

## Chapter 832

### A Decision Made Poorly and in Haste

Jason and Boris were at the beach in Jason's replica town, sitting in cheap folding chairs. Boris had put away his wings and shrunk himself down to human size, as he typically did around humans. His long blond hair was teased by the ocean wind, leaving it dancing around his square-jawed features. The sun shone from his tan, muscular chest.

"Could you please do your shirt all the way up?" Jason asked. "You look like the cover of a romance novel from the eighties, and don't even try and tell me it's not on purpose."

Boris laughed and left his shirt how it was.

"How are your messengers doing?" Jason asked.

"Not great," Boris admitted. "I railroaded them into all this and it doesn't sit well. Being around non-messengers without subjugating them goes against all their behavioural programming."

"They aren't ready for the Unorthodoxy?"

"They are not. On one hand, messenger indoctrination works. On the other, your aura is everywhere here. They can feel it in the territory you've claimed, even when you tamp it down. The incomplete but unmistakable feel of an astral king, but without the power. It's an undeniable refutation of everything they've been taught about who and what they are. The promises they've been made about their futures. The conflict between their indoctrination and the evidence of their senses is causing some dangerous cognitive dissonance."

"Some of them had to have at least had doubts. The gold rankers?"

"One of my two gold-rankers was ready, thankfully. All she needed was to get away from her astral king and get a little nudge. She's been key in helping me keep a lid on all this. The other gold-ranker wasn't ready for this, but he's adapting. The silver-rankers are the issue. I've removed them from a life where they can only follow orders and don't have any choices, but I didn't give them a choice about it and I've been ordering them around ever since. This is not the way we like to do things.

"But circumstances didn't allow that."

"No," Boris confirmed. "No, they did not. We go slow and careful when bringing people in, like cult deprogramming. That's just not possible with everything going on. I was stuck choosing between killing them all or forcibly bringing them along."

"I'm glad you kept so many of the messengers you claimed from the territories alive," Jason said.

“I’m glad that you’ve done the same,” Boris said. “I’m sure many argued against it. How are *your* messengers doing?”

They looked up, spotting messengers on the wing. There were always a few to be seen in the sky over Jason’s town. Disregarding living anomalies, and with the destruction of the undead army, the most populous group in the transformation zone were messengers. Only a fraction were under the command of Boris. Most had been sealed away in the territories of the transformation zone, then unsealed as territories were claimed.

These messengers were born with the power to speak every language and an understanding of the cosmos that some spent lifetimes striving and failing to achieve. Yet, they were children; amnesiacs without history or identity. Jason had freed all that he and his allies could safely steal away from the enemy, but many had been killed.

The survivors now lived within Jason’s mountain fortress and could be seen flying around it and over the town. At first, they had been extremely hesitant to emerge from their dormitories. They clustered together like herd animals cornered by a predator. Slowly they had grown more confident, and while they still kept to themselves, they claimed the sky as their domain. A place they belonged and could feel free.

“I’ll admit that I’m at something of a loss,” Jason said. “I have no more idea of what to do with them than they have of what to do with themselves.”

“It’s good that you freed them from outside control,” Boris said. “Even yours, which I appreciate. With enough patience — or ruthlessness — they represent a lot of power.”

“Getting more power has never been difficult for me. It’s holding onto my decency that’s proven the hard part.”

“Freeing them wasn’t hard, was it? Freedom is part of the problem with my messengers. They’re still branded by Vesta Carmis Zell and know that she’ll kill them the moment they leave this place. Obviously, you removing their brands is the solution to that, but most of them aren’t ready to take that leap. Letting you into their soul might be harder for them to accept than joining the Unorthodoxy. You had no such problems with the territory messengers, though.”

“No. I didn’t have to dig through their souls and find a mark to erase. It’s like they were waiting for someone to give them a destiny.”

“That is how young messengers are,” Boris said. “Astral kings need to imprint something on them; it’s a normal part of our reproductive cycle. In the beginning, the astral kings guided newborn messengers in forming their own marks, in their own souls. It laid a groundwork for them to forge their own destinies.”

"Obviously not how it works anymore."

"Not outside of Unorthodox birthing planets."

"Are there a lot of those?"

"No. The orthodox messengers are diligent about hunting them down. If we have too many birthing planets, we get noticed. More resources are put into hunting us down. We hide because we lack the numbers to fight using different methods to mask our presence in each place. That way, losing one site doesn't expose all our methods."

"Is Earth one of your birthing worlds?"

"Not enough magic for the birthing trees. What would you do if I'd said yes?"

"Nothing," Jason said. "Every people deserves to live, and yours would have been there for a long time. Like the vampires. If I can tolerate vampires, I can tolerate messengers. How many of you are on Earth?"

"I don't know the exact number. Less than a million, I think."

"A million?"

"We live amongst the humans, leading mostly ordinary lives. We're citizens of Earth and have been since before the first civilisation. It's our home. A home many of us wanted to protect more actively as magic came into the open and the monster surges began. It was the most contention we've had amongst our people in centuries."

"But you didn't act."

"We did more than you think, and more still, after you left. We've become increasingly active in the Cabal, especially after the vampire schism."

"What is going on with the vampires on Earth?"

"It's war. Not open battle; more like skirmishes between elite forces, but a lot of them. Combat began in earnest shortly after you left, as if the vampires were waiting on your absence. I think you made an impression on the vampire leader, Elizabeth."

"What is the state of the war?"

"When I left, it had quieted into a stalemate. The vampires have most of Europe, although there are holdouts. The Cabal holds some of the UK and Scandinavia. The Network have set up in Greenland. Your domains are clear. The magic around them is too strong, making the sunlight dangerous for vampires. Your grandmother has been leveraging that, letting the human forces use your territories as staging areas."

"How unified are the vampires? I know at least some of them were fighting against the vampire lords."

"Most of the vampires chose not to follow the risen vampire lords. Like my people, they have been around longer than any of the short-lived humans. They only obeyed the

vampire lords when they were forced to through bloodline magic or the threat of death. The priority of the Cabal has been freeing those vampires from the control of the risen lords.”

“Weren’t the Cabal vampires the ones who dug the old vampires up?”

“Yes, and there were eager collaborators even amongst those who weren’t involved in bringing the lords back. But most of team Eat People to Death are new vampires, created by the lords themselves. The Cabal vampires escaped their influence as soon as they could. The whole mess caused a schism in the Cabal and cleaning house was ugly. We cast out any vampires that sided with the risen lords willingly.”

“What happened to the vampires who went against the vampire lords? Humanity doesn’t have a great track record of accepting people while at war with others of the same group, and that’s when everyone is human.”

Boris glowered.

“About what you’d expect,” he said in an almost-growl. “The vampires siding with humanity should be one of their greatest assets, but the humans are as you’ve said. Most governments and magical factions are killing vampires on sight.”

“Not even internment camps?”

“Camps mean logistics,” Boris said.

“Ah,” Jason said. “They’re not going to set up a supply chain of human blood.”

“No. Some did try holding vampires at the beginning. Very quietly. Smaller groups, containment facilities. The kind of experiments they’ll be talking about fifty years from now in high school history classes.”

“Only at the beginning? They stopped?”

“I imagine there are some still operating, but we liberated most of them. We think.”

“We?”

“The Cabal. Some sympathetic members of the Network factions and even some within government groups. Humans can be crappy, but they can also surprise you at how far they can go to do what’s right.”

“I have a vampire friend. I hope he’s alright.”

“Craig Vermillion was alive and well the last time I saw him,” Boris said. “Alive-ish, anyway. It’s a grey area with vampires.”

“You know him?”

“I didn’t, but he’s Cabal and we’ve been investigating you as best we can. Your friend is residing in secret with your clan. Vampires have long been good at hiding, and they have allies. Ultimately, a relatively small number were caught or killed.”

“Relatively small is not the same as small.”

“No,” Boris agreed. “No it isn’t, and what the humans are doing is only turning would-be allies to side with the vampire lords. Fortunately, most of the refuges aren’t secret, so a few vampires going over to the murderous side isn’t hurting us.”

“Refuges?”

“There are safe zones for vampires who aren’t turning to the lords. Mostly in areas where the Cabal holds sway, where we’ve displaced the Network factions and openly joined or even completely ousted governments. Scandinavia, parts of Russia and Africa. Sulawesi and Papua.”

“Sulawesi? Where Makassar is?”

“Yes. Indonesia is one of several countries where the rise of magic has turned old fractures into fresh breaks. Sulawesi and Papua have both declared independence with Cabal support. Military crackdowns failed miserably as the government’s Network allies were too busy with their own factional conflicts to go up against the Cabal. The Cabal, on the other hand, has been getting stronger very quickly. So many of our members had stalled in power because of Earth’s low magic. Now that magic has risen, it’s like a drought has broken. Our people are growing stronger and stepping into the light.”

“Will I even recognise Earth when I go back?”

“It will have changed,” Boris said. “But will you have changed any less?”

“I suppose not.”

They sat in silence for a time, looking out over the water.

“We are going to do this, right?” Boris asked. “Clear off my brand?”

“I still have doubts,” Jason said. “When you first showed up, you said that Vesta Carmis Zell was your astral king and you needed to clear her brand.”

“Technically, I implied it. Quite heavily, I’ll admit. I was hoping you’d rush over and purge the brand if you thought it was hers.”

“I was a little busy.”

“It’s months later and I’m still branded, so I figured that out.”

“Lying to me didn’t help your case.”

“Oh, like you’ve never let someone make the wrong assumption for your own benefit.”

“Sure I have. And I understand why they didn’t trust me after.”

“It was a decision made poorly and in haste, I’ll admit. Far from the first, and doubtless far from the last. With age comes wisdom, but if you stop making mistakes, you’ve stopped living. New experiences are key to going through immortality without

calcifying. All I can offer in my defence is the desire to stop being a slave. A chain is a chain, even when the one holding the other end is nice enough not to yank on it.”

Jason sat quietly contemplating Boris’ words.

“I’ve been inside the souls of messengers,” Jason said. “I’ve seen the mark burned into their souls like cattle brands. I can see why you would want that gone. But what else do you want, Boris Ket Lundi? Why did you come looking for me? Why risk yourself to intervene? You said yourself that you and your people were meant to be hiding your presence from me.”

“Things have been moving beyond the scope of our original agreement with Noreth. He certainly never predicted you becoming an astral king, and these linked planets are drawing a lot of attention. The great astral beings are moving their agents much more actively around Earth and Pallimustus.”

“They are?”

“Your friend Dawn is not alone in taking an interest in these worlds, and you are a focal point of that activity. Did you know it was the prime vessel of the Keeper of the Sands who killed Mah Go Schaat to protect you?”

“No. Why would they do that?”

“I don’t know. I imagine you will, soon enough.”

“Why are they focused on me?”

