the wave of fire bolts. The collaboration of the two basic attack spells, chaining over and over, was devastating to the weaker members of the horde.

“Uh...” Jason said, watching the carnage. The iron rankers amongst the horde were falling like raindrops, with the bronze-rankers mostly surviving but in such a wrecked state that the Network team with their firearms should have little trouble mopping up. The larger

monsters were burning, but they seemed largely unfazed. The fires on them soon went out, revealing some discoloured skin and scorched hair, but little more than superficial damage.

“Now for the finishing touch,” Farrah said. She held her hands out to her sides, palms up, slowly raising them as she chanted a spell.

*“Let the fires rise and claim their ashen due.”*

In the distance, the horde was a sea of flame emitting horrifying shrieks of agony, heard, even from so far away. With Farrah’s spell, the fire started burning brighter, the screams growing louder before starting to fall silent. Jason took another peek at her abilities.

“What spell was that?” Jason asked.

“Look for yourself,” Farrah said.

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#### Ability: [Rising Flames] (Potent)

- Spell
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 3 minutes.
  
- Current rank: Silver 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): Damage dealt by all instances of [Burning] inflicted by you slowly increases.
  
- Effect (bronze): Shortly after an instance of [Burning] reaches maximum damage potential, it detonates, consuming the instance of [Burning] and dealing all potential damage immediately.
  
- Effect (silver): When instances of [Burning] detonate, they inflict damage in a small area around the victim.

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“Strewth,” Cotsworth said, walking up to Jason as he looked into the distance, scratching his head. “Looks like the rest of us can knock off. Good luck with the big ones.”

Aside from a few bronze-rank monsters barely clinging to life, only the silver-rankers were left.

“You know,” Jason said to Farrah, “I have a power that, when you stab someone, makes the bleeding slightly worse. How is that fair?”

“Always with the complaining,” Farrah said. “The circumstances just happened to suit my abilities.”

“The circumstances being an army of monsters.”



“Exactly,” Farrah said. “You have your own ideal situations. Put three people in the dark and you’ll probably kill them. Eventually.”

“Oh, that’s hilarious,” Jason said as he was shrouded in dark mist. “At least my ideal circumstances can include having mana left four minutes into the fight.”

“Your fights take longer than four minutes?” Farrah asked. “Maybe your abilities are terrible.”

When the mist dispersed moments later, Jason casual outfit had been replaced with his combat robes, his starlight cloak already draped over him.

“Shade, if you would?” he asked.

Two of Shade’s bodies emerged from Jason’s shadow to take the form of robust dirt bikes, naturally all in black.

“I don’t know how to ride this,” Farrah said as Jason mounted up.

“Do not be concerned, Miss Hurin,” Shade said. “Straddle me firmly and I will take good care of you.”

“Shade,” Jason admonished. “Time and place.”

“Mr Asano, that level of innuendo is beneath you. Or, at the very least, it should be.”

“Fair point,” Jason said. “That was low humour and we need to focus on the job at hand. Farrah, go ahead and put Shade’s throbbing machine between your legs.”

“I’m feeling very uncomfortable,” Farrah said.