

## Chapter 831

### Leadership Isn't Easy

Jason walked across the wide grassy meadow where his companions had confronted the avatar. Humphrey followed as they headed for the forest surrounding the area, moving around holes left by giant feet. The sky darkened, day turning to night by the time they reached the trees ringing the space. Jason led them into the woods and they soon came across a much smaller clearing. A few logs were set up as makeshift benches around a campfire.

A glass-fronted refrigerator stood incongruously off to the side and Jason took out a couple of glass mugs full of beer. He handed one to Humphrey and they sat, looking at one another across the fire. Humphrey sipped at his beer and then peered into the mug, his expression startled.

"This tastes like... the feeling you get when a litter of adorable puppies jumps all over you."

"Yep."

"How is that even possible?"

"My house, my rules. Are you sure you don't want to do this somewhere we're on more even footing?"

"I'm not afraid of your power, Jason. Or of you reading my emotions. When we get out of here, you're going to be praised for doing yet another impossible thing. Deservedly so, but I need you to understand something before you get caught up in all that."

Jason nodded.

"You're disappointed. And angry. Why?"

Humphrey looked down at his feet, not speaking for a long time. When he finally did, he asked a question in a quiet voice without raising his head.

"Do you still want to be a part of this team?"

Jason jumped to his feet.

"How can you even ask me that?"

Humphrey looked up, a sad smile on his face.

"Have you ever considered what it's like being on your team from the perspective of everyone else?" he asked. "Did you realise that since you and I formed this team, you've spent more time away from us than with us? Dead, or presumed so. Convalescing. On the other side of the world."

Jason opened his mouth to reply but Humphrey raised a hand to forestall him.

“I know,” Humphrey said. “There are always the best of reasons. But something being justified doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. It doesn’t make the ramifications go away. We accept that you spend so much time apart from us, Jason, but that doesn’t make it easy. We’ve spent a lot of time figuring out what our team is without you in it. We’ve had to.”

“Humphrey...”

“Don’t, Jason. Let me talk.”

Jason looked unhappy but nodded and sat back down.

“I know how important trust is for you, Jason. It is for any team, but what you went through while you were away from us made you especially sensitive to it. So I know how much our trust means to you.”

Humphrey let out a sigh.

“I also know that you’re afraid, Jason. Afraid that what you are in this place will take you away from us. We’re afraid of that too, and it almost happened today. The problem is, we didn’t know what was happening or why. Not for far too long. There were dangers here we had no idea about because you didn’t tell us.”

Jason looked at the ground, unable to meet Humphrey’s eyes.

“It had to be done.”

“Yes,” Humphrey agreed.

“I was afraid you’d try to stop me.”

“Why?” Humphrey asked, loud and angry. “Why in the world would you think that? How many times have we been here, Jason? When did we ever not go along with one of your lunatic, self-sacrificial plans? When did we try to stop you? Was it when you overcharged your portal to get us out of that underwater complex, even when Clive said it would probably kill you? Which is very nearly did. Or when you got into a knife fight with the Builder, which actually did kill you. We went along with it all because that’s what needed to be done, consequences be damned.”

Humphrey got to his feet and stalked back and forth in front of the campfire in short, jerky steps.

“We supported you, Jason, even when we were sure we would lose you. You’ve always had our trust, always, but today we didn’t have yours. You didn’t think we would trust you, so tell me when that idea crawled into your head. Tell me when we ever gave you a reason to doubt that we would do anything but stand by you.”

“Never,” Jason whispered, tears welling in his eyes.

“Never,” Humphrey echoed. “You didn’t tell us that you would have to open up your soul. What that would mean for us. You made a plan and only brought us in when you

absolutely had to. Instead of giving us a chance to prepare, you had your minions tell us when there was no other choice. If we'd known, if we'd been ready, we could have done more. Done better. At the very least, we could have had some understanding of what we were walking into."