“You’re a catalyst. You became an outworlder through chance, at the exact right place and time. The World-Phoenix was the first to take advantage of that and nudge you onto a certain course, but that set into motion far more than she intended. You were close enough to a confluence of events that other powerful entities followed the World-Phoenix’s course in nudging you this way and that. Knowledge. Dominion. The Reaper was quite open when he connected you with your shadow familiar, but what about the other two? A sanguine horror and an avatar of doom, both born right as you were calling for familiars? We’ve already talked about the rarity of a genuine avatar of doom, but do you know how hard it is to get something like a sanguine horror?”

Jason thought back to the Red Table cultists who attempted to sacrifice Jason and his friends to summon a sanguine horror. All the time, effort and expense they put into the endeavour, yet Jason had picked one up with an awakening stone and a half-learned ritual?

“It seems I have been quite the pawn.”

Boris laughed.

“Aren’t we all? But don’t think of it in terms of someone picking up a piece and moving it as they desire. Great astral beings work on a macro scale. Their thoughts, if you can even call them that, don’t encompass mere decades or a scope as small as a planet. That’s why their vessels are more important than many realise. They don’t just let great astral beings act on a mortal scale; they allow them to think on a mortal scale. It’s why their vessels have such a large impact on their small-scale actions.”

“And why ancient beings sometimes do things that are very stupid.”

“Sometimes. As a relatively ancient being myself, I can tell you that we don’t need help doing something stupid. But my point is that great astral beings don’t play chess with pawns and kings; they play with the butterfly effect. They reach out and gently flick the cosmos and then wait for the ripples to shape events in ways they can use. That is when they deploy their vessels and agents to handle the finer details.”

“And the World-Phoenix flicked me by giving me a token while my soul was passing through the astral.”

“Right place, right time. But the ripple of her action sent you in the direction of that confluence of events I mentioned, prompting others to move. To use you as a catalyst.”

“What confluence of events?”

“The Builder. The old Builder. The link between worlds. The Sundered Throne, if my guess is correct. Events on a scale beyond my power to influence. Trying to involve myself would be a good way to end a very long life.”

“Isn’t involving yourself exactly what you did here?”

“This? A transformation zone and an undead army? Some god of undeath doing what gods of undeath always do? No, this is my level. I’m comfortable with this level of stakes. Even if we mess it all up entirely, it wouldn’t even destroy the planet.”

“You’re comfortable with this?”

“Yes. And you should be the same, given your history, but you’re not and that’s fascinating. You bet against a god with your soul as the ante, to save what? Ten thousand brighthearts and a city that’s already destroyed? You saved the Earth. Billions, and you still need to do it again. Yet, here you are, putting it all on the line.”

“Someone will save the Earth if I fall.”

“Yes. Me, you idiot, and I won’t do a great job. And that’s compared to you, who has frankly been half-assing it this whole time.”

“You?”

“Yes, me. Who else? You think dimension-hopping gestalt entities grow on trees?”

“Well... yes.”

Boris looked at Jason, blinked a couple of times and both men burst out laughing.

“Okay,” Boris acknowledged once they settled. “That may not have been the best-made point.”

“Which has veered quite far from my original question. Why come looking for me?”

“Well, as I explained, events have become a lot more complicated than Noreth anticipated. Unsurprising, given that he never operated on a cosmic scale. We messengers do, and there was a growing number of reasons to be concerned. Not the least of which was Pallimustus suddenly becoming thick with messengers, one dimensional link away. That did not make those of us hiding from them on Earth very comfortable.”

“Wouldn’t coming here just draw their attention?”

“The greater concern was you becoming blindly antagonistic towards all messengers. The deal was to reveal ourselves when you returned to Earth under certain, specific circumstances. We realised that if you’d already been poisoned against all messengers, having a million of us appear out of nowhere and claim to be your allies wouldn’t go well. Especially given how things went with the other allies you’ve had on Earth.”

“You’re right about my lack of trust for Earth allies. And I’ll admit I have wondered if all messengers needed to be killed off.”

“But you decided that wasn’t the case. I’m assuming, based on all the messengers you’ve freed.”

“They aren’t that free. I keep boxing them all up in pocket universes.”

“That’s just a matter of logistics. I can help you unload them.”

“Whether they want anything to do with you is their choice to make,” Jason said.

“I appreciate your compassion for them. One of the reasons it was decided that I would come to Pallimustus and look into you was that you were not showing a lot of compassion by the time you left Earth. You were hurt. Angry. Reacting quickly and with definitive violence. The reasons were obvious enough. Loss. Emotional isolation from your support structure.”

“That might have been a good time for an ally who understood to step in.”

“There were those who argued we should.”

“Were you one of them?”

“No. I argued that you would regard us as untrustworthy at best and refuse to work with us. At worst, you would see us as an enemy. One too powerful to fight, prompting you to do something extreme as you have done time and again. The very reason that Noreth, Dawn and now I refuse to tell you about certain things in your future.”



“What did you do? Anything?”

“We came close to revealing ourselves not just to you but to the entire world. Trying to stop the race for reality cores. In the end, it was decided that the results would have been too unpredictable. We did put a stop to core chasing within the parts of the Cabal we controlled at the time. Unfortunately, that came at a point where the vampires had seized a lot of power within the Cabal. Their overt actions had diminished our quiet influence and it took time to properly re-establish that and excise the troublemakers.”

“I understand that,” Jason said. “I’ve made a lot of bold moves and watched others suffer the consequences. There’s wisdom in moderation, but moderation never seems to be an option for me. Or maybe it is and I keep making the wrong choices.”

“When facing extreme circumstances,” Boris said, “there is often little choice but extreme actions. And extreme circumstances find you with some regularity. Or do you find them?”

“A bit of both. I imagine that you, of all people, are familiar with destiny magic.”

“I had wondered if that was in play. It certainly explains a lot.”

Boris let out a sigh.

“Asano, I will confess a hesitance in sharing the part I and my people played during events on Earth. In revealing our inaction. I feared it would anger you.”

“I’ve learned to let go of my anger over that time. I hope. I don’t think I’ll know for certain until I go back to Earth.”

Boris nodded.

“I am glad that you found your way to feeling compassion for my kind. When I arrived on Pallimustus and discovered that you’d started liberating messengers from Vesta Carmis Zell, that’s when I decided to help you. I got a lot more than I bargained for in that deal, but I think it’s worth it. You and I are going to know each other for a span of time you’re too young to even comprehend.”

“Then you *really* shouldn’t have lied to me.”

“It wasn’t, strictly speaking, a…”

Boris saw Jason looking at him from under raised eyebrows.

“No,” he said. “I shouldn’t have lied to you.”

## Chapter 833

### Binaries

Boris was human-sized and without his wings, but Jason couldn't help but notice the messenger was still a lot taller. They were still on the beach, Jason in a floral shirt and tan shorts. Boris was wearing what Jason could only describe as a blouse with only two buttons at the bottom done up. Like his hair, it was being gently tousled by a sea breeze that wasn't enough to cut through the scorching heat of the day. Jason looked down at Boris' legs.

"Are you wearing pantaloons?" Jason asked.

"I'm not going to take fashion criticism from someone dressed like a Japanese tourist in an American movie. From the eighties."

"Better that than the cover of some bargain-bin bodice-ripper. You look like you washed up from a pirate ship and have zero interest in consent."

"Are we going to do this or what?"

"Well, we were. The problem is that I'm starting to feel like the plantation owner's busty-yet-naïve daughter."

"I thought the problem was you suspected me of being a soul-engineered trap."

"What? Oh, yep. That's the problem. I didn't forget."

Boris shook his head and Jason raised a hand, one finger primed to flick.

"Really?" Boris asked. "You don't have a more mature way to—"

Jason flicked him on the forehead.

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Jason and Boris stood facing each other, barefoot in the sand. Jason looked around Boris' soul space. It was a blank, unnaturally flat desert that stretched out to the horizon. There were no rocks, no dunes, no clouds in the azure sky. Just a flat expanse of sand and a sun with its merciless heat.

"This is quite a soul space you've got here," Jason said.

"An astral king first helped me form this space before your planet existed. I've had a lot of time to work on it."

"And this is the foyer. All your secrets, far off where no one can see them."

"We both know that you could find them with little effort. This is my space, but I don't have the tools you do."

“I’m not going to go rummaging,” Jason said. “I only came in here because there’s no other way to clear the brand off your soul. Taking advantage of that would be a violation of the highest order.”

“I could show you around a little. That might help you trust me more.”

“You just told me how long you’ve had to work on this place. Are you telling me that in all that time, you couldn’t have sculpted up a reassuring and thoroughly deceitful playground to lead someone through? A theme park where the theme is you not being an evil scheming prick?”

Boris laughed.

“I could have done that, yes. In fact, I might get started on it as soon as we’re done here.”

“Put in a bouncy castle. Bouncy castles are awesome.”

“If you aren’t going to go poking around, I should lead you to the brand. It’s located in the traditional throne room.”

Jason lightly tapped his foot and sand rippled out from it like pond water after a rock was dropped into it.

“That get it done?” Jason ask.

Boris tilted his head as if listening for something.

“Yes,” he said, surprise in his voice. “I do believe that is enough that I can take it from here.”

“Good. I’m leaving before any more of your sketchy pirate friends show up.”

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Jason and Arabelle stood in the middle of a residential street in Jason’s replica town. There was no traffic, although there were parked cars. They were looking at a particular house.

“So, this is where you grew up,” Arabelle said.

“Yeah. My sister and her family own it now. I think. Their living situation got a bit complicated there for a while, as did society as a whole. Looking back, I hit Earth a bit like a bomb.”

“You blame yourself?”

“For what happened on Earth? Absolutely not. My arrival may have changed the exact outcomes, but things were going pear-shaped long before I turned up. With or without me, magic was going to go public sooner rather than later. The Builder’s shonky door was waiting for an outworlder to claim it hundreds of years before I was born.”

“I was more thinking on a personal level.”

“If I hadn’t returned, my family wouldn’t have had a normal life because no one would have. Things would have played out a little differently, but the existence of magic was coming out. There was no stopping it and that was just the beginning. It could have turned out fine or gone full zombie movie, I don’t know. Earth isn’t made for regular people anymore, and my showing up or not couldn’t change that. But I made my family not regular people anymore, and I left them as safe and well-off as I was able.”

“But you have regrets?”

“I don’t think there’s such thing as a life without regrets. I wasn’t equipped mentally for what Earth had waiting for me, but I did the best I could with what I had. There’s no shame in doing your best, even when it doesn’t work out.”

Arabelle gave him a side glance and he chuckled.

“I know,” he said. “Normally, after one of these crazy fights, I’m laid up for months and more than a little broody.”

“This was more than a crazy fight, Jason. You risked not just your life but your soul and your very identity. I saw your soul being corrupted and broken down.”

Jason nodded and started walking down the street, Arabelle following.

