

HE WHO FIGHTS

WITH

MONSTERS

BOOK NINE



SHIRTALOON

(A.K.A. TRAVIS DEVERELL)

S H I R T A L O O N

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DON'T SHOW UP TO THE FANCY PARTY IN SHORTS

CONVALESCENCE WAS NOT SOMETHING THAT PEOPLE WITH THE MONEY TO afford healing magic often had to deal with. Jason Asano was wealthy, even for an adventurer of his rank, yet had been experiencing a lengthy convalescence. Some wounds ran too deep, and Jason had a habit of pushing himself too hard.

Magical powers had limits, not just because they required practise to master but because the body could only endure so much. It required years to inure the body to the kinds of forces that high-ranking magic channelled through it. Jason, however, was a man for whom events would not wait for him to have the necessary strength.

On a rescue mission in a half-flooded mining complex, deep at the bottom of the sea, Jason and his team had been sent to rescue civilians. The complex had been raided by fanatical religious zealots, some of whom were exceptionally powerful. When they were trapped in a room with no escape, Jason had, characteristically, done something impossible.

There was power inside Jason that he was not ready to use. Tapping into that power, he opened a portal he should not have been able to open, rescuing his team and a large group of civilians, but the strain came exceptionally close to killing him. Only the combined efforts of his team and his familiars managed to keep him alive. The process had been so spectacular that everyone in the city of Rimaros had felt it. Jason's aura had blasted across the city and the image of his personal crest had filled the sky.

Jason's convalescence had not been uneventful either. The repercussions of what he had done to himself had precipitated a meeting with some of the most powerful entities in the cosmos. As this meeting was held in the open, the people already watching Jason became all the more interested.

Rimaros, the City of Islands, was comprised of three main islands, along with a series of artificial islands that floated in the sky atop columns of rising water. The latest addition to the city was an island that had previously been a flying fortress city, until being dropped into the ocean in a massive and costly battle.

Jason lived on one of the three main islands, Arnote. On an island of sleepy beach towns, his cloud house remained perched on a clifftop amongst more conventional homes. Looking out over a pristine lagoon, it had been a pleasant place to spend his convalescence.

The cloud house was currently in the state of a pagoda. Linked to Jason's soul, it had undergone some changes when he was close to death, including taking the form of a sinister temple-like structure. Jason's attempts to change it while in a delicate state had led to an unsettling hybrid structure, but as he recovered, he was able to restore a sensible form.

After a lengthy seclusion, Jason was finally open to meeting with some of the people clamouring for his attention. There was no shortage of them, after his series of ostentatious displays, ranging from the opportunistic to the concerned, although that concern was less *for* Jason than *about* him.

Among those seeking Jason's attention, the better-informed ones made use of people Jason was already comfortable with meeting. This started with Estella Warnock, with whom Jason was sharing lunch on a pagoda balcony that overlooked the lagoon. One of the benefits of being unable to adventure was that Jason had time to experiment with local ingredients, developing variants of dishes he knew using local ingredients. On this day, he and Estella were sharing one of his best results: a variant of shakshouka. He didn't have chicken eggs or tomatoes, which made eggs poached in a tomato sauce challenging, but the local analogues had proven successful.

Though Estella was an essence user, she was not an adventurer and had no interest in being one. When she had served as a scout to help Jason and other adventurers protect the island from monsters during the Builder's attack on Rimaros, it had not been out of any sense of civic duty. It had been at the behest of her grandfather, a former adventurer who did have the sense of duty that his granddaughter did not share.

Warwick Warnock had been one of Jason's neighbours until he died assaulting one of the Builder's fortress cities at the very same time Jason and Estella were protecting the island. Estella had inherited his home and had been at something of a loss after his death, having just given up her profession of low-stakes spy-for-hire. She had been one of Jason's few

allowed visitors during his convalescence, commiserating in a shared sense of aimlessness.

“Havi Estos wants a meeting,” she told him.

“Lots of people want to see me. I didn’t think you were speaking to him.”

