

Chapter 817

Will He Be Broken

Two cloud vehicles shot through an unclaimed territory, hovering a few metres over the ground. The territory was an icy expanse, but far from a barren waste. In the distance, castles made of ice sparkled in the sun. Plant life was abundant, in shades of white blue and grey over the traditional browns and greens.

Of the two vehicles, one was larger and more colourful. Painted in vibrant sunset hues, it ranged from warm shades of orange, gold and red through to cool purples, blues and teals. The other vehicle was encased in hexagonal panels of slick dark red, like blood under glass. Between the panels, the white cloud the panels were set into was visible.

The driving spaces for the two vehicles were as different as the exteriors. While they were both situated at the front of their respective vehicles, with large viewing windows, the similarities ended there. In Emir's cloud vehicle, the design was extremely minimal and made entirely of clouds. There was a chair, to either side of which was a ball of mist, hovering in the air. These balls were the only control mechanism, Emir having one hand in each as he piloted the vehicle himself.

The cockpit of Jason's cloud vehicle showed no trace of its cloud vehicle nature. It looked like someone who understood nothing about complex vehicles but was very enthusiastic about buttons had gone mad with power. There were two seats, each of which contained a Shade body that was acting rapidly to work the vehicle's numerous control mechanisms. There were buttons, switches, toggles, levers and lights, all in a hodgepodge mix of anime mecha, seventies aeroplane and mad science lab.

On the rooftop lounge of Jason's cloud vehicle, Miriam Vance was wondering why it had a rooftop lounge. Jason was sitting next to her, watching the terrain rush by with a mixed juice drink and a huge grin. The drink had a little umbrella and a bendy straw. Their chairs were comfortable cloud recliners, side-by-side so they could look ahead as the vehicle moved forward. They each had a side table for drinks, with another table between them.

"We should be getting blasted by air much more at this speed," he said. "I have an invisible mist shield redirecting it. I let a little in, though, because I want that sense of motion. The mist covers the whole roof, in fact."

"I figured that might be the case when our high-speed, open-air passage through a snow field was pleasantly warm."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Jason said, then took a long sip of his drink. "Ooh, that's some good stuff."

"You don't seem especially worried about what we're heading into," Miriam observed.

"Well, you can't go getting excited every time something like this happens."

"I rather believe you can."

"Don't think I'm not taking this seriously. I know the stakes are more than just life or death. If we lose here, we'll all die and a disaster of massive proportions will hit the world. But in my last transformation zone, the world would end if I didn't win and my only allies were all my gold-rank enemies. This time I've got resources, allies, power and a plan that someone other than me came up with. I've even got a mountain fortress in the shape of my own head. The only other thing I could ask for might even be on the cards. I've been talking with Clive and... well, that's for after. Assuming we win this fight, we still need to clean up the rest of the territories while the anomalies keep growing stronger. It's going to get dangerous even for the gold-rankers by the time we're done."

"We have Xandier."

"Yeah, but I don't think you like putting all your eggs in one basket any more than I do."

"No, I do not. But, as you said, that is for another day."

"Exactly. Today we have a climactic battle for the fate of see article one. I'm not saying that this is old hat, but I've been through it enough times that I know the best thing I can do is be rested and centred. I'm sure I don't need to tell you that anxiety, anger and grim determination make you feel powerful, yet make you weaker."

"You do not," Miriam agreed. "Being calm and mindful, without becoming placid and passive is easier said than done. Especially given what we face today."

"You get used to it. Would you like a scone? I'm going to have a scone."

True to his word, Jason was soon biting into a scone slathered generously with jam and cream, letting out a moan of pleasure.

"Shimmer berry jam," he mumbled happily, spraying crumbs. "I made it myself while I was convalescing in Rimaros."

He swallowed his mouthful and grinned.

"The greatest triumph of my time there," he said.

"Your greatest triumph?"

"Yep."

"Did you forget that you convinced the Builder to end his invasion and leave this world?"

"Nope. I stand by my statement."

Miriam looked from Jason to the tray on the table between them.

"I guess I'd better have one of these scones, then."

"How confident are you in this plan?" Jason asked.

"That sounds like a nervous question," Miriam said. The scones had proven oddly effective at diminishing her nervousness. "What happened to moving past anxiety?"

"There's a lot of people asking that question in this vehicle," Jason said. "Out loud or not."

"Well," Miriam said, "let's start with the fact that you can portal between disparate territories you control, sight unseen. That, as far as I'm aware, is an aspect of the unique connection you have with territories. Perhaps messengers could match it, connecting to the territories through their ritual magic, but we don't have any with portal magic to test. Then, we add the ability to pack up almost all our forces in your soul realm and jump them from one territory to another. Also, as far as I'm aware, unique."

"You think the Undeath priests won't know about it?"

"They might. We've clashed with them enough times to have had losses. It's possible they kept some alive and interrogated them. More likely, though, any information they had is from those they captured who hadn't joined up yet."

"Meaning they would know about much of what we can do, but nothing revealed after entering the transformation zone."

"Yes. This includes the ability to transport a large and relatively weak silver-rank force through unclaimed territory using cloud vehicles. Since we suggested the territory agreed upon for the battle, they will likely be looking for traps and plots we've put in place. Having our demigod and some of our key gold-rankers there to observe, they hopefully won't anticipate us smuggling most of our forces across dangerous territory to hit them in their own backyard."

