

## Chapter 813

### Small, Easy or Inconsequential

Jason was walking down a wide forest path with the unnamed rabbit by his side. Sunlight passed through the thin canopy, leaving their way well-lit, yet also private and secluded.

“Names are important,” Jason said. “I have a familiar. His name is Colin and people love him.”

“You’re saying that ‘Colin’ is some magic name that makes people like you?” the rabbit asked.

“A little bit. Not by itself, of course. Context is important. I’m a man of two worlds. I come from a world where magic was hidden until very recently. It was only seven or eight years ago that I didn’t even believe in it. Then I travelled to a world full of magic, right out in the open.”

“I assume you’re going to be rounding up on a point at some stage.”

Jason chuckled.

“Yes, but like I said: context is important. Something I’ve discovered about the magical world is that with all the big magic, people overlook the little magic. The subtle stuff that my world has always used without ever realising it. Music is an excellent example. Crowds are another, and combining them is very powerful. A concert is something to behold using aura senses. Am I confusing you with what I’m talking about?”

“I know what a concert is. Which is weird, by the way, because I’ve never heard music. For a guy who talks about context a lot, you shoved some crazy stuff in my head with no context at all. Like, what’s a turducken about? Is it a weird animal sex thing that went horribly, horribly wrong?”

Jason let out a laugh.

“No,” he said. “Let’s not get too distracted though; I was talking about music.”

“I’m not sure why.”

“Let me get there. There’s no rush.”

“Aren’t you fighting to stop an undead army from claiming a subterranean staging ground from which they can spill an endless flood of unliving monstrosities onto the surface world?”

“That’s up to the powerful people now.”

“We’re walking through the universe that you’re the god of.”

“It’s not a proper universe. Not yet. And I’m not a god.”

"You created me. You're not going to make a lady rabbit from one of my rib bones, are you?"

Jason laughed again.

"No. My plans on that... I just found out about you. Give me some time to consider my next move on that front. In the meantime, I was talking about music. People didn't know about auras in the world I come from. Real auras, I mean; not the stuff your aunt with the crystals talks about."

"I'm the first member of my species; I don't have an aunt."

"The universal aunt. She's an archetype. But real auras can be manipulated without any detectable magic. The collective aura of an AC/DC concert is something to behold. There's real power there, even if there isn't real magic."

"You do remember you're meant to be talking about names, right?"

"Names are a part of it," Jason said. "A song can move hearts, the right words can move nations and a name can make an identity. Shape not just how people see us but who we are. I told you about my familiar, Colin."

"Yeah. Apparently, people love Colin."

"They do. Do you know what kind of familiar he is?"

"Let me guess: something scary? Two-headed fire crocodile?"

"He's a sanguine horror. An apocalypse beast known for scouring entire worlds of life, leaving them nothing but barren rock. He has a constant hunger for blood and flesh and he's not always discriminate about where it comes from."

"Uh, okay."

"But he is discriminate. That, to my understanding, is extremely out of the ordinary. Sanguine horrors are nothing but unrelenting hunger that you eradicate down to the last scrap or it keeps growing, keeps feeding and never, ever stops. But not Colin."

"He's a familiar, right? Obviously, you influence him."

"Yes, and that begins with his name. It sets a tone. A starting point for how the world sees him and how he sees his place in it. Names are important. Our first link to everything outside ourselves. The right name empowers us, while the wrong one has power *over* us. Either way, it shapes who we are. If your name is Mr Hoppityhop, all anyone will see you as is a rabbit. If your name is Doombringer, Lord of Carnage, all anyone will see you as is lonely."

"Is this all a massive stall while you try to think up a name for me?"

"You can choose your own if you like. Many do."

"No," the rabbit said. "It should be you. It just... feels right."

Jason nodded.

"I have been thinking about it as we talk, you're right. I could name you after someone. Kai, after my brother who died protecting his world. But I don't think you should be named after anyone. You aren't from someone else. Except me. You can carry my surname, if you want it, but we're talking about given names. You're something new, so the name I give you should be new as well."

"You have something in mind?"

"Nik."

"Nick? How is that new?"

"It's Nik. NIK, no C. It comes from the word Lehenik. In a language from the world I was born, it roughly translates first or firstly. The first instance. That's what I want to call your people, once you're a species and not a unique being: Lehenik. The first people to belong in this place."

He gestured at the soul realm around them. They were still walking through the forest path, sunlight passing through the thin canopy

"Everything else here," Jason continued, "either doesn't belong or is an extension of me. Except for you. You came from me, but you belong to no one but yourself, with your own fate to shape. But you said that this place feels like home and you were right. It is your home, and you will always have a place here."

"You're going to make more like me?"

"Yes. I believe I know how, and the opportunity is startlingly close. I don't want you to go through life with nowhere and no one to belong to. That would be cruel."

"I don't know how to feel about that."

"Me either. Someday, there's probably going to be a bible with you and me featuring heavily in the early chapters."

Jason stopped in front of a tree, plucked off a red fruit and offered it to the rabbit.

"Apple?"

The rabbit gave Jason a flat look but took the fruit. Jason picked another for himself and they continued on.

"Nik," the rabbit said, contemplating the sound. "Nik. Nik. Nik Asano?"

Jason gave the rabbit a side glance but did not interrupt. He bit into his apple instead.