Havi Estos was a major middleman for semi-legal activities to whom Jason had been introduced in his early days in Rimaros. In order to learn more about Jason, he had hired Estella to observe him, not expecting her powerful yet discreet perception abilities to be noticed. This was the very job that prompted Estella to give up the work, as it was not the first job where she got more than she bargained for. Estella had been quite nervous about encountering Jason again until her grandfather smoothed things over.

“He sought me out,” Estella said. “He knows I know you and wants to make amends.”

“With me or you?”

“Jason, everyone in the city is talking about you, and now he’s very worried about having sent me to spy on you, and what you might do about it. No one is trying to make amends with me.”

“They should. Smart, skilled, discreet people are valuable, and I’m one of those three at best.”

“I’m not going back to work for Estos or anyone like him. They use people like me to catch the trouble they want to avoid.”

“I wouldn’t use you like that.”

She gave him a long stare.

“Are you offering me a job?”

“Do you know the name Emir Bahadir?”

She thought for a moment before answering.

“Is that the guy who tried to rob the royal family a few years back?”

“He did more than try, which is why he’s not allowed back in the Storm Kingdom.”

“Oh, I think they’d let him come.”

Jason laughed.

“Yeah, I imagine they would. Anyway, he’s the one who gave me the cloud flask that produced the building we’re sitting in. When he did, he told me that I should consider expanding my operation. Get some staff, the way he has for his treasure-hunting operations.”

“You want to be a treasure hunter?”

“No, but have you ever heard of auxiliary adventurers? They join adventuring teams as non-combat members, providing various specialty

services. My group will be doing a lot of travelling soon, and having someone outside the team proper who could get the lay of the land quickly would be valuable to us.”

“You want me to traipse around the world with you and your grab-bag of lunatics who run around with diamond-rankers, gods and who knows what else?”

“Yeah, pretty much. I think things will calm down for a while, though.”

“They would have to. I think you’re past the point where things can escalate without the whole world getting destroyed.”

“Been there, done that,” Jason said. “I’m not helping my case here, am I?”

Rick Geller and his team had been in Greenstone at the same time Jason was first training as an adventurer, themselves being trained in the Geller compound. One of his team members, Jonah, had been amongst the first to be forcibly implanted with a star seed, during the same disastrous expedition where Farrah had died. The attempt to extract the star seed had been a gruesome and lethal failure. That spot on the team had subsequently been filled by Dustin Kettering.

Dustin had once been part of a three-man team with Neil and Thadwick Mercer. Thadwick’s own star seed implantation had caused that group to fracture, with Neil going to Jason’s team and Dustin going to Rick’s. Thadwick’s fate was considerably more tragic—he had become some kind of energy vampire that was still at large somewhere in the world.

Although he was now silver rank, Rick looked as uncomfortable as ever around high-rankers, being a good and obedient young man. Jason found himself grinning at Rick’s uncertain expression as he watched him emerge from a flying carriage with Princess Liara, stepping onto the lawn in front of his pagoda.

Jason vaulted the balcony railing to land right in front of the pagoda’s large main entrance. He conjured his cloak as he fell to slow his descent, which wasn’t necessary to avoid damage to him, but to avoid dents in the lawn from a superhero landing. The new look of Jason’s cloak arrested the attention of Liara and Rick, who were both familiar with its previous iteration.

“That looks creepy,” Rick said. “My eyes don’t want to look at it. It’s wrong, somehow. Like you’re wearing a hole in the world.”

“It is quite unsettling to look at,” Liara agreed. “I’m not entirely shocked, however, that your stealth ability is so attention-grabbing.”

“Why do people keep saying that?” Jason complained as he dismissed the cloak.

“At least you’re draping yourself in weird magic instead of weirdly high numbers of women,” Rick observed, drawing an odd look from Liara. “When a beautiful princess attached herself to my meeting, I figured it would be the same thing all over again. What is it with you and these Rimaros princesses?”

Liara gave Jason a querying expression.

“Rick was around when I first met Zara, but I am not always surrounded by women... what’s about to happen notwithstanding.”