“It wasn’t actual damage,” Jason said. “Well, it was a bit, but not as much as you’d think. My soul is used to being knocked around from the inside and what you saw wasn’t actually happening. It was a metaphor for control; a board game playing out as my will clashed with the echo of Undeath’s.”

“How does that even work? How does willpower have an echo?”

“Gods,” Jason said and he clapped his hands together. “When I do that, it makes a sound. Something you and I can do because we’re physical in nature. A god is spiritual in nature, and exhaustively powerful.”

Jason clapped again, this time doing so with all of his silver-rank strength to cause a loud crack of noise.

“How loud could a diamond-ranker clap?” he asked. “Could they knock over these houses with the sheer force of it? A god is far more powerful than even a diamond-ranker, so when they spiritually clap, it has power. Power enough to give the avatar something that mimics a will of its own. More power than I can handle as a mortal man. I have one foot in the spiritual realm, which is what allowed me to fight at all, but a god is a god.”

“And in your soul realm, you are the closest thing there is to a god.”

“Yes. But I had to let myself become more god-like in order to act like one. Once I did, the remnant of Undeath’s will was a paltry thing, but I had to put both feet on the spiritual side to get there. Coming back wasn’t easy.”

"I find it hard to imagine going through that didn't leave some kind of trauma."

"I was surprised as well. I've been waiting for the backlash to come, but it's been just the opposite."

"Oh?"

"I'm changing. We've talked about my fear of what I end up becoming, but I just got a really good look."

"You're going to turn into some god-thing with no identity?"

"No, thankfully. That was me fumbling around with power I didn't understand. Again. But the experience gave me insight into the spiritual power that's been growing inside me. The aspects of myself that are shedding mortality."

He glanced at Arabelle walking beside him.

"Most importantly," he continued, "the experience has helped me accept the parts of myself I've been holding at arm's length out of fear. I never explored the limits of my spiritual power because I was afraid of what I would become."

"But dealing with the avatar of Undeath forced your hand."

"Yes. A lack of understanding meant that my approach was more dangerous than it had to be because I was learning how under the worst circumstances. The exact situation Humphrey told me off for forcing all of you into, as it happens."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Like I made the latest in a long series of stuff-ups. To be honest, I think Hump beat you to the punch in making me realise how I was sabotaging myself and the people that matter the most to me."

"What did you learn?"

"That I have to not just talk about trust but actually be trusting. The price of a mistake always seems so obvious in hindsight."

"I'm afraid that we've gone beyond the scope of my knowledge regarding mental health," Arabelle said. "What you're describing, what does it mean from a practical perspective? What's changed?"

"I've been exploring that over the last few weeks. As a gestalt being, my body has been both physical and spiritual for several years. Now, my mind is as well and I've been delving into the spiritual parts of myself. If I'd been willing to do that when it was safer, I wouldn't have had to take such risks. If I had to fight that battle of wills again now, I wouldn't need to carve parts of myself away. I've stopped segregating my mind into the parts I accept and the parts I'm afraid of. I've stopped pretending it's a binary and accepted that I'm going to change."

They drew close to the beach and Jason led them off the road. He pushed the branches of a bush out of the way and took them onto a trail that ran alongside a small creek. It was Australian bushland; eucalyptus trees with their heavy scent and bushes sporting sharp prickles as often as leaves. Long grass crowded the trail on both sides and Arabelle felt some brush her leg. She stopped to inspect her pants and found a neat, straight slice in them.

“Cutting grass,” Jason said as she stopped to examine her pants. “Likes to make unpleasant cuts. Paper cuts, basically. You’re gold-rank, so you don’t have to worry.”

“My pants do. What does this cutting grass look like?”

“The rest of the grass. Welcome to Australia. Well, fake Australia.”

Arabelle watched as Jason crossed the creek by stepping on a sequence of unstable-looking rocks. Arabelle simply jumped across; a laughable task for her gold-rank physical prowess. Just as easy for Jason, but he’d chosen to hop across the rocks like a normal person. He did so with a confidence that came not from prowess but practise.

“Where are you taking us?” Arabelle asked. “Or is this just a tour of your childhood haunts?”

“This creek runs out of a duck pond,” Jason said. “I wanted to see if the ducks were there.”

“You already know the answer to that.”

Jason nodded but kept walking. There were no ordinary animals in the transformation zone. They reached a clearing and the promised pond. There wasn’t much to it but Arabelle could see why it would be a treasure to children. Hidden away in the bush, an escape from parents, even if that was an illusion. Those same parents would remember the way from their own childhoods, just as Jason had led them here now.

Arabelle watched Jason as he stood, staring at the small pond and the lack of ducks. She waited, giving him as much time to think as he wanted. He took a lot of it. There was an eerie quiet without animals or insects. A breeze occasionally rustled eucalyptus leaves.

“I remember it being bigger,” he said, finally breaking the silence. “Nothing stays the way it was, does it? Even if a place doesn’t change, it does to us because we do. Something that used to be so familiar feels the same, but also different enough to be uncanny. Like finding an old shirt that you loved growing up, one you wore until it had holes and then you kept wearing it anyway. But now it’s too small, like it belongs to someone else. Someone you used to be but aren’t anymore.”

Arabelle stayed quiet. She recognised that he wasn’t really talking to her.

“I’m going to change,” he said, repeating his earlier words. “I’m going to trust myself that the changes will be for the better, and not cost me everything that I am. I didn’t trust myself or my friends during the avatar fight. Not until I had to. If I’d had the courage to stop hiding from the inevitable, it wouldn’t have been so dangerous.”

He turned and smiled at Arabelle.

“Let’s go,” he said and led them to another path Arabelle had not noticed before Jason pushed aside a bush.

“I’ve been talking about my mistakes and my feelings,” Jason said. “We’ve covered that ground so often over the years that I already know how to move forward. There are other things that need my focus right now.”

“Such as?”

“The transformation zone. I can feel it, stronger than ever now.”

“Because you’ve claimed half of it?”

“That’s part of it. I’ve gained a fairly good sense of it and it’s different to the transformation zones I encountered on Earth.”

“More powerful?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t matter. The issue is that it’s more complex. On Earth, the zones were straightforward dimension patches; scabs grown over wounds in the universe. This transformation zone has been stuffed with extreme influences. Divine power; a warped natural array; a half-formed soul forge. Even me. I didn’t have my astral gate and astral throne back on Earth, and they have definitely influenced the zone.”

Arabelle turned her head but the mountain shaped like Jason’s head was obscured by the trees around them.

“We’ve noticed,” she said dryly.

“All those factors are like infections trapped under the scab, making the healing process harder. It also means that claiming a quarter of the zone all at once hit me like a train. Not as bad as losing territories — nothing got ripped out of my soul — but that many territories all at once? It hit me harder than losing a much smaller territory did.”

“Did you learn anything helpful from your connection to the transformation zone? Something we can use?”

“Yeah. I have a stronger sense of the territory than I did for the transformation zones on Earth, at least before I claimed them fully. I can feel the natural array. The soul forge. I think I’ve even figured out what the messengers kept getting wrong. Why their attempts to turn the natural array into a soul forge didn’t work.”

“Which is?”

“Better discussed with Clive and Farrah, frankly. The short version is that they kept looking at the natural array and its power as a single thing when they’re actually two. Connected but not combined. The natural array and its power are binary, like the body and soul of a human.”

“Body and soul,” Arabelle said. “Not an accidental comparison I take it.”

“No,” Jason said. “It’s like the messengers were blinded by their gestalt nature. They thought of the soul forge as something belonging to astral kings and, by extension, messengers as a whole. It was theirs, not just *for* them but *of* them. That led them to applying messenger sensibilities and treating the two aspects of the array as a gestalt.”

“Their gestalt nature is one of the cornerstones of the messenger sense of superiority,” Arabelle said. “So, when they look at something they associate with themselves, they don’t think in binaries. It’s a blind spot for them.”

“Exactly,” Jason said. “What they needed was the power, but they kept corrupting it by trying to incorporate the physical array. I think the messengers gave us a device they thought would extract the soul forge, but they were wrong. It’s a good thing we used it for something else.”

“Does this mean you can take the soul forge if we manage to claim this entire zone?”

“I believe so. I have a better idea of what the soul forge is now. Only the very basics, but learning to use my astral throne and astral gate have helped. And there was Dawn saying I should leave them alone.”

“You didn’t listen to her at all, did you?”

“I did, but you know how it is. If you need a sword but the only one available has spikes on the handle, you still grab it. Saving a life is more important than a bloody hand.”

“You and I have discussed your propensity for self-sacrifice, Jason. Be wary of overlooking alternatives and jumping directly into self-destructive behaviour.”

“I know,” Jason said in the tone of a child promising to make his bed.

“What other insights have you gleaned?”

“My improved understanding of my spiritual side and the soul forge have given me a better idea of what happens next. When I’m reforming the transformation zone and reintegrating it with normal reality, I’ll separate the natural array and the soul forge that are corrupting one another, then claim the soul forge for myself. That will trigger my transfiguration into a full astral king. I’ll begin the process of becoming a half-transcendent.”

“A peak diamond-ranker?”



“No. That’s the other half of half transcendent. Transcending requires two things: transcending mortal power and transcending mortal nature. Peak diamond-rank is about becoming so powerful that mortality itself can barely hold onto you. That’s the half that most people achieve first, often never managing the other half.”

“But you just had to be different.”

“I guess it’s kind of my thing. I still have to get to peak diamond the long way. The part most people have trouble with is truly stepping over the line between mortal and immortal. To transcend mortality itself. That’s not something you can do just by growing your power.”

“And you’ll do that by becoming an astral king.”

“Astral king or nearest offer. I won’t be the first to turn into an astral king the hard way, and those that do are all a bit odd, apparently. I guess regular folk don’t end up at this stage. But becoming an astral king isn’t the only way to shrug off mortality.”

“Didn’t Dawn go off to become a transcendent?”

“Yes, but I have no idea how.”

“She didn’t tell you?”

“I didn’t ask. The fact that she was leaving always seemed more important than why.”

Arabelle smiled to herself. Jason led them out of a bush and onto the side of a road. It was somewhere on the outskirts of the town with houses more spread out. She looked back and would have had trouble finding the path again.

They started walking down the middle of the road, which felt hot and soft. Arabelle’s foot sank slightly into it at one point, a patch of road having melted underfoot. Jason turned to see why she had stopped and he broke into a broad smile.

“Cheap surfacing materials,” he said happily. “Gets melty on hot summer days. I always loved that.”

Arabelle shook her head and they kept going.

“What are the practical aspects of becoming an astral king?” she asked.

“It means consolidating my soul realm into an actual pocket universe. Something floating out in the astral that people could go and visit in a dimension ship. It will arguably become a dimension ship itself.”

“That you can return to Earth in?”