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Deep under his mountain fortress was a huge magma chamber. The molten rock of the chamber's floor washed the cavern in red light, painting the cages hanging from the

ceiling on chains. Jason and the newly monikered Nik emerged from a tunnel set into the wall and ending in a stone balcony.

“Oh, great,” Nik said. “You’re keeping an army of Undeath priests in an overly elaborate and easily escapable trap. I’m sure that’s going to work out fine.”

“The suppression collars they’re wearing are the real cages,” Jason said. “As for the actual cages, we have to keep them somewhere.”

Brisk footsteps echoed in the stone tunnel behind them until Miriam Vance joined them. She looked at Nik and then at the dangling cages before demonstrating that she knew how to learn a lesson and asked no questions. Jason turned to glance at her before looking back out at the cages.

“Operations Commander,” Miriam said. “I want to officially pull all silver-rankers from territory clearing,” she said. “Our best estimate is that around half of the territories have been claimed and the anomalies have gotten too dangerous.”

“That’s going to annoy some people,” Jason said. “Silver-rankers chafe at how slowly we advance, which is as true for me as anyone else. This place has been better for advancement than a monster surge.”

“Silver-rankers are hard to kill by most standards, Operations Commander, but nothing here is standard. We’re getting close calls in every territory we claim now, even with gold-rankers watching over the rest. I don’t want it to take a death before people accept that it’s time to stop.”

Jason nodded.

“I’ve been leaving all that to you, so I won’t gainsay you now,” he told her. “We’ll consolidate the gold-rankers and press on?”

“We can,” Miriam said. “That will slow our progress, however, even with Gareth Xandier and his demigod strength. I believe it is time to change strategies.”

“You want to make a move on the Undeath priests.”

“Ideally we would find and kill the avatar before the Undeath high priest takes control of it.”

“Garth,” Jason said. “The high priest’s name is Garth.”

“I don’t care what his name is,” Miriam said. “I only care that we take him from undead to full dead. I think he’s likely found his god’s avatar by now, but I still think the time to hunt it down is now. The undead build their ranks with every enemy they face while we’ve collected everyone with major power in our group. We aren’t going to get stronger.”

Jason nodded again.

"Alright," he said. "Let's gather everyone together and explain the plan. How is Clive?"

"Not what I'd call well, but ready to brief everyone at the very least."

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"The problem with—"

Clive slapped a hand over his mouth and drew a sharp breath in through his nose. He gestured at Jason who refilled Clive's glass of water from a pitcher. Clive gulped it down and slammed the empty glass on the table as he winced at his ongoing headache. Jason refilled it again.

They were in the conference room with the various leaders of the alliance factions, adventurers, brighthearts and Builder cultists. The messengers were also represented, with Marek Nior Vargas next to Rick and Jali Corrik Fen next to Jason.

"I apologise," Clive said to the assemblage. "As I was saying, the problem with dealing with the Undeath priests is their avatar. We have to assume they have control over it now, as all finding it first changes is our lives getting a lot easier. As everyone here has seen during the claiming of the latest territories, our own divine representative, Gary, is extremely powerful."

Gary was a large and shiny presence in the room but looked awkward at being pointed out.

"Many of you witnessed Gary clashing with the avatar already," Clive continued. "Those who did will have noticed that these two forces are evenly matched. No one can take them down, including each other. We need to resolve that to overcome the priests, their undead and their messengers."

"And to save time here," Jason cut in, "we will not be relitigating the idea of using messengers ourselves."

"So you keep insisting," the cult leader Beaufort said. "But perhaps this should be a group decision and not one for you alone."

"No," Jason told him.

"No?" Beaufort asked. "That's it? Just 'no,' without further reason or explanation?"

"Yes."

"And if we insist?"

"Then that would be unfortunate."

"You are not making this feel like an equal alliance, Asano."

"It isn't."

Everyone at the table was aware that Jason's aura permeated the room. That the mountain fortress they were in, absurd as it was, took the shape of Jason's head.

"There will be no more talk of taking the messengers to battle," Jason said. "I won't go over the value of a chain of command again, but if anyone else has a problem with their or my place in this one, speak up now."

Jason panned the room, his gaze meeting only silence.

"Good," he said. "Now, Clive will explain the actual method we will use to deal with the avatar."

Clive nodded his agreement and immediately winced at the rapid head movement.

"I was going to make a lengthy explanation that fully encapsulated the plan," Clive said. "But since I need to go lie down, you get the quick version: The Undeath priests attempt to reanimate when they are killed. I'm sure you've all seen it. It doesn't work, though, because they're cut off from their power source, meaning the divine power of their god. The avatar is another source of that power and, unlike the god itself, limited. It too is cut off from the god, so any power drained out of it will weaken it. The plan is to kill as many priests as we can get our hands on in the presence of the avatar. Each reanimation will siphon off some of its divine power. If we can siphon off enough, it will tip the scale enough that Gary can destroy it."

"Won't that leave us with an army of animated priests to kill?" Gabriel asked.

"Yes," Miriam answered for Clive. "This will be a hard fight, which is where everyone except Gareth comes in. We will attempt to kill off the risen dead immediately, of course, and expect some success given that we will choose the conditions they animate in. It is foolish to assume that will go exactly as planned, however. We need to anticipate combating the Undeath priests with the avatar, as well as the prisoners we kill off as they reanimate. This battle will not be small, easy or inconsequential."