The doors behind Jason opened to reveal a group of women, including the pink-haired Estella, Farrah, Sophie, Belinda and Autumn Leal. Autumn was an adventurer whose acquaintance Jason had made, prior to his team arriving in Rimaros. She had an exotic magical frog named Neil that had perished in the defence of Rimaros from the Builder’s flying fortress city. This was something Jason had discovered in the process of checking on people in the wake of the casualty-filled battle, but he had largely left her alone.

Autumn had been in mourning for her bonded companion for some time, but now, for the first time, Jason sensed at least an amount of hope from her aura, along with a solid sense of resolve. It was not the time to explore that, however, and he satisfied himself that she seemed better than she had in the past.

Rick was oblivious to this; all he saw was Jason joined by five women.

“And there it is,” he said.

Jason opened a portal to Rimaros and the five women passed through. Jason didn’t close it afterwards, and instead called out through the still-open doors.

“Are you coming or what?”

“On my way,” a voice came from inside, shortly followed by a hustling Taika. He looked around, seeing that the five women had already departed, then his gaze settled on Liara. “Oh, hey, princess bro.” He then went through the portal and Jason closed it again.

Liara shook her head.

“A bronze-ranker,” she muttered. “What happened to the respect for rank?”

“It’s Jason,” Rick told her. “He’s a bad influence.”

Rick then remembered that he was speaking to a gold-rank princess and his head dipped down as if yanked by a string.

Jason chuckled. “You’d best come inside,” he told them.

“Sit anywhere,” Jason said as they entered a casual lounge inside the cloud structure. “I’m not really the conference table type.”

The lounge, like most of the pagoda, was designed in such a way that the room had a flow leading out to an open wall balcony terrace. This particular room was made up of undisguised cloud substance rather than being masked as more ordinary material. The sprawling layout of plush couches and armchairs fell outside of the meeting etiquette that Rick and Liara were familiar with, so while they looked around for the most appropriate place to sit, Jason moved behind the bar.

After taking out a selection of fruit and two magical wands, Jason started waving the wands like a slightly confused orchestra conductor, and the fruit rose into the air. After wobbling in place for a moment, the fruit peeled, sliced, pulped and juiced itself into a pitcher. Liara and Rick gave up on finding appropriate seats for the moment to watch.

“I could be better at this, I know,” he apologised. “It’s something I picked up while I was recovering to practise my mana control. I know a guy who’s way better at this than me, but he probably wouldn’t be great at saving the world. We all have our areas.”

He paused, frowning.

“Wow, that was really braggadocious. Am I a braggart? When did I start bragging about things I’ve actually done instead of making crazy stuff up? Oh yeah; my life caught up with the most ridiculous things I could think of. Damn, I’m great.”

Jason flashed his guests a grin as he resumed moving the wands. He finished the pitcher of blended fruit drink with a bundle of ice cubes that floated in on their own, and then came out from behind the bar, looking at Rick and Liara standing around.

“Couldn’t find a seat?”

With a sweep of Jason’s arm, all the furniture outside of the bar area sank into the floor. Three chairs then emerged from the floor, spaced equally around a low, circular table. Jason plonked down into one of them and the others sat down after.

“I think you forgot the drinks,” Rick pointed out.

“Crap, thanks.”

Jason reached out with his aura, grabbing the pitcher of juice and three glasses, floating them across the room and onto the table. Liara was able to sense the aura he projected to do so and looked at him, wide-eyed.

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Jason told her. “This is pretty much how it always goes. I almost die, come out of it with some weird new power, and a god or some other ridiculous thing shows up. The order changes around, but it’s a pretty reliable pattern.”

He filled the glasses from the pitcher.

“No exciting ingredients, just fruit. Bit early in the day, yeah?”

Jason leaned back in his seat and sipped at his drink, waiting for the others to talk. Rick was waiting for Liara to speak first, but she was looking around the room.

“Your cloud building has changed,” she said. “I don’t mean the shape; that’s normal cloud house stuff. I mean whatever is under the surface. It feels different. Focused, somehow. Solid.”

“I made some changes,” Jason acknowledged.

“How bad would it be? If someone came for you here?”

“For me? Not so bad. For them? Depends on who it was.”

Jason’s gaze turned to Rick.

“I have to apologise,” he said. “I didn’t realise you were still in town. I thought you went back north after the Builder abandoned the Sea of Storms.”