“Yeah. Probably my cloud vessel too, given its connection to me. I can’t steer it, though. Clive and I have been looking at dimensional navigation and we can’t get our heads around it. Boris said he’ll give me the magic I need to ride the link between worlds,

no navigation necessary. Of course, Clive and I will check it as thoroughly as we can before ever using it.”

“You’re going to turn into an astral king. How long will that take?”

“Years.”

“And you’ll have to stay inside your soul realm the whole time?”

“More than that. I have to become my soul realm. A body-spirit gestalt is like a seed. Very close to literally, for messengers. When I become an astral king, that seed will germinate and become a universe.”

“If your body becomes a universe, won’t you be stuck floating through the astral?”

“Once the process is complete, I’ll create an avatar. A prime avatar that embodies everything about me. They’re normally peak diamond, with a goodly chunk of extra spirit power behind them, but mine will be stuck at my rank. You can only have one at a time, even when you’re a full-strength astral king, but it lets astral kings operate in physical reality. They generate less authority than gods or great astral beings but, through their prime avatars, have a freedom to act in physical reality that other zenith astral entities can’t match. Astral kings maintain that physical aspect that gods and great astral beings never had.”

“Doesn’t that mean that the astral kings could send their ludicrously powerful avatars here?”

“That’s what I was wondering. Theoretically, yes. In practice, there’s a lot of political wrangling with local gods. The disadvantage of maintaining a physical and spiritual existence is that you’re subject to the rules and limitations of both. Gods won’t let astral kings invading their world send powerful avatars, and astral kings don’t ask. Replacing a prime avatar is, by all accounts, no small thing.”

“That’s a lot to take in.”

“I know, right? I’m going to turn into a universe. And I’m going to be so obnoxious about it, too. I’ll talk about it more than if I became a vegan; I’ll be completely intolerable.”

Arabelle sighed.

“It’s good that you know what is coming for you,” she said. “Better that you seem at peace with it. But do any of these new insights help us with claiming the rest of the transformation zone?”

“Yeah, actually. Clive had a hypothesis that I can now confirm and we’ve been discussing how to make use of it. Right now, Gary is hard carrying us in claiming territories, but we don’t know what’s waiting for us at the end. Clive, Farrah and I have been cooking up something to give us an extra bit of punch when...”

He trailed off and they both moved to the side of the road. They watched as a bright yellow car moved erratically down the street. Inside it was a messenger, shrunken down to human size but with white fire blazing in her eyes. They watched her unsteady progress, her expression of distracted determination not even glancing their way.

“Uh...” Jason said at an uncharacteristic loss for words. “Did I just see a messenger driving Mrs Berrigan’s ‘73 Holden Torana?”

## Chapter 834

### When We Worry the Most

“I’m sorry,” Jali Corrik Fen said as she walked alongside Jason in the mountain fortress. The corridors of black stone and red metal were high and wide enough to drive a freight truck through them. It was more than sufficient for the messenger to walk beside Jason without shrinking herself or dismissing her wings.

“What are you sorry for?” Jason asked.

“The messengers you’ve liberated aren’t getting the indoctrination they normally would.”

“I seriously hope you’re not apologising for not brainwashing children.”

“No,” Jali said, her face flushing red. “It’s just that we haven’t replaced it with anything. The messengers are being left to their own devices and some of them are... going a bit odd.”

Jason laughed.

“There’s nothing wrong with a bit odd.”

“Um, alright. There’s nothing wrong with a little structure, either. At some point, we have to find a place for them, and I don’t think either of us want them in the hands of your Adventure Society.”

Jason’s mirth quickly shifted to a frown.

“That’s a fair point,” he said. “Do you have a suggestion?”

“The obvious choice is Boris Ket Lundi, but I don’t think you want to just hand them off to the Unorthodoxy, either.”

“While he’s in dire need of a trip to HR, Boris seems a likeable sort. But I don’t want to push these messengers into a conflict they don’t even know about. Their origins may be less than ideal, but at least they were born outside of your kind’s civil war.”

“A war most of us didn’t realise was taking place,” Jali said. “If the messengers as a whole learned how many Unorthodoxy are out there, it would fracture our society.”

“It needs fracturing,” Jason said.

“Not like this. If information that wildly contradicts the narrative we’ve been taught managed to spread, the astral kings would stage an unprecedented cull. They’d burn half our species to excise the rot. And the half that is left would be the ones that kept the faith. The ones like Tera Jun Casta who would fight any attempt to liberate them.”

Jason nodded.

“There has to be a better way to shift messenger society than that,” he said. “That isn’t our fight though; that’s for Boris and the people behind him. You and I have to deal with these child messengers, and turning them into child soldiers isn’t the way. That being said, I don’t see how we have an alternative to sending them off with Boris. My soul realm is going to be closed for business soon.”

“We will be in this transformation zone for some time yet. Enough to give them some manner of education about the worlds beyond this place.”

“What kind of education are you thinking about?”

“My thoughts on this are inexperienced and rather basic. But I have heard both Rufus Remore and his father Gabriel mention that their family runs a school.”

Jason burst out laughing, to Jali’s confusion.

“I don’t see the humour.”

“You don’t need to. It’s a good idea, provided you can get the messengers to accept tutelage from a pair of humans. And, despite my reservations, I think Boris should be in the mix. There are aspects of being a messenger that humans can’t teach them. I want you to be part of that as well, but I want them to learn about being a free messenger. That’s new to you as well.”

“Some of the messengers will be more accepting than others. The ones freed directly by you and your closest companions never saw battle. They were never used as weapons. Many of the others were, by both your allies and your enemies. Those will be less open.”

Jason nodded.

“All we can do is the best we can with what we’ve got. After the meeting clears out, I’ll have Boris, Rufus and Gabriel stay behind. There’s something critical you’ll need to know before that, though.”

“Which is?”

“Have you ever heard of drinking games?”

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Clive stood at the head of the conference table. Jason’s throne-like leather chair had been moved and the window looking onto the lava waterfall had been turned a smoky opaque. An illusionary map of the transformation zone floated in the air like a hologram. Sitting around the table were the leaders and important members of the alliance between adventurers, brighthearts, cultists and messengers.

“Scattered amongst the territories of the transformation zone,” Clive said, “are those with environmental extremes that can be controlled. The control centres are well hidden and take time to learn to use, but it can be done. One of the key indicators separating the

controllable environments from those that are ordinarily dangerous is an aspect of artificiality.”

Clive waved his hand and the map was replaced with three images floating in place, as if seen through a trio of round windows. One showed lighting striking an iron tower. Another had lava passing through a series of sluice gates in what looked like a subterranean complex made of red brick. The third showed pipes rising out of a swamp to spray scalding water.

“I believe that most of us have encountered these territories, and most of them are now under our control.”

“But do they do us any good?” Gabriel asked. “We’ve cleared out those territories in the process of claiming them.”

“As they are, no,” Clive said. “As you said, those territories have been cleared and claimed, so they’re under our control now, but we can’t just dig up their infrastructure and move it around. But ever since I learned that there were as many of them as there are, I started wondering about their purpose. I’ve developed a hypothesis and, if I’m right, they represent an asset that could be as useful to us as our resident demigod.”

“How confident are you about this? Arabelle asked.

“In the wake of his recent unusual and extreme experience, Jason believes my hypothesis to be accurate.”

“You’re going to have to narrow down ‘unusual and extreme experience’ for us,” Neil called out. “For us they’re unusual. For him, they’re something to spice up his week.”

“I concur with the girthy elf,” said Beaufort, leader of the Builder cultists. “There is no shortage of strange events centred on Asano, even in the short time I have known him.”

“I am not girthy.”

Clive continued, ignoring them both.

“While fighting the remnants of the avatar,” he said, “Jason entered a spiritual state where he gained several insights. Most were personal in nature, but he also obtained a better understanding of the transformation zone. More than half of it is connected to him now, after all.”

“What is this hypothesis you mentioned?” Boris asked. “Assuming that you are willing to share. And, while I mean no offence to Asano, have you tested this hypothesis beyond ‘Jason thinks he figured it out while he was fighting a god?’”

“Exploring my hypothesis is the next step,” Clive said. “It won’t be a small undertaking, which is the reason for this meeting. When we needed everyone clearing territories and it was little more than postulation on my part, exploring this was logistically

infeasible. Now there is a level of confirmation from Jason and our silver-rankers are sitting around with little to do. We also have the magic researchers who managed to survive the early days of the transformation zone. The Operations Commander has given me permission to use them.”

“Use them how?” asked Lorenn, leader of the brighthearts. “And do you intend to use my people?”

“No,” Jason said. “The adventurers and magic researchers should be sufficient to our needs. If it proves sufficiently safe and useful that bringing your people in makes sense, we’ll make that request at that time. You won’t be pushed into anything.”

“The actual work involves setting up some laboriously large rituals around the control centres,” Clive explained. “All in spaces that have been cleared, so I anticipate little danger. The idea is to have the silver-rankers working on that while the gold-rankers continue expanding our territory. We’ll be taking precautions, obviously. Assuming there will be no threat is the best way to be blindsided by one. The only threats we anticipate are messengers or Undeath priests who either escaped the battle or haven’t encountered anyone else yet. It’s likely at least some people are still roaming around.”

“You still haven’t explained what you think these special territories are,” Arabelle pointed out. “Or how you think we can use them.”

“Jason affected this transformation zone from the beginning,” Clive said. “You only have to look at where we are for that to be obvious. While his influence was unmistakable in his initial territory, I also believe that his influence extended throughout the zone. The effects here were more overt because this is where he arrived. Outside of that first territory, his influence was significantly lessened. That’s why the rest of the transformation zone isn’t as... personality-filled as this area.”

“Shouldn’t you have known that you’d influenced everything already?” Belinda asked. “How did you miss having rewritten a pocket universe larger than most countries?”

“I haven’t rewritten whole sections of reality very often,” Jason said. “It was only my third time. What I did manage was effectively unconscious expression. I wasn’t actively trying to replicate my hometown or create a mountain in the shape of my head. It just worked out that way because I’m awesome.”

“Jason subconsciously created a home base from which to expand his territory,” Clive said. “While the results are... quite specific, it does meet our needs. It has the infrastructure and supplies to be a staging ground from which to take over the transformation zone. The space simply took a form that Jason subconsciously equates with doing that.”

“You’re saying that in Jason’s mind,” Gabriel said, “infrastructure and supplies means a mountain shaped like his head?”

“Our ultimate objective,” Farrah said, “is to seize control of this transformation zone. We’re in an isolated world that Jason knew he would need to take over. And I can promise you that, in Jason’s mind, a volcano lair in the shape of your head is exactly how you start your plan to take over the world. The only thing missing is a…”

She trailed off as her eyes went wide. She turned to look at Clive.

“No,” she said.

Clive let out the sigh of a man fresh from a losing battle.

“I’m afraid so,” he told her.