Humphrey stopped pacing, his voice growing louder as he talked.

"Instead of being warned by our teammate, we learned half of what we needed from a messenger and the rest we had to figure out ourselves. We had to figure it out when everything was already on the line because you wouldn't trust us to trust you. To support you. To be there for you the way we have been every time. Every single time."

Humphrey sat down hard enough to make the wood of the log creak. His shoulders slumped, and when he spoke again, his vitriol was gone. All that was left was a weary hollow voice.

"As your team leader," he said, "that is unacceptable. As your friend, you hurt me. We battled a god today, Jason, but the greatest wound I suffered came from you. You're so afraid of losing our trust that you're acting like you already have. We deserve better than that."

Jason nodded, too ashamed to meet his friend's gaze.

"You do. I'm sorry."

"I don't want your apologies, Jason. They don't matter. What matters is that you don't trust us the way we trust you."

"Humphrey, I—"

"Don't," Humphrey said. "We both know your mouth moves faster than your judgement. Instead of saying the wrong thing quickly, do the right thing slowly. Let the way you act going forward be your response. We're not going anywhere, which is the whole point. We're always with you, Jason. You're the one who keeps leaving us behind."

Jason nodded again, his head bowed. Tears landed in the dirt.

"This isn't what you want to hear," he said, "but I'm going away again. After we get the soul forge. I don't know how long it's going to take, but becoming a full astral king won't be quick. Or simple."

Humphrey stood up, moved around the campfire and placed a hand on Jason's shoulder.

"We'll be waiting when you get back. We always are."

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Jason stepped out of the portal and looked around. He waited for a moment and then smiled.

"I think it'll be okay," he said. "I don't feel anythiaaaARGH!"

He fell to the ground, twitching and groaning in the red desert sand. Humphrey leaned over him, looking down with concern.

"Jason?"

Jason let out a whimpering moan.

"I went to the toilet on myself."

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In Jason's mountain lair, he was lying on the couch in his office with a bag of frozen peas on his face. Gordon, still recovering from being Jason's weapon in his hegemon state, was floating around the room unsteadily. The double doors swung open to admit Farrah. She leaned against the door frame in a relaxed pose.

"You should have knocked," Jason said with a groan.

"You've been dropping everyone who knocks through the floor trap in front of the door."

"I'm going to miss this place."

"Not if we don't get out of this transformation zone. Are you up for claiming some territories?"

"Territories plural?"

"You've been recuperating for almost two weeks. We may only be mostly using gold-rankers to clear them but we've got a few set up for you to take. If you feel up for it."

Jason's response was a groan.

"Where did you even get frozen peas?"

"The supermarket. In the freezer section that you cleared all the ice cream out of."

"There was other stuff in there? Anyway, are you up for claiming some territories or not?"

"I'm still feeling pretty seedy. I'm not sure if claiming more territory before I've fully recovered from claiming the last one is a good idea. Ask Neil and Carlos to come check me out. If they give me the all-clear, I'll do it."

"Speaking of healers, Arabelle has been waiting to talk with you since the battle. She's worried about the impact of what you went through."

Jason groaned again.

"I'm definitely not doing that until my everything stops hurting."

"Is there something you don't want to talk about with her?"

"No."

"Nothing about Humphrey telling you off?"

"No, it's... it's like I'm waiting to not be okay after what happened. It feels like I should be more messed up than I am. I think I've been waiting for it to hit me harder before I talk to the person who can help me fix it."

"You think you're not messed up in the head enough? That's pretty messed up in the head."

"Go away."

Farrah stopped leaning against the door frame and moved further into the room.

"Jason you—"

She yelped as a trapdoor opened underneath her and she fell through. The trapdoor closed behind her, all but invisible set into the floor.

"I'm definitely going to miss this place."

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"Since you finally claimed those cleared territories," Miriam told Jason, "I've completely excised all silver-rankers from the teams clearing territories, even under gold-rank supervision."