“I had intended to be gone,” Rick told him. “You remember my sister Phoebe, yes? She’s on my team but had to stay home to deal with family issues. I don’t like having the team split up and wanted to head home, but we were instructed to stay. Didn’t Neil tell you? He and Dustin have been spending plenty of time together since then.”

“No, he didn’t.”

Jason looked to Liara, then back at Rick.

“Let me guess: the Adventure Society roped you in so I’d actually take a meeting, and then Princess Adventure Pants here turned up, right as you were about to set out. The royal family ‘convinced’ the Adventure Society to let their local representative tag along, given that I’ve been willing to meet with her before.”

Rick gave Liara a panicked look at ‘Princess Adventure Pants,’ his eyes desperately trying to communicate that he wasn’t responsible for Jason.

“I’m very familiar with Mr Asano’s way of conducting himself,” Liara

assured him. “And yes, Mr Asano; that is a more or less accurate description.”

She reached forward, took a glass and sipped at it, nodding appreciatively.

“Not bad. But we have to talk about this,” she said, gesturing with her glass.

“We have to talk about the juice?”

“More what the juice represents,” Liara said. “That is the gist of what you were sent to propose, was it not, Mr Geller?”

“Uh, yes,” Rick confirmed. “Basically, Jason, everyone would be more comfortable with your level of prominence going down for the immediate future.”

“Precipitously down,” Liara added.

Jason looked at the juice Liara was holding, his mind ticking over what she had meant. Then a huge grin spread over his face.

“I’m in,” he said.

“We haven’t even told you what the Adventure Society is proposing,” Rick said.

“It’s a secret identity, isn’t it? Jason Asano, scary god-socialiser, leaves his team for parts unknown. Then casual juice enthusiast, Bruce Wayne, joins the team as an auxiliary member in charge of cooking.”

“Something like that,” Liara said. “There will be a lot of details to sort out, but yes. The Adventure Society is proposing the creation of a more discreet legal identity for you to inhabit. You’ll need to be more cautious when working with your team, but it should be manageable. You generally won’t be observed when you’re in the field, fighting monsters. It would help a great deal if your team stayed on the move, taking ordinary contracts.”

“You know that won’t hold up to almost any scrutiny from someone who knows enough,” Jason pointed out.

“It’s not intended to,” Rick said. “There’s no hiding you from anyone of real influence. The idea is just for you to be a lot less loud for a while. Preferably until you rank up, because the higher your rank, the more that the crazy stuff you get caught up in becomes acceptable.”

“I won’t be ranking up for a long time.”

“The Adventure Society is very open to you spending the next decade or five being nice and quiet,” Rick said.

“Fair enough,” Jason said with a chuckle. “So, barbecue-Jason is roaming around with melodrama-Jason’s now-former team. Where is drama-guy while this is going on?”

“He leaves with His Ancestral Majesty,” Liara said. “With everything he has going on, it’s time for him to go out and see some of the cosmos.”

“Apprenticed to Soramir Rimaros,” Jason said. “Prestigious.”

“Obviously, this will work a lot better if your new identity isn’t the only auxiliary joining your team,” Liara said. “Before she left, your friend Dawn made some arrangements, but we can go over the specifics when we get into the details.”

“The Adventure Society wants you to play up the scary adventurer before you go,” Rick said. “A social event where you will need to be every bit the impressive adventurer, rather than... the other thing.”

“You need to be what people imagine from a man who speaks to gods and great astral beings,” Liara said. “Not the man you actually are when you speak to gods and great astral beings.”

“You got a transcript from the spies floating around, then?” Jason asked. “In fairness, you have to talk to Dominion like that or he won’t give you the time of day. Unless you’re a king or something, I guess. Now that I think about it, maybe I should suck up to him. He might leave me alone then. I should remember to try that.”

Rick was looking at Jason with the wide-eyed expression Jason was starting to think of as the ‘standard Rick.’

“Anyway,” Jason continued. “Don’t show up to the fancy party in shorts and sandals, is what you’re saying.”

“That cloak of yours should do the job nicely,” Liara said.

