

## Chapter 811

### Good Leader

Barely seconds passed between the aura appearing at the edge of the territory and reaching the group. Only the gold-rankers had a chance to intercept it, but it avoided them with blink teleports to slam into Humphrey, bowling him over in the long savannah grass. Gold-rankers swarmed them, only for Humphrey to hold out a forestalling hand from where he lay under Sophie.

"It's fine," he said. "Not a mphflm..."

His words were muffled by pressing her lips onto his.

"SUCCUBUS!" Belinda screamed as she arrived with the silver-rankers. "Kill it!"

Sophie rose to a mounting position over Humphrey, then turned to give her friend a flat look and a rude gesture.

\*\*\*

Emir's magical cloud bus was skimming over the savannah grass. The interior had three levels, the bottom two set out with either row seating, like a bus, or booth seating where pairs of seats faced each other. The top floor and the roof were utility and lounge spaces, more open and with amenities like food tables. Emir didn't let the cultists go up there.

On the second level, Sophie was sitting next to Humphrey, facing Clive and Belinda.

"You need to get off this bus and leave," a scowling Clive told Sophie. "Now."

"Clive!" Humphrey said as Belinda patted Clive on the arm.

"Okay," Belinda said in the voice of a mother trying to coax a tired, cranky child.

"Maybe we should tell Sophie *why* she should go instead of just telling her to do it."

Clive turned a petulant gaze onto her.

"She's not stupid," Belinda said. "You just haven't told her what's happening yet. She can't read your mind."

Clive looked like he wanted to retort, but nodded.

"Would you like me to do it?" Belinda asked gently. "Maybe while you go have an apple?"

Clive nodded again, got up and headed for the stairs at the back of the bus.

"He's not doing well," Belinda told the others. "Holding onto those territories is messing with his head."

"What is it he didn't tell me?" Sophie asked.

"What you would have heard him tell me if you weren't busy..."

She gave a pointed look at Humphrey.

“...catching up.”

Humphrey looked sheepish while Sophie grinned.

“It’s about the Undeath priests,” Belinda said. “You said there’s a large group building around Jason. We’ll find our way with your directions, but Clive’s right that you should use your speed to range ahead. You have to tell them that we need to take the priests alive if possible. Or what passes for alive, with some of them. They do worship Undeath.”

“Why?” Humphrey asked.

“Because they’re power mad? I bet a lot of them are lonely guys, angry at the world because girls won’t talk to them. They convince themselves that worshipping the god of zombies will somehow make women fall for them because we all like bad boys. But it’s never their fault, no. It’s the world that’s unfair, not their inability to take a shower, comb their hair and talk about anything but how much better they’d be than actual adventurers if only they were given the essences. It’s not like there aren’t women with low standards out there, but they can’t even make a modicum of effort. I bet they think they’re so great, now, swanning around with their evil powers and swishy black cloaks as if... why are you looking at me like that?”

Humphrey gave her a flat look while Sophie was laughing behind her hand, jabbing Belinda’s leg with her foot.

“I meant,” Humphrey said, “why do we need to take the priests alive, not why do they worship Undeath.”

“Oh,” Belinda said. “Well, have you seen what happens when you kill them?”

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “You were there.”

“Oh, right.”

Sophie snorted another laugh.

“So,” Belinda continued. “Clive’s thinking is...”

\*\*\*

Jason’s office in the mountain lair was mostly open space. It was all dark stone and dark wood, washed in red light from the lava waterfall on the other side of the glass wall. On the opposite side of the room was a large pair of sliding double doors. They were made of distorted glass that showed a blurry view of the lobby beyond and were the only visible way out. There were nine secret exits.

There were bookshelves, a drinks cabinet and paintings on the wall. They were replicas of Dawn’s work, many examples of which were stored in Jason’s cloud flask. A large couch was upholstered in luxurious dark velvet. Against one wall was a small table

with an image projector showing the most up-to-date map they had of the transformation zone.

Jason leaned against the wall near the small table. He was looking over the map, comparing it to his internal sense of the territories under his command. He was having trouble concentrating, his mind slipping off anything he tried to focus on like grabbing at wet ice.

The map showed that things were going about as well as could be expected, although not perfectly. They had unified all the key territories from the original plan, but the final territory had been lost to a force of Undeath priests. Due to its lack of value, they had chosen to consolidate rather than extend themselves and try to defend it. Now Jason was suffering the after-effects of losing territory.