They were walking down the middle of a street that ran alongside the water. It led to the marina in the replica of Jason's hometown and the car park being used as a staging area.

"I thought you already cut out the silvers," Jason said.

"There were a few exceptions. People whose power and skill sets made them both useful and likely to survive. The territory that Boris handed over was an appreciable amount of land, even without the territories we cleared during your convalescence. Now that you've claimed them, the power of the anomalies has passed a risk threshold I'm willing to send any silvers into. I've even started consolidating the gold-rank groups."

"What about Boris and his messengers? You decided to use them in the end?"

"They're not any less trustworthy than the Builder cultists, and I'm using them. I'm only using the gold-rank messengers. They only have three, but Boris himself is a monster. You know they say that messengers are closest to matching an essence user rank-for-rank?"

"Yeah, but I've never seen one close to an elite adventurer. Boris seemed strong from what little I saw on the battlefield, though. You think he stacks up?"

"More than stacks up. Other than our demigod, I don't think any of our gold-rankers could take him one-to-one. Maybe Lord Pensinata."

"Boris makes you uneasy."

“There’s very little I’ve encountered since meeting you that doesn’t make me uneasy, Operations Commander. If I’m being honest, you unsettle me more than he does.”

“Really?”

Miriam pointed to the sky where a pair of messengers were flying overhead. Their hair and eyes were white and their skin was pale. Their wings were mostly white feathers, with a few scattered black, red and gold ones amongst them. Their wings were also wreathed in ethereal white flame.

“Boris Ket Lundi is strong,” Miriam said, “but strength I understand. You’ve turned those corpse-looking messengers we captured into something else. Something that looks alive, and you did it with death energy, of all things. You’re reshaping people. Reshaping reality.”

She glanced up at the image of Jason’s head carved out of a mountain.

“Your battles, your enemies,” she continued. “They exist on a different scale to anything I understand. And I don’t mean just further along the power scale; I mean on a different track entirely.”

She stopped walking and turned to look out over the water.

“Jason, your conflicts are spiritual. Cosmic. I’ve taken reports from everyone who witnessed your final battle with Undeath’s power, if you can even call it a battle. None of it makes any sense. You fight invisible wars where metaphors and imagination are deadly weapons. Where the prize is reality itself. You’re a silver-ranker fighting gods and that only works because there’s a plane of existence I neither see nor understand. It doesn’t align with the world in which I exist.”

She gestured around with her arms.

“But now I’m here, in some liminal space where the laws of nature and magic are reduced to guidelines at best. I don’t know what the rules are and I barely understand the stakes anymore. Death and destruction, spilling into the real world? What does that even look like now that we’ve dealt with the undead?”

“If we don’t settle this transformation zone cleanly,” Jason said, “what will result is a seeping wound in reality. How bad, I don’t know, but it’s enough that the god of Destruction was hoping for an outcome a lot like this. I chose to create this transformation zone; it was my plan. It’s my responsibility to put an end to it, but I can’t do it alone. Not even close.”

They looked to the distant horizon and the tree jutting to the sky, impossibly tall.

“So,” Miriam said. “You’re saying it’s a vaguely defined but extremely bad thing if we don’t capture the big magic tree?”

“Yeah.”

“Honestly,” Miriam said, “you aren’t the one I want to be talking to. You’re *what* I want to talk about, not who I want to talk about it with. But I was trained better than to vent to my subordinates and you’re the only one who doesn’t answer to me.”

“Leadership isn’t easy. I highly recommend speaking with Arabelle Remore. She can help you, plus she understands me and my secrets better than almost anyone. I’ll give her permission to talk about some of that if it will help you work with me. She’s also oath-bound to the Healer to maintain privacy. An oath I can assure you she takes very seriously. You can speak with her without compromising the dignity of your position.”

“Didn’t I hear that she’s been chasing you around?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”