“You want me to wear the cloak to a social event?” Jason asked. “The Adventure Society is looking for me to go full chuuni, I see. I can do that.”

“I don’t know what chuuni means,” Rick said.

“I think we can figure it out from context,” Liara said. “Mr Geller, since Mr Asano has already agreed—if your earlier acceptance wasn’t merely in jest, Mr Asano?”

“I’m still in; I like this idea. And I did ask you to figure out how to reduce my profile, after all.”

“Then let us take ‘yes’ for an answer and go, Mr Geller. Mr Asano, we’ll discuss the details at a later date.”

“No worries,” Jason said.

“I would appreciate it if any public displays you make from here on out are more of the dramatic Jason and less of the neighbourhood barbecue Jason, if you please,” Liara said.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that. Melodrama is kind of my thing.”

“Yes, Mr Asano. We’ve noticed.”

WHAT SHE WAS WILLING TO DO

“NOW THAT DAWN HAS SCARPERED,” JASON SAID, “I’VE HALF OF A MIND to do the same. Bottle up the pagoda, portal out and bunk off. No one would notice, right?”

He and his friends were sitting around a long table on a pagoda balcony, eating lunch.

“Of course someone would notice,” Rufus said. “There are twelve people observing the building right now.”

“Seventeen,” Jason and Estella corrected simultaneously before glancing at each other briefly.

“The point is,” Rufus continued, “that if you start making unexpected moves, people will get worried.”

“He always makes unexpected moves,” Farrah said. “And they always get worried.”

“I’m not that bad.”

“Bro, you went through a children’s ward and made everyone think you’re an angel.”

“That was one time.”

“You had a rolling gunfight with a motorcycle gang hopped up on vampire blood,” Taika said. “On TV. And I was driving. I’m not good at dodging bullets, bro. I’m too big.”

“We do have some responsibilities here before we can leave,” Humphrey pointed out. “I don’t feel bad about skipping this meeting with Estella’s former employer, but we’ve agreed to help Miss Leal obtain a new familiar.”

As someone with a bonded familiar of his own, Humphrey was especially sympathetic to Autumn Leal’s plight. Bonded familiars were actual magical creatures that could die, compared to Jason’s summoned familiars. If Shade, Colin or Gordon were destroyed, their spirits simply

returned to the astral and Jason could resummon them. When Autumn lost her familiar, Humphrey could not help but think about losing Stash and how devastated he would be.

“I could go with skipping the celebration ball, though,” Sophie said. “Why do the rest of us need to go?”

After months of monsters and extradimensional invasions, the dimensional membrane that normally kept such problems away had finally repaired itself, bringing the monster surge and the Builder invasion to an end. The Magic Society made public announcements and Rimaros, like the rest of the world, was in celebrations.

A lengthy festival was taking place, despite the devastation and loss the surge had brought. If only for a short time, people needed some release after monsters and death and mobile cities attacking by land, sea and air. This monster surge had been the longest and most devastating in recorded history, bringing with it not one but two interdimensional invasions, only one of which had been dealt with.

Rural populations needed to leave the cities and fortress towns, returning to what would often be monster-ravaged towns and villages around the Storm Kingdom. Infrastructure would need to be rebuilt and industries built back up. More than just the monster surge, the state of readiness the world had been in for a good five years prior to the surge had hurt economies, closed businesses and turned boom towns into ghost towns.

The repercussions would likely still be felt by the time of the next surge, but now, the repopulation, rebuilding and the messengers that had hidden themselves away could wait. The world would take a week for some much-needed celebratory catharsis.

“The festivals on the streets are the real celebration,” Rufus said. “This ball for the aristocracy is just a show. The first round in the next cycle of political gamesmanship. With everything up in the air, a lot of power is up for grabs.”

“So why should Jason put himself up for grabs with it?” Sophie asked. “Anyone with real power will either know Jason isn’t genuinely leaving the team or be able to easily find out. So why bother with the show?”