"Letting us challenge the main force while Clive sets his plan in motion."

"Yes. The high priest will call back the avatar immediately, I'm certain, but Xandier can stall it while Standish's plan weakens it. We want to clear out as many of the undead and messengers as we can in that time, leaving the priests until the avatar regroups. Your power will be critical during that stage."

"I know."

"Be that as it may, I find drilling the plan into people's heads over and over leaves at least a small chance they'll actually follow it. Once the avatar rejoins the main force, both

hopefully weakened already, we take down their priests and weaken the avatar further, teaming up with Xandier to kill it. That is about as far as we can optimistically anticipate having some control of how this battle goes.”

“Assuming the inevitable chaos factors haven’t already sent it careening off the rails by that point.”

“Yes. We’re planning to come as close to killing a god as it’s possible to get, today, so chaos is inherent and far more than I like could go wrong. If they guess what we’re up to, or the messenger forces floating around choose to participate in unanticipated ways, things will get very messy, very fast. That will happen eventually, though, whatever we do. Sooner or later, we’ll all have to improvise. The strength of this plan is that we have broad objectives that everyone knows and can fight for, even if things go splound-shaped. Eliminate priests and—”

“Splound-shaped?”

“A splound is a fruit,” Miriam said. “It grows in lumpy, unpredictable shapes.”

“Is it tasty?”

“No,” Miriam said. “It’s very bitter.”

On the upper slopes of their mountain, Boris, Mahk and Fiola looked to the distant undead.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t have reached out to Asano?” Mahk asked.

“There are too many ways it could go wrong,” Boris said. “Our contact could be discovered. Even if it wasn’t, Garth is no fool. If he got a sense Asano was trying to let himself be caught, he’d almost certainly back off from that plan.”

“If Asano doesn’t know the plan,” Fiola said, “what makes you confident in him?”

“Jason Asano has been walking through fire from the moment he stepped beyond his own little life on his own little world. At some point, you just have to trust that he’s not going to burn.”

“I’m not sure I like hinging victory on a metaphor,” Mahk said.

“I have been around for a very long time, Mahk Den Kahla,” Boris said. “In all of that time, I’ve seen only a handful of people that can truly shake the cosmos. Bethlin the Reaver. Zithis Carrow Vayel. They’re rare, but you come to recognise the signs. There is no way the World-Phoenix knew what it was getting when it stepped in to alter Asano’s course, but it knows now. They all see the signs, just as I do. It’s why he’s gotten their attention, and why his next battle will be the one that marks his place in the cosmos. Will he stand tall or will he be broken, like the Builder?”

Floating slightly behind and to either side of Boris, Mahk and Fiola shared a look. They both had a sudden sense of being caught up in something much larger than them, which was something a messenger was never meant to feel.

Atop his hill, Garth contemplated the battle ahead. The avatar and a retinue had been dispatched to the battle site, crossing the territorial boundary. His link to the avatar, through the power Undeath bestowed to them both, did not cross the boundary. Garth had considered going himself, but he wanted to stay with the main force. There was nothing the enemy could do to the avatar, and if they somehow attempted some trickery, he needed to command the larger forces. He'd left one of his subordinate priests to control the avatar.

His faction held a massive unified territory now, but it was not under Garth's control. Only the avatar was able to handle the strain and had been imbued with the knowledge and power to unify the entire zone. So long as they could destroy their rivals, this bizarre dimensional detour in their plan would turn out better than they could have hoped. Not being connected to the territory, however, meant that Garth would not be immediately warned when things went wrong.

To address the communication issue, Garth had set up a relay. Next to him, a skull was resting atop a short spear stabbed into the ground. The skull could relay voices between itself and another skull set next to the territorial boundary. That way, a messenger could come through and report quickly. One did just that, crossing the border and rushing to the skull.

“High Priest, the adventurers and their allies are doing something. Their demigod has attacked the avatar.”

“And the rest of their forces?”

“We have still only seen a fraction of them, but we’ve observed them doing something strange. They’re bringing out our priests they’ve captured alive and started executing them.”

“Why? They have to know that won’t impact our morale.”

“I don’t understand either, High Priest. The priests are rising into revenants and immediately attacking the adventurers who are forced to fight them. Even with the enemy prepared, revenants are hard to kill—”

“—because they’re infused with the power of the Undeath god,” Garth said.

His mind raced over the possibilities. What did the enemy hope to achieve? Garth had lost people, and until he had found the avatar, they had not arisen as revenants the

way they normally would. Once they had found it, their power to rise again had been restored by tapping into the power of—

“They’re trying to drain the avatar!” Garth managed to snarl, despite not having a throat or even really a mouth. “We have to—”

“High Priest!” Jameela called out as she rushed up the hill. He turned to look and saw her pointing in the opposite direction to the dimensional boundary. Two strange vehicles were speeding across the desert, floating yet kicking up plumes of dust and sand from their sheer speed.

“Recall the avatar!” Garth yelled at the communication skull. “We have to consolidate our forces before they can!”

He started loping down the hill faster than his awkward body seemed like it would be capable of. The battle was about to begin.