Abandoning the territory was a choice that had paid off. The unified territory they kept had looked patchy at that stage; a handful of key zones hastily linked together. All their key locations were held and united, however, and they then went to work filling the gaps. Now they held most of what they believed to be the bottom third of the transformation zone. Only some edge zones and a few gaps remained in Jason's otherwise unified territory.

At first, Jason had participated in the clearing of territories. His skirmishing combat style held up against the increasingly dangerous anomalies, although Farrah never let him out without gold-rank supervision. That had come to an end when the priests took the isolated territory from him. He was affected by losing territory, like those who had ceded territory to him, but the results were rather different.

Gabriel, Amos and Lorenn had experienced symptoms somewhere between bad food poisoning and a worse hangover. They suffered skull-piercing migraines and their magical bodies underwent very unwelcome changes. Luckily, Jason's replica town included fully plumbed bathrooms, although several were no longer fit for use.

The after-effects of losing territory were a result of spiritual damage, something healing magic could not heal, alleviating symptoms at best. Jason had tapped into his astral throne and astral gate enough that he had harmed himself in this manner over and over again. The tolerance he had built up left him not savagely hungover but in a state of disorientation akin to being drunk.

He made his way unsteadily to the couch and collapsed on it. He took a glass of iced juice from his inventory and, using his aura, floated globs of liquid into his mouth like an astronaut in zero gravity. He made loud slurping noises as he sucked each one down, giggling to himself in between.

Jason fell asleep fairly quickly, Shade emerging to catch the juice glass as it fell out of the air. He stashed it in his personal storage space before returning to Jason's shadow. Jason didn't stir until the double doors slid open to permit Farrah access before closing behind her. She was holding a waffle cone with two scoops of white chocolate raspberry ice cream in one hand. In the other was a cone with one and a half scoops of coconut chocolate ripple.

"Another territory cleared," she said. "Are you alright to come claim it?"

"Yep," he declared with giddy confidence and swung his legs off the couch to sit up. He shifted in place dizzily, his expression confused. He got up with a grunt and stumbled slightly on his way across the room to Farrah. He accepted the white chocolate raspberry cone with a goofy grin.

"How is your magic phone going?" he asked.

"This isn't the time."

"How are you doing two-factor authentication? Is it with auras?"

"We've claimed another territory," she repeated patiently, leading him to the map by the arm.

"Another gap filled?" he asked.

"Yes."

Miriam Vance was directing their forces in as safe a manner as they could in the face of growing anomaly strength. She was no longer letting any silver-rankers out into the field without gold-rank support. This made territorial expansion slower, but no one who had seen the fighting questioned the approach.

Farrah moved to the projector on the table and placed a hand on it. The map started updating with new information. One of the gap territories lit up blue, marking it as cleared but unclaimed.

"I can portal anywhere in my territory," Jason light-headedly pointed out.

"I know."

"I'm a very good wizard."

"Do think you can portal here?" she asked, reaching out to tap an area right next to the blue marker."

Jason peered at the map.

"Are we playing *Spirit Island*? I'm not good at that game. I want to be the shadowy fear spirit. I'm very scary."

"We're not playing *Spirit Island*, Jason."

“Are we playing *Risk*? I’ve heard the legacy version is okay. Should I conquer the Earth?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” Jason whined. “Everyone there sucks.”

“Lick your ice cream before it drips.”

“Oh, hey. Ice cream.”

Farrah pointed to the map, trying again.

“Can you open a portal to here?”

“I can. A shadowy portal. I’m very mysterious.”

“Then can you please... where are you going?”

She turned to look at Jason who had wandered to the middle of the room and was looking around as if lost.

“I wanted to look outside,” he said. “Where are the windows?”

“To the outside? There aren’t any. Just the big one showing your indoor lava waterfall. Why do you want to look outside?”

“Sophie’s back.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yep,” he said and licked his ice cream. “Her aura tastes like apples.”

“That was fast,” Farrah said. “She must have found something.”

“She’s still fast,” Jason said. “She’ll be here in—”

There was a loud thump from the door. Jason and Farrah turned to look as the doors slid open, revealing Sophie sprawled on the floor outside, holding her nose and moaning. Farrah took Jason’s arm and led him in that direction. Sophie stared up at him with an accusatory expression.

“Why does your door block teleports?” she asked.

“It does?” Jason asked.

“I tried to blink through and slammed face-first into it instead.”

“Are you sure the glass on the doors isn’t just too blurry to get a line of sight for your ability?” Farrah asked.

“Yes. No. Shut up.”

Farrah chuckled as Sophie kicked at the air, flipping onto her feet.

“You know the doors will just open if you stand in front of them for a second, right?” Jason asked. “Like at a supermarket.”