“It’s not about convincing them that I’m going off somewhere,” Jason said. “It’s about giving them a sense of control. These are people used to holding power, and there’s been a lot going on that they don’t understand and have no influence over. A lot of that is centred on this pagoda and me sitting in it. Normally, their response to something like that is to take or, failing that, kill it. By jumping through some hoops for them now, I

become more of a known quantity, and demonstrate that at least someone can bring me to heel.”

“Except that’s total crap and you go berserk when people try to control you,” Sophie said.

“Yes, but we won’t be telling people that. I told you: it’s a show. I don’t want to spend the next few years fending off people who think that I’m some kind of rogue threat.”

“You are some kind of rogue threat,” Sophie said.

“Again, *please* don’t tell people that at the party.”

“I hope you don’t think one party is going to put a stop to people thinking that they can or should come after you,” Neil said.

“Of course not,” Jason said. “There will always be someone with too much ambition, too much stupidity or both. But most of the people at this ball are just concerned about a loose power running around during times that are already uncertain. The Adventure Society and the royal family can parade me around, showing everyone what a good boy I am. Then I’m no longer an unknown threat to anyone’s ambitions or just the general welfare of the kingdom.”

“You think any nobles care about the welfare of the populace?” Belinda asked. “Good luck finding one.”

“There’s no shortage of selfish nobles,” Jason admitted. “But some, I assume, are good people.”

“Nope,” Sophie said. “They all suck.”

“Based on your long history of robbing them?” Rufus asked pointedly.

“Yes,” Sophie said.

“You realise that Humphrey and I are both from aristocratic families, right?” Neil asked.

“Yeah, but he’s pretty and you’re the healer. I’ve seen the things they hide away. Mostly while stealing them. Your aunt Clarice has a hideous doll collection, by the way, Neil. I have no idea why she locks it up, because no one is going to steal that, trust me.”

“You broke into my house?”

“There’s no point breaking into poor people’s houses,” Belinda said. “They don’t have any money. I suppose if you’re crap at breaking into places.”

“The point is,” Sophie said, “that I’ve seen the things they hide. The worse they are, the harder they work to make themselves seem good. Humphrey and his mum might be nice and clean, but even Humphrey will tell you that not all of his family are like them.”

“We all have secrets we hide,” Humphrey said. “Things we’re

ashamed of.”

Everyone stopped eating and turned to look at Humphrey.

“What?” he asked.

“What do you have to be ashamed of?” Neil asked.

“My entire point was that we *don't* tell people those things,” Humphrey said. “That’s why they’re secrets.”

“You keep saying ‘we,’ but I don’t think you have anything you’re ashamed of,” Belinda said.

“Of course he does,” Jason said. “I bet it’s that one time, as a boy, he secretly pilfered some condensed milk from the pantry.”

“No,” Gary said. “I bet he skipped out on training once to read a book on how to maintain a humble demeanour when people won’t stop looking into your sensuous eyes, like molten bowls of dark chocolate.”

“Sophie,” Belinda said. “What’s Humphrey’s deep, dark secret?”

Sophie finished chewing on a mouthful of salad as everyone looked at her.

“He accidentally killed a baby,” she said casually. “This salad dressing is fantastic. Can I get some of this on a sandwich?”

As she shoved another forkful of salad into her mouth, Humphrey looked more and more like a boiling kettle until he finally boiled over.

“I DID NOT ACCIDENTALLY KILL A BABY!”

“You did say that *not* admitting it was the entire point,” Jason observed.

“Yeah, he definitely killed that baby,” Neil said.

“I did not kill a baby!”

“It’s a helpless little baby, bro. I know it was supposedly an accident, but how could you?”

“Of course he had to say it was an accident,” Gary pointed out. “Plus, it’s his word against that of a dead baby, so that’s probably how he got away with it.”

Estella, watching the group continue roasting Humphrey, leaned towards Clive, who was also staying out of it.

“Is it always like this?”

“More or less.”

“Aren’t you all meant to be some group of elite adventurers?”

“I’d consider our capabilities adequate.”

“I was expecting more... I don’t know. Dignity, I guess.”

“Admittedly, it’s more like this with Jason around,” Clive told her. “He has a way of setting the tone. But it’s a good thing. Dignity is for outsiders; a face we put on, as needed. We let Humphrey take the lead with