

Shard Warriors – Vol.2

Prologue

Jason

"I think..." The girl let out a sigh. "I think I'm done."

Jason didn't look up at her. He kept his eyes down on the metallic table, staring at nothing. Waiting.

"There hasn't been a Shard Monster attack since... since..."

Since *then*.

Warehouses burning down around them. A raging inferno that'd damn near ended *everything*. Maya with a monster atop her. Jason atop Jennifer. The voice screaming inside his voice to burn everything, set the world on fire.

Even now, months later, he could hear that vile voice.

Burn it. The Red Shard whispered. *Burn it all*.

His chest ached with power. All it'd take was a thought. A single impulse. And the flames would come.

He shuddered.

"Maybe... Maybe it's over," Abigail continued, voice strained. "Maybe we don't need to do *this* any longer. I mean, it's not like we could do it *forever*. It had to come to an end at *some* point. Maybe this is it..."

Jason kept his eyes on the table, not trusting himself to look up. Kept his gaze low. Kept his glare hidden as best he could behind a neutral expression.

He heard her moving, saw her shifting in his peripheral vision.

A few minutes later, she set something down on the table.

He refused to look up. Refused to acknowledge it.

And, quietly, without uttering another word, Abigail left the room. Pausing only once, in the doorway. Looking back at the 'team leader'. He imagined her opening her mouth to say something, to apologise, to tell him he should quit to. But no words came out. A few moments more, and she was gone completely.

Out of their secret base. Out of the fight.

Finally, Jason looked up.

There, in front of Yellow's seat at the round table, was a metallic belt with a yellow disk. Her Morph Belt.

"Shit," Jason sighed, slumping in his own red chair.

That made three.

In front of the blue and green chairs were their belts. Abandoned by their owners. In front of the pink chair, there was nothing. Maya still had the pink Morph Belt, though he hadn't seen her using it since that night. Had barely heard from her at all over the last few months.

"Fuck."

Just like that, the team of five was down to one.

Only he remained. Jason. The Red. The team's captain.

Alone.

He didn't remember much about that time. Being a prisoner, chained up and tormented. His mind poked and prodded at, his body abused and mistreated. That entire chunk of his life was like a thick fog, with only silhouetted images standing out in the unending haze.

Vaguely, he knew what'd happened to him. That a Red Shard had been forced on him, bonded to his flesh. And that he'd been compelled to attack his friends, his family. His team. But his memories... There were so many holes.

"It's not my fault," he told himself. "I couldn't control myself..."

He tried closing his eyes to banish the thoughts, but that darkness only presented an opportunity for the images to torment him. His sister underneath him, her mind-warped voice demanding more. His girlfriend being mounted by monsters, her metallic pink suit torn open to reveal massive, bouncing tits.

Why? *Why?!*

Why did thinking about it make him hard?

His eyes snapped open, glaring at the computer monitor in front of him. A dozen different videos all playing in a grid; live channel feeds for every local news network, and a few national-scale news organisations.

Nothing. Nothing, nothing, *nothing*.

No 'Breaking News' banners, no cutting to footage of monsters on the loose. No Shard Monsters.

And still he kept staring at the screen, resisting the growing weight on his eyelids. Fighting off the urge to let go and fall asleep. Any time the temptation seemed to be gaining the upper hand, all he had to do was remind himself of the nightmares. The waking up paralysed, haunted by things that weren't actually there.

He was the only one left. If a Shard Monster showed up, it'd be on him to deal with it. He couldn't sleep.

And yet, staring at that screen for hours on end every day, hoping that something would change – that some Shard Monsters would show up so he could actually *do* something – was just a different kind of torture.

Sleep and deal with the terrors of his mind. Be vigilant and endure the endless monotony of nothingness. Give in and hang up his belt, and forever know he'd failed and quit. Keep going and accept that he was alone, now and forever.

Shitty options, one and all.

Get up, he told himself. *Do something*.

He tried. Strained against the infinite, invisible weight pressing on him. Then he let out a sigh, slumped back even more.