Jason sat back in his chair with a grin so wide it looked like he was propping his mouth open with raw smugness.

“I don’t suppose you’d like to share with the group?” Arabelle suggested.

“To be clear,” Clive said, his expression screaming reluctance, “what we’re talking about is an integrated array on a geographic scope, with the power to manipulate the environment on a macro scale.”

“Yeah,” Sophie muttered. “That cleared it right up.”

“He means a weather machine!” Jason said as he shook his fist in triumph.

“I do not mean a weather machine,” Clive said. “calling it that is not an accurate representation of the underlying—”

“WEATHER MACHINE!” Jason yelled joyously over him.

A fluffy white cat leapt into Jason’s lap and he started petting it. The cat had a bushy moustache.

Clive sighed again.

“Let me explain where all of these environmental control territories came from,” he said, eager to change the subject. “The transformation zone includes all the elements of the area in physical reality it overtook.”

“That area being the home of my people,” Lorenn said.

“Yes,” Clive said. “We are anticipating a large part of the unclaimed areas of the transformation zone to be tainted by undeath energy, given how much of the brightheart city was affected. Many of our groups encountered such zones.”

“We’ve scouted the territory Jason took from the avatar when it was finally destroyed,” Miriam said. “Much of it was infested with undeath energy and we’re expecting to see more territories like that.”



“I believe I can do something about that when I reintegrate the transformation zone with reality,” Jason said. “I don’t want to rebuild the brightheart home and leave a massive pit of undeath energy sitting in the middle.”

“What will our home look like when all of this is done?” Lorenn asked.

“Come find me later today and we can discuss it more privately,” Jason said. “While we have everyone together, we should focus on broader concerns.”

“Thank you,” Clive said. “Things brought in from the outside are changed by the zone but their core nature remains. The corrupted soul forge tree, for example, is now the towering thing visible from all the other zones. I suspect we’ll see a lot of elemental-messenger-shaped living anomalies when we confront it.”

“You’re suggesting that these territories where the environment can be controlled were brought in from the outside,” Farrah said.

“Yes,” Clive confirmed.

“You mean the natural array,” Farrah said.

“Yes,” Clive said with a nod. “We believe that the natural array was transformed into the scattered environmental control nodes we’ve been discussing.”

“We also believe that they’re connected,” Jason said. “Just like the array from which they were derived. I learned to connect with things more spiritually while facing the avatar, and I could feel the ones in the territory I’ve claimed.”

“Our current hypothesis,” Clive said, “is that the segmentation of the transformation zone meant that the individual territories were cut off from one another. The links weren’t entirely severed, however, which is what Jason was able to sense. But just uniting the territories they’re in hadn’t been re-establishing their link. That’s what we’re looking to do.”

“The idea,” Jason said, “is to pull all these environmental control nodes into one territory and repair the connections. That will turn the whole thing into a single, zone-spanning array. We have to claim all the zones anyway, so what we’re proposing is that we unify the special ones we’ve already got. Then we add the rest as they get claimed. Even if we can’t use the array until every node is integrated, having extra power for the final push on the tree will be of extreme tactical value.”

“What that looks like from a practical perspective,” Clive said, “is a lot of very large rituals being set up all across the transformation zone. We’ll start by trying to link one pair to see if we’ve gotten this all completely wrong. If that’s the case, we let it go and proceed as we have been. If we’re right, or the results suggest there’s value in further testing, we’ll go from there. If we reach the point of full implementation, that’s where our idle silver-

rankers come in. We'll work on the control nodes we have access to now and cover the rest as we claim the zones they're in."

"Do we need all of them?" Neil asked.

"I don't know," Clive said. "It seems likely if they are based on the natural array."

"The avatar destroy the control centre in the lightning field," Neil pointed out. "If we need every one of these areas to be connected, doesn't that mean we've failed before we begin?"

"That's something we'll need to figure out," Jason said. "I have considered that point, and I have a plan. You don't have to worry."

"I hate to break it to you, Jason," Belinda said, "but you having a plan is when we worry the most."

## Chapter 835

### Paranoid

Lightning struck so fast that the last peal of thunder was still rumbling when the next one set the sky to shuddering. Adventurers took shelter under the forest of iron towers jutting from the blasted landscape. Most were silver-rankers, but a small number of golds worked to shield the others from the lightning as they worked. They were clearing rubble that had been a mesa until Undeath's avatar destroyed it.

The adventurers hauled away fragments of shattered rock while also extracting certain parts. The remains of the lightning catchment array that had once topped the mesa were being delivered to Jason, along with a small supply of the rubble. The catchment array was comprised mostly of magical iron, now broken and twisted apart.

Jason fed the remains of the array into his cloud flask, along with chunks of rubble. This involved poking the tiny mouth of the flask with large bits of metal and rock which were drawn inside. Dimensional compression visibly warped the chunks so they could be absorbed, looking like they were sucked in by a cartoon vacuum cleaner.

Miriam Vance watched this from under another giant lightning rod, her expression troubled. She was recovering her mana after a shift shielding silver-rankers, the lighting tough for even a gold-ranker to handle for long. Arabelle Remore moved next to her, likewise recovering her mana.

"Tactical Commander," she said by way of greeting.

"Mrs Remore."

Arabelle looked at Miriam's expression and then followed her gaze to Jason. She then activated a privacy screen that cut out the sound of thunder. They stood side by side, watching Jason work.

"Something about our Operations Commander has you troubled," Arabelle observed.

"I can't help but wonder what he's not telling me."

"As a keeper of most of Jason Asano's secrets, I can assure you that there are many things he's not telling you. I don't believe you need to be concerned about that, but I can see how you would feel differently as the one being kept in the dark. Jason has told me that I should share some things with you if I feel it is appropriate. If you can tell me what troubles you specifically, then perhaps I can alleviate your worries, if only a little."

"I still don't understand what happened with the avatar."

"I'm not sure that any of us do. Perhaps not even Jason himself, fully. That conflict took place in the realm of gods and we are but mortals. Even Jason, for now."

“For now?”

“You know the company he keeps, allies and enemies. You’ve heard the stories, even seen it for yourself, sometimes. Gods, great astral beings. The astral kings don’t care about any of us as individuals, but his name they know. Their messengers hate him with a fervour I can only describe as religious.”

“But it’s more than that, isn’t it? ‘Mortal for now’ isn’t a phrase to be used lightly.”

“No,” Arabelle agreed. “It’s not. Astral kings are not mortals. And if we succeed here, Jason will be one of them. While I believe that is meant to be a secret, Jason has proven unreliable at keeping them, at least those about himself.”

“Jason’s imminent ascension to the ranks of our most grave enemies does not ease my mind. I’ve been fighting messengers since they first arrived at Yaresh. Long before the Adventure Society staged an organised attack, I was standing beside the Holy Knowledge Army, who were ready and waiting. All anyone talks about is the adventurers fighting, but when the adventurers were fighting the monster surge, it was a scant few of us and some barely-trained holy legions that held the messengers back. Kept them contained in their strongholds. Lady Allayeth, my team and barely a handful of other brave souls.”

“You fought with Knowledge’s forces?”

“You’d barely know they existed for all anyone speaks of them now. But they were the ones who held the line. They were the ones who took most of the losses. You know the goddess has been training them for more than a decade? There’s no point sending any soldier less than silver-rank at a messenger. I can’t even fathom how much money the church must have spent on monster cores. And these soldiers didn’t even know what fight they were preparing for. And in the meanwhile, the god of War was pressuring them for overstepping their bounds.”

“You hate the messengers.”

“You’ve seen what they’ve left of my home. And now Asano is going to be one of their kings?”

“The astral kings are not as monolithic as we thought.”

“So says the messenger our Operations Commander gets along with oh so well. And he’s hardly the first, is he? It wasn’t long before this expedition that he was hiding from the Adventure Society for stashing away messengers. Protecting enemy prisoners.”

“You would have killed them.”

“Not before extracting every scrap of information we could wring from their bodies.”

“Which is why he protected them.”

“I tried, Mrs Remore. Lady Allayeth told me that Asano could be trusted and I tried, I truly did. We get along, and we work together well. I’ve come to like him; rely on him even. But everything I see points to an agenda that’s a mystery at best. At worst, it intersects with that of the enemy. We went underground to protect my city, but he came for the same things the messengers want. A soul forge, whatever that is. And with it, he’ll become one of them.”

“You have a lot more problems with our commander than just his fight with the avatar, I see.”

“Maybe if I could understand. I’ve asked Asano about this several times and the more I try to get to the facts, the more he answers in riddles and metaphors.”

“I believe that is all he has to give. I’ve discussed this with him at length, now, and I have also had my fill of metaphors. Which he tells me, with a frustrating unhelpfulness, is the entire point. And I was there, so I believe him. I stood in a place where imagination and reality were one and the same. I witnessed that fight, as much as anyone can have been said to, but all I can tell you is what I already have done. We are mortals and it was a battle of gods. Jason almost lost himself to fight it.”

“That may be the crux of what troubles me. That nonsense about coming back from some false god state by... I still don’t understand. Something about a children’s toy. How can such a monumental thing be so frivolous? So childish? So inconsequential?”

“I will accept frivolous and childish as valid, Tactical Commander, but not inconsequential. That was extremely important.”

“How?”

“Jason Asano is not a stable man. By the time I met him, he had already been through several profoundly traumatic experiences. He’d acquitted himself well, but no one goes through such things undamaged. It’s why they call in people like me, and this was a man who saved my son’s life.”

“I never saw Jason as he was at the very beginning. His world is safer than ours and he had to adapt quickly. He was thrown into events he didn’t understand from the very first moment. No power, no training and he still managed to save my son. I will always owe him for that, so I will do anything in my power to help him.”

“Even if he turns against us.”

“This is why what happened with the avatar is not as inconsequential as you think. The adventuring life changes us all, and his experience was exciting more than most. I saw the early stages of his transformation from a fundamentally ridiculous young man into

a very dangerous one. Not just to his enemies but to everyone; to himself most of all. You know that he left our world for a time and returned?”

“Yes.”

“That was when he suffered the worst of it. When most of those he could rely on were out of reach, myself included. Those he should have been able to rely on were unable to accept what he’d been forced to become, to survive our world and to save his.”

“He saved his world?”

“Yes. And as with the avatar, he almost lost himself to do so. When he came back, he was fractured. A maelstrom of rage, barely contained by the plastered-on façade of a man he used to be. None of us were sure he would ever be made whole, but I dedicated the last year to that goal. I’ve done other work over that period, but Jason has been my central project.”

“You aren’t painting a hopeful picture for me, Mrs Remore. You’re describing someone not just unstable but so unstable that he shouldn’t be in charge of a market stall, let alone this expedition.”

“Is that what you’ve experienced working with him?”

