

Chapter 846

A Cocktail of Ignorance, Arrogance and Ambition

Jason was sitting in a cloud chair on a field of scorched earth and giant roots. The air was filled with the stench of death; the rot of bodies and the worse smell of rainbow smoke. The battle had gone on long enough that the first to be killed were starting to break down. Jason looked across at his counterpart: a wooden clone of himself sitting on a wooden root.

"I want to be upfront," Jason said. "Much of what I'm going to be talking about is consolidating transformation zones into reality. It's something I've done a couple of times before, but each time is different. In this case, very different. Even if you refuse everything I'm going to suggest outright, a lot of what happens will involve figuring it out as I do it."

"Why are you telling me this?" the doppelganger asked in a voice that sounded like wood being planed.

"Because honesty is important. I don't want to be your enemy, so I'm not going to hide anything from you. And the reality is that all I can offer you are things that might work. The only promise I can give you is that I'll try my best. I can't promise results. It's only fair that you know that going in."

"Understood. What is your proposal?"

"Before I get into that, I'd like to go over the potential outcomes as things stand."

"Why?"

"Context. I believe that your prospects are sufficiently unpleasant that even an uncertain alternative is a superior option to those you currently have available to you."

"Go on."

"Let's start by assuming that we fight and you win. I suspect we both believe that you won't, but we can put that aside for the moment. If you win, you may or may not successfully reintegrate the transformation zone with reality. It's not an easy task, this zone will be harder to manage than others I've experienced. The whole place may break down, dumping everyone and everything in it into the astral. That will kill everyone but the messengers instantly. They'll die slowly."

Jason let out a sad sigh before continuing.

"Now, assuming you don't fail, you successfully consolidate the zone into normal reality. That puts you back where you started before any of these transformation zone shenanigans. Deep underground. Corrupted. Slowly spreading ruin while unstable forces build up within you. That's what brought us looking for you in the first place. Did you know

about that? The destructive power accumulating inside you as the disparate aspects of your being clashed? This began long before my people entered the underground.”

“I was aware of the danger.”

“If you end up back out there, the only change will be scale. That power will go back to building up, but the end result will be more destructive than if we’d left you alone. Even if everything goes right for you, all that will happen is you’ll corrupt everything around you until you finally destroy it and you.”

“That is... in accordance with my assessment,” the wooden Jason said. “But can you offer anything but faster annihilation?”

“I might argue that a faster annihilation would be better than what happens if you win. I think I can offer you a superior option, but not if we fight. We both know that if I win, I have to separate the elements that make you up. Do you understand what those elements are?”

“Does it matter? You are talking about taking me apart.”

“It matters. You were born from an attempt by messengers to turn one thing, called a natural array, into something called a soul forge. They did not understand what they needed to do was separate out a part of the array and use that. Instead, they tried to force it all to stay together. The outcome was you. Not a natural array, not a soul forge.”

“You know what I am? My nature?”

“I believe so.”

“Can you explain it? I... do not know what I am.”

“I can, although I will need to be a little roundabout in that explanation.”

“Context?”

“Just so. I’ll start with a soul forge. Exactly what that is doesn’t matter; suffice to say that they are used by astral kings who are akin to gods to the messengers.”

“Is that what you are trying to become in taking this soul forge?”

“Yes, although I’m not taking a conventional path. For most astral kings, they form a soul forge within themselves in the process of becoming what they are. They don’t understand how an externally formed soul forge — like the one involved in your creation — works. That lack of understanding is how a cocktail of ignorance, arrogance and ambition set in motion the events that brought us here.”

“What convinces you that you know better than they?”

“That I’m not also ignorant, arrogant and ambitious? Not as much as I’d like because I’m all three of those things.”

“Why would you admit that?”

"I told you that honesty was important and I meant that. I want to try and help you, and this whole conversation is a rambling attempt to get what people where I'm from call informed consent. That basically means that before I do anything, I help you to understand, as best I can, what I intend and why."

"Claiming to be the same as those who failed does not incline me to accept any proposal from you."

"We are similar, but not the same. I am becoming an astral king, but not in the normal way. I need to find a soul forge externally, like the one attached to you. I have been slowly gaining an understanding of them because there is a hole inside me where one would perfectly fit."

"I still fail to grasp the relevance."

"An astral king becomes an astral king by creating a realm. A universe within themselves."

"Like this transformation zone."

"A lot more stable, but yes. When an astral king creates their universe, within it will be a birthing tree. A tree that creates messengers."

"Is that what I am?"

"I believe in part, yes. But like the soul forge, something has gone wrong. The attempt to create a soul forge went awry, somehow triggering the creation of a birthing tree. But the environment was wrong and the messengers trying to force the natural array turned it into a corrupting element. Then my allies and I created this place. It is, as you surmised, somewhat like an astral king's universe. It still wasn't right for a birthing tree, but it was still a better environment. You remained incomplete and corrupted, but more thoroughly formed. The transformation zone, the forces making you up, and probably my influence turned you into what you are now."

"And what am I?"

"Unique. The sum of the elements that made you, bundled into a result that no one could predict. Which is not special, by the way; that's how all of us come about. Your process just happened to be a little more exciting than most."

"You are saying that you are a part of me?"

"An influence, at least. There is a being that I accidentally created while the transformation zone was forming. I think you ended up affected by that. It's how you wound up with a soul."

"I have a soul?"

“Yeah. At first, I thought the echoes of consciousness driving your actions were a soul-like construct created by the soul forge. What we call a motive spirit, which is what monsters have. But you...”

Jason gestured at the wooden replica sitting opposite.