What was the point?

It was all over. The team. Him and Maya. Everything. What was the point in fighting it? They'd lost. *He'd* lost.

Get up!

He pushed himself. Tried again. And, this time, he *just* managed it. Climbing off the chair, standing up on aching legs. He took a step away from the desk, stumbled a little.

Keep going.

When his feet let him out of his apartment, he didn't question it. When he strode out into the pitch-black night, took in a breath of fresh, cool air, he felt something inside himself relax a little. A knot of tension and anxiety uncoiling slightly.

He picked a direction and began walking.

His feet ached. Throbbled painfully.

Behind him, the city was nothing more than lights in the distance. A silent metropolis on the horizon.

Ahead of him; darkness. A grey sky with only the brightest stars still visible, twinkling through clouds and the oncoming sunrise. An endless stretch of desert, a single unending road to nothingness.

Dead brambles and dry weeds flanked both sides of the empty road, lit by flickering streetlights.

"I should turn back," he said, though he didn't stop. Didn't turn around. Just kept on walking. "This is dumb. I can't just-"

There. A light in the distance. A beacon in the night.

A house, all the way out here? A diner or truck-stop? It was a building. The closer he

got to it, the more he could make out the silhouette of it in the darkness. A tall, wide building with large, bright windows.

A church?

Somewhere he could rest his legs, for sure. He'd been walking for hours. All night, practically.

Jason approached the building, felt the chilly air disappearing the closer he got. By the time he reached the church's open doors, a gentle warmth had enveloped him. His aches and pains throbbed as he passed the threshold, entered the church.

It was empty. Well-lit with candles and bright bulbs, warm as a summer day, comfortable with cushioned pews and pillows.

Jason shuddered, body taking a moment to adjust to the sudden change in environments. From chilly, empty night to *this*. The church had to be spending a *fortune* on heating, if they kept the place *this* warm every night.

Not that Jason was complaining. He walked over to the nearest pew, sat himself down, let out a satisfied sigh.

Finally. A chance to rest. His seat wasn't as comfortable as he'd been expecting, but it sure as shit beat standing. He'd rest here for a bit, until his feet and legs stopped complaining, then he'd head back home.

With any luck, his feet wouldn't be covered in blisters tomorrow.

Jason let out a sigh, looked forward past the church's altar to a gigantic wooden sculpture. A cross that stretched from the floor to ceiling, and the oversized, bearded man nailed to it. The painted wood looked good. Fresh. No flakes or marks that Jason could spot.

He wasn't particularly religious. Wasn't a 'believer'. But, all the same, staring at that sculpture stirred something in him.

"What am I doing?" He sighed softly.

"Looking for something," a man's voice said from behind him, "by the look of things."

Jason shot to his feet, spun on the spot and raised his fists.

The church's priest raised an eyebrow at him.

A tall, thirty-something year old man with slicked back charcoal hair and an air of confidence surrounding him. Clad in regular black priest robes complete with white collar, black gloves on his hands and polished black shoes. He stood with his back straight, chin high, completely unconcerned by Jason's raised fists.

"Guidance, perhaps," the man said, tilting his head to one side. "Or advice. Or maybe you're just here to rest your feet. I didn't hear a car parking outside, so I assume you must've walked here."

"I, ah," Jason lowered his hands. "Yeah..."

The priest smiled.

"We're a long ways from the city," the priest hummed. "Quite the walk. Why don't you sit down and rest for a bit?"

"I'm okay," Jason said, shaking his head. "Sorry to intrude, I just-"

"Nonsense!" The priest said happily. "You're not intruding on anything. This place is as much your home as it is *His*." The priest pointed a thumb up at the church's ceiling. "You're welcome here for as long as you like. Sit, sit. I'd offer you something to drink, but the plumbing here hasn't worked in years..."

Jason wanted to decline. To apologise and insist on leaving, walk away, find somewhere else to rest. But his body and mind refused him, wanted to stay here in the comfortable warmth. He shrugged, suppressed a sigh, sat back down on the rock-hard pew.