“No,” Miriam admitted. “He’s been unconventional, but that has been what we needed. I don’t think a conventional approach would have kept us alive this far. But he’s led us beyond the edges of any map I’ve ever heard of.”

“See?” Arabelle asked. “Sometimes a metaphor is the best explanation you have to give.”

Miriam grunted her reluctant acceptance of the point.

“What happened with the avatar mattered,” Arabelle continued. “The thing that pulled Jason back to himself, that spoke the very core of who he was, was just as you said: frivolous and childish. It made those of us who know and care about him ecstatic.”

“Why?”

“Because it proved something that we’ve been hoping for ever since he came back to us. That he hadn’t been entirely lost. That, at his core, he’s still closer to the absurd man who arrived on our world the first time than the bloodthirsty maniac who arrived the second time. You asked what happens if he turns against us. We’ve been worried about that since he came back. He’ll never be exactly who he was, but none of us are. Life changes us all, and the adventuring life more than most. Especially the adventuring life.”

“That’s true,” Miriam said.

“What we saw took something that we believed and showed us absolute proof that we were right. That the man he is now is fundamentally still the man we knew. The man

who infuriates almost everyone, yet draws heroes to him like flies. Who will take a good sandwich over a great treasure. A man who throws barbecues where diamond-rankers sit and eat with everyday people because he believes that they are worth the same. Believes it with such an unconscious conviction that, if only for a little while, they believe it too.”

“That’s nonsense.”

“Yes! Utter nonsense! That’s who he is: the man who does the nonsensical and makes the world accept it through sheer force of will. The man who helps people for no more reason than they need help. Even if they’re messengers. Even if it kills him. And now we have proof of that.”

“Proof for you. It still doesn’t mean anything to me. I’m responsible for everyone in this expedition.”

“So is he.”

“But he didn’t come here to do what this expedition was sent to do. We’re here to protect what’s left of my city, but he isn’t. He’s after that soul forge, just like the messengers. The messengers he brought into our base of operations.”

“That’s true,” Arabelle said. “His primary goal was to keep the soul forge from the messengers. To take it for himself if he could. Sometimes, Jason won’t be able to hold the same values as you or I. Not if he’s going to keep working on a scale that includes gods and great astral beings. It’s something that has worried him since he saw the path his life was taking.”

“I don’t care about that. Even assuming he won’t betray us, that’s not the same as being on our side. What happens if he has to choose between this soul forge and Yaresh? Between the soul forge and keeping the members of this expedition alive?”

“Those goals are aligned.”

“And look at the madness we had to go through to get to that point. Madness that he led us into, every time.”

Arabelle frowned.

“Tactical Commander, I think you need some sleep.”

“Is that your professional opinion, healer?”

“Yes. Think about what you’re saying. You’re suggesting that Jason hatched a wildly elaborate plan that would have required not just the knowledge but the cooperation of the Builder cult, the messengers and an undead army. Not to mention multiple gods, two of whom have been antagonists for, as far as I can tell, as long as they’ve existed. If he could manage all of that, he wouldn’t need to. He’d be in such control of the situation that he

would get everything he wanted without any of us ever needing to come down here. He'd get it all and we'd never even know."

Miriam's cognitive dissonance was plain, as expressions of anger, fear and uncertainty warred on her face.

"That's not... I am tired."

"You need rest, Tactical Commander. Jason might be officially in charge, but you've been the one really running the expedition. You've scheduled the gold-rankers claiming territories for the next week already. Clive probably knows what he's doing here and there's nothing we can do about it if he's wrong. As the healer in charge of the expedition's mental health, I'm directing you to get a full week of rest. That way you might at least get a few days before you ignore me and go back to work. Do I have to go to Archbishop Shavar and have you formally removed from your position?"

"And if I say no?"

"Well, you could fight me on it, but I think we both know how that would go. What would your lady Allayeth tell you to do?"

Miriam glowered, but finally gave a curt nod.

"She'd tell me to listen to the healer."



## Chapter 836

### Academically Unsound

Thunder and lightning assaulted the ground like an army of angry angels. Rain hammered down, turning black dirt into sludge. The air was thick with the smell of ozone, mud and, for the silver-rankers clearing the rubble, tongue-coating stone dust. The amount of rubble was enormous, having once been a towering mesa. Much of it was scattered far enough away that it didn't need to be cleared but thousands of tons of stone still needed to be removed.

It would have been impossible without the power of the silver-rankers. Their superhuman strength and vast magical power accomplished in a day what would have taken weeks or months on Earth. A scant few gold-rankers Miriam Vance had spared from claiming more territories shielded them from the lightning.

They were done in the late evening, although that made little difference to the light levels. The sky was filled with black clouds and pounding rain, the staccato lightning the only source of natural illumination. The lightning struck in such quick succession that the air was never entirely free of rumbling thunder.

The silver-rankers had finished their task and were sheltering under the massive lightning rods. They used various methods to stay dry, from magical umbrellas to force fields to heat zones that evaporated any rain that came close. Their conversations were loud to be heard over the constant noise, fresh claps of thunder frequently interrupting.

The space that had once occupied the mesa was now a broad disc of stone protruding from the ground. It was misshapen and jagged, ranging anywhere from barely clearing the ground to several metres high. With the rubble gone, the full result of the avatar's attack on the mesa was revealed.

"How powerful was that thing?" Clive wondered, looking it over as they waited for a gold-ranker to get in position. "The raw physical power to do this is astounding, even for a gold-ranker. I can't believe Gary went toe-to-toe with that."

"Yeah," Jason said grimly. "It took so much power that it's slowly killing him."

Most of the rubble had been piled up out of the way although certain parts had been dug out and handed over to Jason. The twisted scraps of metal that had been the lightning catchment array atop the mesa were most of it. There were also parts from the control centre it had hidden, drones that could be controlled from the mesa along with some of the mesa rock itself. Jason had fed it all into his cloud flask.

The gold-ranker finished her preparations. A member of Miriam's team, Moon's Edge, Ramona projected a translucent dome into the air, spanning the entire space the mesa had once occupied. Lighting repeatedly struck the dome, scattering across it. Moving with Jason were Clive and Belinda, whose auras helped replenish Ramona's mana. Farrah, Taika and Nik joined them, the diminutive rabbit man looking nervous. They hovered over the mud in a black skimmer that was more sleek and stylised than a cheap and colourful model.

"Are you sure this will work?" Nik asked loudly over the thunder.

"No," Jason said with a laugh. "No, I am not."

"What he *means* to say," Farrah corrected, "is that everything we know points to this working. Weeks of testing has confirmed that these control nodes are not just able but primed to be connected."

Farrah's specialisation was in magical arrays. Combined with the insight she gained into natural arrays from studying the grid on Earth, she had proven herself critical to the plan. Her expertise accelerated the testing of Clive's hypothesis and the linking of the environmental control nodes.

Farrah lacked Clive's broad grasp of magical theory, or even that of Belinda and her eclectic knowledge. Farrah had a traditional adventurer-first approach to magical study, meaning she excelled in her specialty but only knew the fundamentals beyond it. Their project centred on her array magic specialty but dabbled in other fields. The gaps in her knowledge would have slowed them down if not for Clive.

On becoming an outworlder on Earth, Farrah gained the power to form bonds of trust, allowing her to copy knowledge from the other person like a skill book. It had allowed her to rapidly learn about Earth from Jason, including a lot of information she wished she hadn't. However useful a qualitative comparison of different Voltrons might have recently proven, there were things in her memory now she never wanted and rarely admitted to possessing.

Sharing the bond with Clive was a more pleasant experience. His mind focused on magical theory with a single-mindedness that was almost scary, and she came to realise how staggering that mind was. She used Clive as a glorified skill book, shoring up gaps in magical knowledge as they worked. His mind moved so fast, though, and in such complex patterns that she struggled to absorb the knowledge. While taking breaks she thought back to her original studies in magic. The combination of the bond and Clive would have been an egregious and very welcome cheat.

While working on the rituals that would link the environmental nodes, Clive, Farrah and Belinda demonstrated a formidable synergy. It had been the same when they were conducting the ritual that triggered the transformation zone in the first place, rushing to finish before they were overrun by the undead. The time constraints were less immediate this time, but no less real. The transformation zone was more stable than others Jason had been in, but it would eventually break down if not unified and reintegrated with reality.

“Devising the rituals to link these nodes may have taken us a few weeks,” Clive told Nik, “but by magic research standards, it’s been breathtakingly fast. We’ve already linked several nodes safely and successfully.”

“This isn’t a control node, though,” Nik pointed out. “This is rubble.”

“This is not rubble,” Jason said. “We cleared off the rubble; this is a lump of rock.”

“Which is somehow better?” Nik asked.

“Uh, no,” Jason said. “Just more accurate.”

“You know that all the information I was born with about this place went away when it was destroyed, right?” Nik asked.

“When the transformation zone was first forming,” Clive said, “everything was in flux. Power became accessible in ways it wouldn’t normally be and Jason used that, consciously and unconsciously. The conditions allowed him, in that moment, to do things that couldn’t be done at any other time.”

“I have a power that allows me to reshape reality when it is in a malleable state,” Jason said. “It allowed me to tap into the physical material that formed the zone, and everything that was inside it. Including the soul forge and something the Healer gave me which is how you came into being.”

Jason let out a groan as realisation crossed his face.

“Giving you the talk about where babies come from is going to be so complicated,” he complained. “I might have to recruit a priest of Fertility. And one of Knowledge.”

“Putting that *very* far aside,” Clive said, “while Jason was changing things — and creating you — he also created a network of power. The territories like this one with hidden control centres are nodes in that network. We haven’t confirmed that there is a central hub, a node that controls the network as a whole, but we think there is. We think it’s here and—”

He was cut off by a fresh crack of thunder, close enough to drown out his words.

“Part of our developing hypothesis,” he continued, “is that this site is the central node of the network. And that you are the key to making it all work.”

“Except that this key is broken,” Nik said and gestured at the rock they were floating over. “The lock is even more broken.”

“We don’t think that you’ve truly lost the knowledge you had about how to make this control node work,” Clive explained. “As you said, the node is very broken. But we think the knowledge is still inside you, just dormant. The idea is that if we can replace the node, that dormant information will come back.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” Nik said. “You think this is the central node of some massive network, but I never got a sense of that at all. I knew how to control the lightning, more or less. The drones, the elevator, I guess, but that’s all. There wasn’t any sense of some inactive link or an unconnected network or whatever.”

“Just like you don’t have the memories of how to control the mesa now,” Farrah said. “If we restore the mesa and that restores your connection to it, that’s step one. Step two is linking other nodes to this one. If you gain the knowledge of how to control them as we do that, it means we were right.”

“And if I don’t?” Nik asked.

“Then we’re not right yet,” Clive said. “Research, experimentation and testing is an iterative process. We develop a hypothesis and look for where it’s wrong. Then we refine and keep going until we can’t find anything wrong.”