“I can feel it through you,” Jason continued. “There’s a genuine soul in there. I mentioned creating a living being. His name is Nik. Even outside the transformation zone, I believe you had some level of primitive consciousness. You can tap into aspects of this transformation zone, and I think that’s what you did. When I created Nik, you tapped into that same process and somehow created yourself. Or recreated. You exploited a highly unusual and wildly specific confluence of conditions and events to become an entity with a soul. You turned yourself into a person who also happens to be a twelve-kilometre-tall tree.”

“That tells me what I am. Not what you intend to do with me.”

“You began as a natural array and a soul forge, one born from the other and then mashed together to disastrous effect. As the soul forge came from the array, you were a product of both. One thing became two, then two became three. The problem is that you are all still intertwined. You are all corrupting one another, yet you all rely on one another as well.”

“If you separate us, we are destroyed.”

“Yes. If we fight and I win, I use the reformation of the transformation zone to separate the elements. Hopefully functionally. I’m confident I can make one work. That will be the natural array, should my friend decide he needs it. The soul forge as well, hopefully. But those don’t have souls. They’re objects. Complex magical and spiritual objects, but things that can be manipulated.”

“But I have a soul,” the replica said, a hint of revelation in its flat voice.

“You have a soul,” Jason agreed. “I can’t do anything to it without your willing participation.”

“So that is your offer,” the replica said. “If I surrender the zone to you, you will attempt to extract the natural array and the soul forge without destroying me.”

“Yes, although it’s not quite that simple. The corrupting elements are a part of you, but not a part of your soul. If I extracted the natural array and the soul forge it would destroy you, but your soul would remain intact. I would need to create a new body when the reformation of the transformation zone allows me to, minus the corruption, and put your soul back in it.”

“That is possible?”

“Possible? Yes. How likely it is to succeed, I cannot say. Even the attempt would require your active participation, and I can’t promise it will work. I can’t even be sure what you’ll become if it does work. I can promise that I will try and that if it becomes a choice between saving you, the soul forge or the array, the choice will be you.”

“You would give up the soul forge?”

“I’m going to live forever. I’ll find another one eventually.”

“You said your friend would need the array.”

“He might.”

“Why would I believe you and he would both give up the things you want?”

Jason leaned back in his chair and let out a frustrated sigh.

“That’s the thing,” he said. “That’s where this all falls apart. There is a reason why we would do that, and it’s a simple one. It’s just not very convincing.”

“What is it?”

Jason sat up in his chair to look around in the direction Gary had left. He had stationed himself some distance away, standing like a guard on duty.

“I think you should ask him,” Jason said, then waved Gary over. With a blur of movement and a rush of air, the demigod was next to Jason’s chair.

“What is it?” Gary asked.

“If I asked you to give up your choice for the chance to save a life, would—”

“Of course,” Gary said. “I knew going into this that I wasn’t coming out. You’ve offered me another option, but I never expected it. And we both know it’s not as simple as going back to how things were.”

The doppelganger turned its head to look up at Gary.

“I can see the power devouring you from within. You would give up the chance to escape that to help me?”

“Yes,” Gary said.

“I am your enemy.”

“Who told you that?” Gary asked. “We killed the enemy in this place. All that remains is getting as many people out as we can. If Jason thinks you’re worth saving, then you are.”

The doppelganger looked from Gary to Jason and back.

“Trust,” it said.

“Yes,” Jason and Gary said together.

“This one,” the wooden Jason said to Gary, “told me to ask you why you would help me.”

Gary looked at Jason, who shrugged, then turned back to the doppelganger.

"It's not a very convincing reason."

"That is what the other one said."

"He's right."

"I would still like to hear it."

"Alright," Gary said. "We'd help you because you need help."

"You didn't ask to be put in this position," Jason said. "This was done to you, at least partially by us. What if we don't have to fight? I told you our reason isn't convincing, but what do you have to lose by trying? Death from corruption and madness? I'm not sure I could do worse than what's waiting for you if you win."

"And that's saying something," Gary added. "he's extremely good at inflicting misery and suffering."

"Thank you, Gary," Jason said.

"Pain, torment. It's his whole thing."

"Gary, you can go back and—"

"Not just physical, either. He's gotten really good at soul torture. There's a messenger girl who—"

"Not helping, Gary."

"Sorry."

Jason shook his head, then looked back at his doppelganger.

"You don't have a good reason to believe us. To believe me. And I'm asking for an amount of trust that's hard from a friend, let alone someone you spent the last few hours trying to kill. All I've got for you is that winning is worse than surrendering."

"If I understand what you are proposing," the wooden Jason said, "you wish for me to surrender the transformation zone, allow you to tear me into segments and then believe that you can and will attempt to recreate me, for which you will need my active participation in you manipulating my soul."

"Yes," Jason said.

"And you offer as assurance only the claim that you would help me on principle."

"Yes."

"With no more incentive than to do anything else would be worse."

"No," Jason said. "Your incentive is hope. You asked for it and this is as much as I can offer. If you want more than that, I'll have to start lying."

The tree's Jason-shaped avatar sat in silence for a long time. Gary went to speak several times but was waved to silence by Jason.

“Your hope,” it said finally, “is a tiny thing.”

“Yep,” Jason acknowledged.

“It could easily be a lie.”

“Yes,” Jason agreed.

“I do not like being in this position.”

“I doubt you’ve liked any position you’ve ever been in, for as long as you’ve existed.”

“And you have offered the only chance at a better one I have ever known. I will grasp at it, even if it proves to be false. I will work with you, Jason Asano.”