The priest walked over to him, leaned against another pew. Not too close, but near enough for them to chat.

"So," the man said, "what are you searching for?"

"Nothing," Jason said, not looking at him.

Sitting down had been a mistake. He should've walked away the moment this fucking priest showed up. At least out there, he wouldn't have to deal with people and questions.

"Look, son," the priest said, voice a little softer. "I know a troubled person when I see them. If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine. But, if you do, there's no better place or time. Your feet obviously brought you here for a reason."

There was no reason. He'd just been walking. Away from home, the base, his job as Red. That this stupid church was out here, in the middle of nowhere, was pure coincidence.

When Jason scoffed dismissively, the priest only smiled.

"I remember when I was young and stupid," he said, eyes locked on Jason. "A naive, simple-minded fool. Feels like forever ago now. But hey, some people learn the truth faster than others. And some never learn it."

The priest poked his thumb over at the giant crucifix.

"It took *that* idiot being stapled to a plank to learn the simple truth of things."

Jason blinked. Glanced between the priest and the crucifix.

"Everyone has a purpose," the priest continued. "A part to play in the grand scheme. *He* thought his purpose was to heal and help and guide people to the light. But he was wrong. His only purpose in life was to die. Pretty shitty hand to be dealt, but it is what it is."

"Are... Are you sure you're a priest?"

"I am what I am," the priest chuckled. "A guide. A teacher. That's *my* purpose. Which begs the question; what is *your* purpose?"

"My... What?"

"Purpose! Everyone has one. And, in my experience, it's only when people don't know what their purpose is – or are actively fighting against it – that they end up troubled enough to spend their night walking miles outside of the city limits with no goal or destination in mind."

Jason's skull throbbed. The beginnings of a headache forming around his cranium. He was *far* too tired to be dealing with *this* kind of shit.

So he didn't answer. And the priest didn't push him. He sat there in silence, and the priest stood motionless. Waiting.

Purpose? What the fuck was the man even talking about?

It was loony and silly and pointless and... And simple.

His purpose... If Jason had one, if there were some magical, mystical force guiding him, he knew what it was. Had known it for years. Ever since that first time putting on the Red Belt.

Defeat the Shard Monsters. Put an end to whoever was creating them. Save the city. Be a hero.

"Helping people," Jason whispered.

"Hmm?" The priest hummed.

"My purpose," Jason said, a little louder. "It's helping people."

Not *quite* the truth. But close enough.

"Alright," the priest nodded his head. "So, what's keeping you from fulfilling that purpose? What's causing your turmoil?"

"I don't..." Know? But he did. He knew *exactly* what the problem was. "My team. They're all split up, doing their own things. What I need to do... I can't do it alone. I need them. But they're not there. They... quit."

The priest smiled at Jason. A wide, toothy grin.

Then, without warning, he pushed away from the pew he was leaning on, began walking away.

"Hey! Wait," Jason called after him. "Wait! Aren't you meant to help or something? Give me advice?"

The man paused but didn't look back.

"You know your purpose," the priest said, sounding satisfied and happy, carefree. "And you know what the issue is. So, fix it. Put your team back together."

Then the man kept walking, striding to a door that went to the church's backstage. Out of sight. Gone.

Jason remained seated for a few minutes more.

His mind bouncing around thoughts, headache growing and growing until Jason couldn't think at all.

Finally, he stood.

For as weird and unorthodox as the priest was, he was right. Jason needed to rebuild his team. Needed to be a leader and mend the schisms that'd grown between his friends. And then, when the five of them were back together, the team reforged, he'd lead the way against the Venitus Institute – bring the whole fucking place down and put an end to the Shard experiments, once and for all.

His feet throbbing almost as painfully as his head, Jason left the church, began the journey back home.

But the pain didn't bother him. Not in the slightest.

He had a goal now. A target. A *purpose*.

And he knew exactly where to start in fulfilling it.