Nik looked unconvinced.

“What you’re saying,” Nik said warily, “is that you want to get something wrong over and over again with me stuck in the middle of it the whole time.”

“Exactly,” Clive said happily.

“No!” Farrah said, shooting a scolding glare at Clive before turning back to Nik. “What he’s saying is that we’ve already gone through the critical test stage. That’s why we linked several other nodes before we came anywhere near this one. I am extremely confident this is going to work.”

“Why?” Nik asked.

“Because you’re here,” Farrah told him. “You were literally made for this. Jason could have made some kind of control matrix, but he didn’t. He made a person.”

“So, I’m a glorified control panel?”

“No,” Farrah said. “Jason is obsessed with doing what’s right, even though he’s wrong about what that is most of the time.”

“Hey...”

Farrah was seated next to Nik in the skimmer. She shrugged down to bring her eyes closer to the level of the diminutive rabbit man.

“You,” she told him, “have what most people in the cosmos spend their entire lives looking for: a purpose. And it’s not some small thing that a control panel can do. Your purpose is to keep us all alive. To prevent the destruction of a city full of people who have already suffered so much. To save the brightheart people who will go extinct without you. You were born to be a hero, Nik. You’re the most important person in this transformation zone.”

“Really?” Nik asked.

“No, it’s me,” Jason said, earning a glare from Farrah. “You’re definitely next, though, then probably Clive or Gary. Neil is near the bottom, between the magic researchers and the Builder cultists.”

“You know the thunder doesn’t muffle all the sound!” Neil yelled from his spot under a lightning rod. “Silver-rankers have very good hearing!”

“Quiet, you!” Jason yelled back. “This is why you ranked below that messenger who keeps stealing cars. If you…”

The air around Neil shimmered as a privacy screen snapped into place.

“Oh, no he did not,” an affronted Jason said.

“Operations Commander,” Ramona said from somewhere below the skimmer. Jason looked over the side.

“Sorry, Ramona,” he said. “I forgot you were down there.”

“Clearly. Not to complain, Operations Commander, but is there any chance you could get on with it? I can absorb some mana from the lightning to feed back into the shield, but I can’t keep this up indefinitely.”

“You should listen to the nice lady, bro,” Taika said.

“Why are you here exactly?” Jason asked him.

“Rude,” Taika said. “I wanted to see what it looks like from underneath when the lightning hits that shield.”

They all looked up as a fresh lightning bolt struck the shield, electricity dancing across it in a brilliant display.

“Okay, that does look awesome,” Nik said.

“I’m so glad about that,” Ramona said. “CAN YOU PLEASE DO YOUR ACTUAL JOBS?”

“I like her,” Taika said as Jason got to work. He plucked the shrunken cloud flask from his necklace and it returned to normal size. He set it on the dashboard in front of himself and Nik who was sitting next to him and removed the stopper. Wisps of cloud snaked out to form three small shapes: a mansion, a bus and a palace.

“Nik,” Jason said. “Stick your hand in this one. The house.”

Nik did as instructed and shoved his hand into the miniature cloud mansion. Jason did the same and the other two cloud models vanished. The image of the house started shifting, from the shape of a mansion to a replica of the mesa.

“Think about what you remember about the mesa,” Jason told Nik. “Don’t push it; just think about it and let the memories come.”

“Those memories went away,” Nik said.

“The ones on how to use the control centre, yes,” Jason said. “But not your memories of the place itself. Of your time there with Dustin and Neil. What did it look like? What was the layout of the rooms? Where did you sleep? Did the elevating platform make a sound when it moved? Was the air dry or humid? What did it smell like? How did you launder the sheets?”

As Jason spoke, the cloud image became an increasingly accurate representation of the mesa. The array of lightning rods around the roof started to take shape.

“I think I’m feeling it,” Nik said. “It’s weird, like remembering something I forgot years ago.”

“You’re only a few months old, bro,” Taika said, still looking up at the dome.

“Shut up,” Clive told him in a sing-song voice, trying not to sound upset and interrupt Nik.

“Sorry, bro.”

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Once the cloud flask had formed a pattern based on the mesa, it started belching out cloud material. The skimmer backed off and Jason left the flask by the side of the mesa base, sitting in the mud. It continued spraying out cloud-stuff, ignoring the lightning. It was struck several times, the lightning appearing to be sucked inside.

“Should we have just used that to shelter us?” Taika wondered as they watched it.

While Ramona headed for Miriam and some much-needed rest, Jason and the others joined the rest of Team Biscuit under a lightning tower where Humphrey had set up an open-sided tent. He remained the best-equipped member of the team, having not just money but connections with adventuring supply specialists. The tent was pleasantly warm, magically repelling water and even had some basic cloud furniture.

“How much did this thing cost?” Jason asked.

“Not sure,” Humphrey said. “Mother purchased it for me. Said I’d need it if I was still in Rimaros for the rainy season.”

The main part of the work was done, not just for Jason's team and Ramona but all the silver and gold-rankers. They all watched the cloud house mesa reach completion, the mass of cloud-substance taking on the precise look of the destroyed rock formation. Humphrey and Sophie were on a cloud couch, Belinda and Clive on another. The others stood around a table Jason had set up as a build-your-own-sandwich bar.

"That's exactly the way it was," Neil said as he handed a plate holding a salad sandwich to the rabbit man who could barely see over the table. "You did a fantastic job, Nik. How are you so much more competent than your dad?"

"Thanks, Uncle Neil."

"Nope," Jason said.

"Absolutely not," Neil agreed.

"We are not brothers." Jason insisted

"Definitely not brothers."

"We're barely teammates. We're going to kick Neil out when we find a better healer. Or a thinner one."

"We would've kicked Jason out already except he always figures it out and fakes his death before we have a chance. Or cripples himself and gets laid up for months. Or goes off alone and comes back brooding like a teenager."

"Will you two shut up?" Clive asked. "Nik, how did we do?"

"They're back," Nik said. "The memories of how to use the control centre. nothing about other nodes, though."

"That's right within expectations," Clive said. "We need to get you inside and do some testing. Neil, you've been there before, right?"

"Yeah, the original version," Neil said and pointed at the base of the mesa. "The hidden entrance should be just down there."

"Then can you and Nik please lead us inside?"

"We're just about to eat," Neil said.

"We really should be acting with haste," Clive said.

"Oh, NOW we should be acting with haste?" Ramona called out from under another tower. She was reclining in a hammock that was hung on thin air.

"Can we please just go?" Clive asked.

"Okay," Nik said. "But we're taking our fu—"

A peal of thunder drowned him out.

"—ing sandwiches."

“Nik,” Jason scolded. “Just because you can use those words doesn’t mean that you should.”

Shade bodies appeared and took the form of personal transport devices. They were floating discs that were normally round but these black versions tapered to a sweeping point.

“You realise that round is more practical?” Clive asked as he moved out. His platform turned back into Shade and he landed in the black mud with a squelch.

“Apologies, Mr Standish. Please give me a moment to assume a more practical configuration.”

“Ah, no thank you,” Clive said wisely. “I’ll just walk.”

Jason used his aura to shield them all from the rain as he and Farrah brought up the rear. The mesa now shielded them from the lightning, the array of rods on top of the cloud version working like the original.

“I guess you were right,” Jason said.

“Of course I was,” Farrah said. “About what?”

“In being confident that this was going to work.”

“Oh, that was a lie. Do have any idea how many academically unsound shortcuts we’ve taken over the course of this project? Half-tested hypotheses are the least of it. Half of the stuff I’m putting together I’ve taken from Clive using a questionable mind-reading power. These rituals we’re using to link the control nodes are built as much on guesswork and hope as sound theory. The fact that we haven’t made one of the Magic Society guys straight-up explode is a minor miracle.”

“Uh, Farrah mate,” Jason said.

“Yeah?”

“We don’t have a privacy screen up.”

Farrah looked around and saw everyone else looking back. Nik at the base of the mesa and the Magic Society researchers under a nearby lightning tower looked especially unhappy.

“Huh,” Farrah said. “The thunder muffles sound less than you’d think, doesn’t it?”



## Chapter 837

### Not All of Us Are Demigods

“That was hard,” Gary said. “Normally the boss anomalies are huge monstrosities, but this thing...”

He looked down at the odd, seemingly innocuous creature. It was round and purple with stubby arms and legs, like a child in a grape costume. It had a purple top hat and a face that was a couple of dots and a line, in the middle of its body, as if drawn on with a marker.

“What was that thing?” Miriam asked. “It’s like it could remake reality.”

“It came back from the dead more than Jason,” Gary said.

In the end, it took Arabelle draining the creature’s mana and using powers that impeded healing and even resurrection magic. That finally cut off its reality-warping powers and allowing them to kill it without it coming back to life.

They looked around the landscape that normally would have been pleasant, if rather odd. The territory was comprised of bold, simple colours, like a children’s drawing. Hamlets comprising only a handful of little cottages were nestled amongst rolling hills. There was an unreality to it all, like an obviously false image somehow made real. The sky was too blue; the hills too green. The clouds too perfectly white and fluffy.

It was like standing in a child’s dream, but one turned to nightmare by the living anomaly corpses scattered across the meadows and slumped against the yellow cottages. They were, like their surroundings, creatures that seemed more imaginary than real. Anthropomorphised shapes with stubby little arms and legs, their bodies shaped like circles, squares and triangles. They were all bright, bold colours. Red, blue or yellow; purple, pink or green. For most, their bodies and heads were the same thing, their faces drawn in simple dots and lines. Some had hats, others hair with pigtails or hairclips. One had bright red, high-heel shoes.

These were creatures of a child’s fancy. It had felt wrong to cut them down, but their strange powers had made them dangerous. A purple triangle with a yellow hat and shoes moved so fast that gold-rankers had trouble keeping up. A square with a green hat hit Gary so hard he was buried metres into a hillside. More dangerous were those whose powers were more esoteric.

A yellow circle man induced euphoria in anyone who went near him. Emir had stood lost in happiness as a pink heart-shaped creature almost squeezed him to death in a crushing hug. A blue circle with a flower in her hat told Gabriel to attack his wife, which did

not end well for him. As she was healing him up after the fight, he was looking around at the strange landscape and its now dead inhabitants.

“Belle,” he said, “do you know what I’m thinking about?”

“How you’re going to make up for trying to stab your wife?” Arabelle asked.

“What? Oh, uh... yes? Yes. That’s absolutely what I was thinki—”

He let out a yelp of pain.

“Is healing magic meant to hurt?” he asked.

“No,” Arabelle said innocently. “Any pain you may be experiencing is likely a mental issue. Possibly brought on by guilt.”

“Yes, dear. But, uh, the *other* thing I was thinking about was the Standish boy’s explanation about Jason shaping this transformation zone. And a mountain shaped like his head.”

