

Chapter 806

Group Dynamics

"I don't like leaving it here," Taika said.

"We can't use it and we can't take it with us," Humphrey told him. "Our best move is to leave before it brings trouble down on us."

Belinda and the two men were standing over a shimmering orb that had refused to enter either Humphrey or Belinda's storage spaces.

Item: [Stable Genesis Core Amalgam] (unranked, legendary)

An amalgamation of refined vessels of transformative potential energy (consumable, magic core).

- **Effect:** Use to set up or expand spiritual domains. This is a refined amalgam linked to multiple stably unified territories.
- This core cannot be used without the proper ability or method. This core cannot be subject to dimensional stasis or removed from the territories to which it is linked. This core is radiating energy that can be sensed by those who have claimed a properly stabilised territory. The energy will increase over time, extending the range at which it can be sensed.

"This thing is going to draw the most dangerous people here like feliculars to a bostirion," Belinda said.

"I agree," Humphrey said.

"I don't know what either of those things are," Taika said.

"You don't have bostirions on your world?" Humphrey asked. "You're missing out."

"On the other hand, not having to deal with feliculars would be great," Belinda said.

"That's true," Humphrey said while nodding his agreement.

"Are bostirions food?" Taika asked and the other two immediately erupted into laughter.

"He thinks you eat bostirions," Belinda said.

"You should never, ever eat a bostirion," Humphrey said. "My great uncle got one near his mouth once. He didn't even eat it and still suffered something I'm not sure you can even call diarrhoea. The house was uninhabitable, and we have a big house. We had to call in a priest of the Healer to make it stop and a priest of Purity to make the building liveable again."

"Bro, your great uncle is normal-rank?"

"No, he's a gold-ranker," Humphrey said. "He hadn't used a toilet in twenty years."

"Okay," Taika said. "I still don't know what this thing you're talking about is, but you have to point it out if you see one. I haven't pooped in three years and I don't want to catch up all at once."

"That's not how it works," Belinda said. "You're not saving it up."

"That's what you say," Taika said, "but Humphrey just told us a twenty-year poo story."

"Which I'm now coming to regret," Humphrey said. "Let's get out of here."

He walked towards the nearby territorial boundary and Belinda joined him.

"I'm not kidding about this," Taika called after them. "You have to tell me if you see one of those things."

Belinda and Humphrey shared an amused look and kept walking. Taika shook his head and followed.

"I want to go home and see my mum," he muttered.

Jason floated in the air over flat savannah that sprawled out to the horizon. His silver-rank eyesight picked out the dinosaurs roaming around, some he recognised, some he didn't. They were easy to pick out, massive herbivores that chomped on trees or lounged in waterholes.

His gaze turned to the distance and the shadowy veil at the bounds of his territory. He was still staring when Farrah flew up from below to join him. They hovered in the air, side by side.

"What is it?" she asked.

"There's something out there. A large territory, waiting to be claimed by the first one who can get there and take it."

"Are you going to go?"

"No. It's going to attract the undead avatar, and we haven't found Gary to fight it yet. Anything that drives it in a direction that's not here is a good thing."

"And if the avatar does find us before Gary?"

"Then I'll have to try something drastic."

Farrah sighed.

"You have something in mind?"

"Yeah."

"Will it work?"

"Probably, but I'm hoping to not find out."

"The consequences are uncertain but maybe worse than the problem they fix?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "Vast cosmic power isn't everything it's cracked up to be."

"Yes, it is."

Jason gave her a side glance, then snorted a laugh.

"Yeah, I guess it is."

He turned his gaze back down to the territory below.

"I just wish I had more time to stop and enjoy places like this."

"It won't always be like this, Jason."

"So people keep telling me. At this rate, I'll have to conquer the cosmos and make everyone knock off their crap."

"Jason?"

"Yes, Farrah?"

"Don't conquer the cosmos."

"No promises."

He turned to look in the direction of his core territory and grinned.

"Rick just got back, and he brought friends."

Jason sat at the head of the conference table. His backdrop was a wall of glass behind which a lava waterfall spilled down out of sight. Sitting around the table were members representing every faction of their alliance, adventurers, brighthearts and cultists. Not everyone was happy about Jason adding messengers to the alliance by fiat, but he informed them that if they didn't like it, they could challenge him for his territory and see how that went. Not everyone was happy about that either.

The positions around the table told a story of the group dynamics between the factions, and the individuals within those factions. Jason sat at the head of the table with Sophie and Farrah to his left. The other adventurers ran down that side of the table in a line, ending in Rick Geller.

The gold-rank adventurers Rick had managed to find were Arabelle Remore and Miriam Vance, the tactical commander for the underground expedition. He'd also rounded up Gabriel Remore and Amos Pensinata, but they were sleeping off the after-effects of handing their territories to Jason. They had accumulated eleven territories between them and the result of handing them over was hangover-like symptoms that were resistant to healing magic.

The silver-rankers he'd found were Zara Nareen, Amos Pensinata and Rick's sister Phoebe.

“...only found one of my team members,” Rick said, continuing his report. “I would have liked to continue but, given all the people we’d found, consolidating our forces seemed like the right move.”

Past Rick was Marek Nior Vargas and his gold-rank right-hand man. Jason didn't anticipate friendship anytime soon but gauged Rick and Marek to have formed a functional working relationship. There was one more messenger in the room, Jali Corrik Fen, seated to Jason's right. Jason had not missed the disapproving glances from close friends and reluctant allies alike.