“I was in a rush,” Sophie said.

“You found something?” Farrah asked.

“Yeah,” Sophie said with a grin. “A big group. Humpy, Lindy. Clive, who was the one who got me running back here. He wants us to start taking the Undeath priests alive instead of killing them. As many as we can get.”

Jason went to scratch his head and almost poked himself in the eye with his ice cream. He stared at it, as if surprised to find it there, then grinned and licked it.

“Is he alright?” Sophie asked.

“He’s fine,” Farrah said. “He’s got Shade to stop him from falling into the lava waterfall.”

“Please tell me he’s not in charge right now,” Sophie said.

“I’ll take you to see Miriam Vance,” Farrah said. “Shade, don’t let him go through any portals on his own.”

“Of course, Miss Farrah.”

Farrah led Sophie back through the office doors.

“It must have been nice seeing Humphrey and Lindy again.’

“Such a relief,” Sophie said. “ I was so happy to see they were...”

The doors slid shut behind them, leaving Jason mostly alone.

“I should get some ice cream,” he said.

“You’re holding an ice cream, Mr Asano.”

Jason looked down at his hand.

“Oh, nice.”

\*\*\*

As Gary was now almost twice her height, Farrah leapt through the air to grab him in a hug.

Reunions abounded as Rick and Sophie brought the two large groups to Jason's territory. This brought most of the surviving expedition together, although each group had extant members presumed either still isolated or dead.

There was little time to celebrate as Clive and Constance handed their territories over to Jason. They both immediately started suffering the after-effects and Jason was again left with territories distant from his original one and in need of defending. Another operation was planned and launched to secure them.

Jason had largely recovered, his condition improving much faster than those more heavily stricken. Clive and Constance had passed through the bathroom destroying phase and Constance was on bed rest. Clive was still unconscious for most of each day, coming out long enough to be fed a fistful of spirit coins.

Jason's mind was clear but he still endured physical symptoms, mostly vertigo and headaches that came and went. He was able to use his powers well enough but didn't even try to argue he should be fighting. He was able to take half of their forces into his soul realm, portal to his new territory and let everyone back out.

The new plan to unite the territories was less aggressive than the last. The living anomalies were even stronger, meaning any group without gold-rank support was at risk. The territory clusters were further apart this time and would take longer to link, so both needed solid defences. The biggest threat was the avatar, but it had been last seen close to Durrum's former territory. That was far from the land Jason inherited from Constance and Clive.

With their forces evenly split, they would slowly work towards linking them up. Miriam Vance was in charge of the strategy. Jason deferred to her expertise and tried to stay out of her way. He felt like a worthless princeling as everyone else worked on establishing more territories for him while he just lounged around.

He was standing in one of two observation lounges. Each one was situated behind a giant window that, from the outside, was a giant eye. Jason looked down on the car park of his replica small town's marina where adventurers, brighthearts and cultists were marshalling.

"You'll need to join them," Jason said. "There's never enough healers."

"Yeah," Neil said, stepping up beside him.

"I'm told you made a good leader out there."

"I could have done better."

Jason let out a tired, good-natured laugh.

"Yeah," he said. "I know that feeling."

"I think maybe I understand you a little better now," Neil said. "Getting tossed into deep water. Little to no allies, forced to rise to the challenge or die. It's harsh, but there's also something compelling about it. Like you're really alive."

Jason glanced at Neil before turning back to the window.

"I think you do understand me a little better."

"I'm not going to complain about it as much as you do, though."

Jason let out a chuckle.

"Probably for the best. Neil, I know that everyone else on our team is flashier than you. Fiery swords and flying tortoises and clouds of magic butterflies. But we see how good you are. We can only step forward the way we do because we know you're standing behind us. Covering our mistakes. We're an odd bunch, and we need a steady dose of

reliable to make it all work. You just proved in a whole new way how reliable you are, and I don't say it enough, Neil, but thank you. For being amazing."

Neil looked at Jason, wary for signs of mockery. Jason didn't look at him at all, staring out the window with a weary gaze.

"Thanks," Neil said, his voice uncertain.

"Now," Jason said. "I've been sensing an odd aura that arrived with you. I felt it come here with you and stop outside the door. I assume you're here to make an introduction."

"I'm sure you two will figure it out," Neil said while shuffling towards a side door.

By the time he reached it, he was half-running. Jason watched him go with a frown, then turned to the double doors that were the main entrance to the observation lounge. He walked over and they opened to reveal an anthropomorphic rabbit in a tuxedo. He stood across the hall, nervously turning the brim of his top hat in his hands.

"Dad?" the rabbit asked.