“Mmm,” Arabelle said as she rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “It would make sense for Jason to be responsible for... whatever is going on here. It does have his signature mix of whimsy and gruesome violence.”

“It’s creepy, right?” Gabriel asked.

“I think it might have been nice. Before we showed up and everything went berserk, anyway. Speaking of creepy, though...”

“Arabelle, you wound me,” Boris said as he floated their way.

“Want me to wound you again?”

“Apologies, *Mrs Remore*. I can confirm that young Jason certainly had a hand in this place being as it is.”

The three gold-rank messengers were too strong to not use in clearing territories but kept a wary distance. Like the Builder cultists, their alliance with the adventurers was uneasy. Only Boris Ket Lundi regularly approached the adventurers outside of combat.

“You know what these things are?” Gabriel asked the messenger.

“Indeed I do, Lucky Husband.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Oh, you don’t think you were lucky in marriage? My dearest Mrs Remore, I’m afraid your husband’s opinion of you is not as high as I’d hoped. If you and I—”

“I wonder how long messenger wings take to grow back,” Arabelle casually mused.

“I’m just going to go over there,” Boris said and floated away.

“That’s right,” Gabriel called out after him. “You keep walking. Or hovering or whatever.”

“Gabriel?” Arabelle asked sweetly, her distracted spouse missing the warning sign.

“Yes, dear?”

“Do you really not feel like a lucky husband?”

Gabriel blinked, then blinked again, his face blank.

“I hate that guy so much.”

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Arabelle went to fetch Jason who had portalled into a neighbouring territory he already controlled. The territory was a beautiful one filled with rolling hills and open plains filled with colourful wildflowers. The living anomalies belonging to it had been carnivorous plants and poison-spore fungi, and the place was much better for their absence. The sun shining from a blue sky made things just warm enough that the slight breeze was perfectly refreshing. The smell of flowers drifted on the air, pleasant without being pungent.

Arabelle had run to the rendezvous spot Jason had portalled to, gold-rank speed and stamina making a vehicle unnecessary. She found him standing next to what looked like an especially unnecessary vehicle: a fixed-wing glider trike with a large fan on the back for propulsion. It had two side-by-side seats and was entirely black.

“Wouldn’t a skimmer be more efficient?” Arabelle asked as they looked at it sitting in the grass. “Or that aeroplane thing Shade often turns into? The one with a bar. I quite like that one.”

“This is better,” Jason said.

“I have my doubts. Until just now, I had been starting to believe that your world had universally superior vehicle design, despite the lack of magic.”

“And there’s the rub,” Jason said, turning to point a finger at Arabelle. “A complete lack of magic, yet we still invented flying tricycles and you are somehow unimpressed.”

She shook her head as she let out a chuckle.

“I shall concede the point. I am glad that you are thinking more positively about the world you came from.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. He reached up to rub his neck as his face took on a contemplative expression. “I’m even catching myself not dreading the idea of going back. I left a lot of unfinished business there. Emotional baggage. A vampire army. Do you ever stop and think that your life is weird?”

“Not since meeting you.”

“Fair enough. Oh, and, I have to take back Taika and all those people from Earth that Humphrey’s mum took in. I keep forgetting about them.”

“You’re silver-rank,” Arabelle pointed out. “With a silver-rank memory, you can’t forget about them.”

“Not with that attitude.”

He grinned as she shook her head.

“Still,” he said. “We have to deal with what’s right in front of us before we look to the future. No reason we can’t have a little fun while we’re at it, though.”

He claimed one of the seats in the trike glider and waved for her to join him.

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The cartoonish landscape fascinated Jason. There were rolling green hills, roads that looked drawn in crayon and towns straight from a colouring book. Then he started seeing the anomalies left dead from the rolling battle with the gold-rankers. Colourful shaped with little arms and legs. Some wore hats, others had hair the same colour as their bodies with clips or ties.

“I don’t like this,” Jason muttered. “This is just wrong.”

“You know what these things are?” Arabelle asked as she fell into step with him.

“Yeah.”

“The messenger said you would. This place is an echo of you, isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t use the word echo.”

Jason looked down at a thick shaft of frozen blood jutting diagonally from the ground. Dangling from it, impaled, was the body of a yellow circle creature with yellow hair and pigtails.

“Did she have some kind of light powers?” he asked, pointing.

“Yes,” Arabelle said. “Searing beams of light. Not that dangerous alone, but she wasn’t alone. This was the most dangerous territory we’ve cleared so far. Many of the anomalies had mental influence powers and tried to control us. Make us vulnerable to those with more conventional attacks. They had a lot of mental influence abilities, which is rare, and not often useful against gold-rankers.”

“Because you can resist them with auras?”

“Yes. Vampires have strong mind-influencing powers and they still prefer targets two ranks lower than them. But the anomalies here have gotten so strong that only Gary, Boris the messenger and Lord Pensinata were able to fully resist them. My husband proved unfortunately susceptible.”

“Is Gabriel alright?”

“The only thing my husband needs to be worried about is me.”

Jason laughed, but lost his humour as he looked at the hanging body again.

“Her name was Sunshine,” he said. “It’s hard to deny that I influenced this territory, but I don’t like the implication that this is somehow a reflection of me. Except, perhaps, my unconscious mind reflecting my habit of not properly thinking things through.”

“How so?” Arabelle asked.

“The idea of a territory where these things are all just getting along on their own is nice. But they’re still anomalies, so they turned bad once our people came here. It’s necessary to claim the zone, so my nice idea turned into a horror show.”

“What are these creatures?”

“For once, I’d rather not explain it. No fun in it. Should have been Care Bears.”

“Care Bears?”

“Yeah. Those sinister little pricks have it coming.”

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The trike neared the ground where the adventurers and their allies were gathered. The final conflict with the boss anomaly and its minions had taken place on an open field that was too uniformly green to look natural. It had the largest collection of anomaly bodies, scattered across the ground.

The trike dissolved into a cloud of darkness rather than landing, dropping Jason and Arabelle to the ground and they landed running before slowing to a walk. The shadowy cloud resolved into Shade who moved alongside Jason. Boris moved quickly to join them.

“I have to say, Asano,” Boris said, gesturing around them. “This is rather messed up.”

“Agreed,” Jason said.

They reached Gary, standing over the grape-like boss anomaly.

“Makes sense,” Jason said looking at it. “His name was Impossible. I’m a little surprised you beat him.”

“He kept coming back from the dead,” Gary said. “He’s worse for it than you.”

“Can I have permission to loot all these bodies?” Jason asked.

“Please do,” Gary said. “Something about seeing these things subjected to violence like this is unsettling. The sooner they’re cleaned up, the better.”

Jason nodded and Shade left, more Shade bodies pouring out of Jason’s shadow to spread out and touch all the bodies so he could loot them. Jason reached down to touch the boss anomaly himself. Everyone stepped back and the body dissolved into rainbow smoke.

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- [\[Stable Genesis Core\]](#) has been added to your inventory.
  - [\[Greater Miracle Potion\]](#) has been added to your inventory.
  - 10 [\[Gold Spirit Coins\]](#) have been added to your inventory.

- 100 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 1,000 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 10,000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.

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“Oh, hey,” Jason said, pulling out the potion he just looted. It was a small vial filled with pale blue liquid and swirling silver sparks.

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Item: [Greater Miracle Potion] (iron rank, legendary)

*Salvation in a bottle* (consumable, potion).

- **Effect:** Fully restores health, mana and stamina. Negates all afflictions and effects of gold-rank or lower that prevent cleansing or are triggered by cleansing. This potion is only effective on gold-rank and lower individuals. If administered to an individual of silver-rank or below within moments of death it will revive them. The magic of this potion lingers in the body longer than normal potions, meaning additional recovery health and recovery items will not be effective for a longer period.

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“I haven’t seen one of these in ages,” Jason said. “The higher-rank ones are good.”

“Miracle potion?” Gary asked.

“Yeah.”

“I’ve heard the gold-rank ones are impossible to make. You get them accidentally, very, very rarely when brewing really high-end healing potions. And only while overdoing it with using exceptional materials or energy. Divine power and the like.”

“You take it,” Jason said, holding out the vial. “If something goes pear-shaped clearing these territories and a healer can’t get to someone in time, you’ve got the best chance of not having been taken out. You could save someone, or maybe get a healer back on their feet.”

Gary took the vial, pinching it with his thumb and forefinger. It looked tiny next in his massive hand. Gary slipped the vial into an empty loop on his potion belt.

“It’s getting on time you and I had a serious talk,” Jason said. “About what comes next.”

Gary looked away.

“Have to get on to the next territory,” he said.

“Not right now,” Miriam told him as she approached. “Asano, claim this territory and we’ll all head back to base. We’ve been going hard and this territory was the worst yet.”

“I can keep going,” Gary said.

“I’m sure you can,” Miriam told him, “but not all of us are demigods. Gold-rankers have a lot of stamina, but the mind needs rest as well. I think that’s true even for you. I’m not asking, Xandier.”

“Yes, Tactical Commander,” he murmured. It sounded like thunder with his rumbling lion voice, resonating with divine power. He strode off, his long legs quickly eating distance. Jason watched him go with a sigh.

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Gary’s booming laugh echoed through the massive hallway in the mountain fortress. With Rufus and Farrah at his side he pushed open a set of massive double doors and stopped. The bar was empty aside from one person, the furniture pushed to the sides of the room. Only four chairs were left in the middle, set around the last remaining table. Of the chairs, three were normal wooden chairs while the last was a massive, throne-like affair. It was the only one that looked like it would hold Gary.

The chair opposite held the room’s only occupant. Jason was pouring drinks into three glasses and one mug. The bottle held something bright red and, Gary guessed, sickly sweet. When he was done with the red liquor, he added a few drops of another liquid to each glass, and a splash to the mug. The red liquid started swirling with black, dancing inside each glass like living things.

Gary turned to leave, only to find Rufus and Farrah in his way.

“I can make you move,” he growled.

“And I can make you stay,” Jason said from behind him. Gary turned to look at him.

“You really believe that?” Gary asked.

“No,” Jason said with a grin. “But it was a good line and I don’t think you’ll make me try.”

Gary looked at Farrah and Rufus like they were traitors and stomped over to the large chair. He dropped himself into it, opposite Jason. The others joined them and the double doors closed on their own. The only light came from a glass wall and the lava waterfall beyond it, washing the room in red.

“What kind of madman has a lava waterfall as an indoor feature?” Gary rumbled. Jason just grinned. Gary took his mug and drained it.

“Not bad,” he begrudgingly acknowledged.

Jason smiled. It was soft and warm compared to his usual amused smirking.

“It’s time to stop dodging this conversation, Gary,” he said.

“You had to get them involved?” Gary asked, inclining his head to indicate Farrah, then Rufus.

“You kind of made me, buddy.”

Gary growled.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “Let’s talk about how I die.”