The largest group Rick had brought back were the brighthearts, including their leader, Lorenn. She was seated opposite Jason at the foot of the table. Many of her brighthearts were in the territory, but only two were with her in the meeting. Lorenn had also handed multiple territories to Jason but had not wanted to miss the conference. Her complexion was pale and sickly but she otherwise showed no sign of her discomfort.

There was a large gap between Jali, on Jason's right, and the row of Builder cultists further down that side of the table. One gold-ranker was flanked by silvers; they had other gold-rankers in the territory but only one had come to the conference, to proxy for their still missing leader.

From his interactions with the cultist, Jason knew he was less amenable to the alliance than their leader, Beaufort. Rather than causing trouble, he chose to listen in silence unless directly addressed, at which point he followed the group consensus. Jason didn't care for the cult any more than they did him, but was grateful that the man was smart and loyal enough to not cause problems.

The meeting continued going through the experiences of Rick and those he had brought back. Of major concern was the effect that claiming multiple territories had on people without the correct means to do so. Arabelle had the most to say as not only did she get to watch the process closely with her husband but she was an expert in mental health.

“Gabriel's behaviour became increasingly erratic the more territories he claimed,” Arabelle she told the group. “It seems that those who cannot claim the territories properly are subjected to increased anger and paranoia with each one they accumulate. After collecting six territories it had reached the point of becoming dangerous. He was lashing out and becoming overprotective of his power. It took us some time to calm him down and convince him to hand it over peacefully. Fortunately, the symptoms immediately vanished on handing over the territories, although the aftermath is apparently unpleasant.”

“I can confirm that,” Lorenn said.

"Six seems to be the threshold at which it becomes a real problem," Arabelle continued. "Both Amos Pensinata and Councilwoman Lorenn showed similar effects, but both maintained self-control with their five and four territories respectively. Also, there do seem to be ways to ameliorate this. From speaking with our cultist ally, he experienced these effects but handled them readily, with diminished after-effects. My guess would be that the star seeds in their souls have helped them adapt to external influence."

Discussion moved on to the messengers claimed from each territory. The cultist messengers had died immediately upon leaving cultist control. Their segmented bodies, held together with Builder magic, were unable to live on without Builder influence. That had almost been enough to drive Jason to do something he'd regret to the cultists, but he held his temper.

The elemental messengers of the brighthearts had suffered no ill effects from being placed under Jason's control. On the contrary, their minds had cleared, taking them from simpletons to intelligent communicators. Jason had felt his brand replacing that of Lorenn when she handed over her territories and immediately stopped it. As he had with the others, he guided them to place their own marks on their souls, setting them free.

From there he had handed them over to Jali, now used to inducting fresh messengers to their existing population. Those claimed by Lorenn retained their elemental nature, even after being handed over to Jason. It didn't seem to impede them or draw any ire from the others. These messengers had never gone through messenger indoctrination to build up prejudices.

"The biggest problem we have with the messengers," Jason said to the conference group, "is that many of them were left abandoned. We have eleven territories worth of messengers left comatose and they've all just woken up."

"You're sure?" Arabelle asked.

"I felt it," Jason said. "I felt them wake and I set them free."

"Are you certain that was wise?" Phoebe Geller asked.

"I'm tired of explaining that I don't own slaves," Jason said. "I don't want to hear anyone bring it up again."

"That's it?" Lorenn asked. "We have to accept what is arguably the most powerful weapon at our disposal being set aside because you say so, and we don't even get to talk about it?"

"Yes," Jason told her.

"And if we don't accept that?"

"I've already told you all once, Councilwoman. If you don't like the way I do things, challenge me. Take this territory and do it better."

"You know that's not practical."

"Then when I say something is done, it's done."

"If you're just going to issue decrees, then what is the point of even having us here?"

"Because I'm well aware that a group will come up with better ideas than I will alone. But the final decisions are mine."

Lorenn scowled.

"You never struck me as a tyrant before."

"You don't know me that well. But let me be clear, Councilwoman: I will never hold your people in my soul realm over you. They are not hostages and never will be. Regarding their disposition, I am at your command. If you want them out here instead of in my domain, I will bring them out. I imagine we can keep them safe and fed here."

"Telling me I have to do what you say but you won't use my people as hostages doesn't comfort me, Asano. And even if you bring them out, this is still your domain."

"That's true," Jason said. "This situation is not built for equanimity. There needs to be a chain of command, and I need you all to understand that I am at the top of it. I don't want to be a despot, but if that's what it takes to get us to the other side of this, I will be. Anyone who can't accept that should probably leave now."

Silence reigned.

"Good," Jason said. "Now—"

"Jason," Phoebe Geller said. "I think we should discuss the possibility that claiming all these territories is affecting your mind as well. Less than the others, but I think it might be influencing your behaviour."

"It's not," Farrah and Arabelle said simultaneously. The two women shared a glance and Farrah continued.

"This is Jason. I've seen him like this before. It's not always pleasant to be around, but when the world is breaking apart this is how he gets."

"You know I'm right here," Jason said. "You're talking about me like I'm not in the room."

Jason and Farrah stared at one another until they both broke into grins.

"Okay," Jason said. "Now that you've all met Edgelord Jason, let's move on to what comes next. It's good that we've managed to unify this many territories, but having them scattered and separate poses logistical issues. Rick, if you would?"

Rick took a small glass half-orb from his pocket and leaned over the table to place it flat-side down in the middle. He leaned back and gestured at it, causing an illusion to be projected. It showed a map with clearly delimited sections, marking out territories.

"We took a cartography crystal with us," Rick said. "It's a recording crystal designed specifically for mapping terrain. Despite this being a dimensional space and the territorial boundaries being very odd, the geography seems to be fixed. I'll take you through what we've found and what we've guessed about the transformation zone."