

Chapter 827

No Limit

Jason's world was breaking. Trees were rotting and falling over. Buildings crumbled as whole sections fell away, leaving them unable to support their own weight. The ground was turning to purple-black sludge. Ghostly white flames resisted the encroachment but it was a losing battle. The fire was driven by Jason's will and his will was spent.

Jason stood in the middle of a field, exhausted and barely standing. It had been a long time since pain had bothered him, after years of severed limbs, impalings and even decapitation at the hands of his foes. More than anything else, nothing had been the equal of his first encounter with the Builder. The great astral being had scoured his soul, scraping away at the exterior so Jason would let him in.

This was worse. The power of Undeath was devouring him from the inside out, stripping away his soul and claiming it for itself. It was still driven only by a mindless echo of an absent god, yet that echo struck Jason like thunder, battering him over and over. And once the power had claimed him completely, it would own his will, leaving Jason as nothing but a hollowed-out puppet.

He wanted to keep fighting. Keep resisting and claw back what had been taken. But there was no reprieve, as there had been with the Builder. No clock to run out if he just held on long enough. Jason wasn't rolling over, but there was no more fight left in him either. There was nothing left to fight with.

The soul realm was breaking down, not just physically but in its very nature. Everything was in flux, vulnerable to manipulation by anyone with the will to do so. His sense of the space was shaky at best; his former omniscience failing him. He'd focused enough to shore up certain areas. The space Sophie's mother lived in would hold out longer than most places, as would the underground caverns of the brighthearts. But nothing would last forever, and when Jason fell, so would they.

Jason didn't even notice that he'd closed his eyes. Despite the pain, he felt an urge to lay down, as if gravity was growing stronger. He wanted to drop, to close his eyes and let go. He drew a sharp breath through clenched teeth, fighting back against his desire to give up.

Jason opened his eyes and looked at the avatar in the distance. It stood still, unmoving, towering over the trees like a kaiju. He knew the physical avatar was dead, but that had always been a shell. The true essence of it was the power of Undeath, and now it was inside of Jason's soul. Even this avatar didn't matter. It was just a representation in

his mind, unconsciously created by Jason himself. The power was everywhere, as was the damage it dealt, chewing up the landscape.

Despair tainted Jason's mind, which in turn tainted the land around him. Colour leached from what remained uncorrupted while the corruption grew more vibrant, parts even showing a purple glow. Unable to hold himself upright, Jason dropped to his knees.

"Is this it?" Shade asked with scornful disappointment. "Is this all you amount to, Mr Asano?"

Jason looked up at Shade, pain and hurt written across his expression.

"Shade?"

"What are you doing, Mr Asano."

"I thought... I thought I could..."

Jason bowed his head, tears pushed out of his eyes as he closed them tightly.

"I thought I was enough," he whispered in shame.

"And now you think you aren't?" Shade asked.

"I'm spent, Shade. I don't have anything left."

"You think will is like mana? That you can burn it off by throwing out a few powers? Use it all up in a fight? Who convinced you it was such a small thing?"

"I can't—"

"The brighthearts are here, Mr Asano. Everything that remains of their entire civilisation. What do you think they are going through right now as all this happens around them? How helpless, how fearful?"

"I want to fight, you know I do. I just don't think I can."

"If the spirit is willing, do you think it matters if the body is weak? In this place? You think that's air you're breathing?"

"I'm not breathing. Wait, did you just quote *The Matrix*?"

"I know you are in more pain than you have ever felt. I know that you are only clutching onto sanity because all the pain that came before has prepared you."

"It's not enough," Jason choked out.

"You think that you are at your limit, Mr Asano, but the will has no limit. The only way that your will can be exhausted is if you choose to quit. If you give up on yourself, on your friends, on all the people taking shelter here. You think you cannot fight, but you are fighting. Every moment you don't surrender, the battle goes on. You think you have exhausted your willpower, but it cannot be exhausted. Will has no limit so long as you have the resolve to keep fighting, keep standing."

"I don't know if I can."

“Mr Asano, I have known you for some time, now. Do you know what makes you special? What has made you the focus of so many powerful forces, both ally and enemy? Why are people willing to risk everything for you?”

“Rakish charm?” Jason asked, the pained, half-sobbing delivery undercutting the attempt at humour.

“Resolve, Mr Asano. The resolve to help people for no more reason than they need it. To stand when no one else can or will. To make the insane choice because it has to be made, even if it kills you. Time and again you do this, and now you have to do it again. Stand because because you have to. Because people need to. Stand, even if you don’t think you can. I think you can. I know you can.”

Jason looked up and Shade, realising that Gordon and Colin were beside him. Colin, more intimately connected to him than the others, was barely standing, ravaged by undeath like the land around them.

“On your feet, Mr Asano. I know you think you’ve reached your limit, but there is no limit.”

“It feels like there’s a limit.”

“The Builder once tried to convince that was the case through pain. I was a lie because he knew that all you had to do was tell him no forever and he could do nothing.”

“It didn’t feel like nothing.”

“No, but it was still a lie that you might surrender your soul. And now you are telling yourself that lie. Giving yourself an excuse to give up. To surrender to the pain. We need to embrace that pain, Mr Asano. To accept it and the fight it represents. Do you have the resolve to do that, Mr Asano? Or will you surrender Colin to the god of Undeath? Will you give up on Miss Wexler’s mother, on everything left of the brightheart people?”

Jason looked up at Shade as hope, fear and doubt warred across his face.

“I don’t know if I can.”

“You can, and I will tell you how. You have forgotten the most fundamental lesson about what this place is, or perhaps you never truly learned it.”

“What?”

“You have not been human for a long time, Mr Asano, but it is what you still are in your mind. It’s why you give yourself limits in a place where you have none. Perhaps you fear what happens when you truly let go of who you are, but that fear is a false one. That isn’t who you are but who you were. You left that behind a long time ago, but refuse to admit it to yourself. You keep telling people you aren’t human, as if saying it is a talisman that will let you keep hold of your humanity. I’m sorry, Mr Asano, but that slipped through

your fingers long ago and you need to accept that if you're going to put up a fight. There is only so far you can push a human, Mr Asano, but you are not human. You've simply used the power of this place to turn yourself into one. When you let go of that idea, you let go of the limitations it imposes on you. It is not the spoon that bends; it is only yourself."

Jason took several sobbing breaths. He leaned forward, putting his fists on the ground to help him get unsteadily to his feet.

Jason's friends, Boris and his messenger army moved through an increasingly miserable landscape. Ethereal ghost fire and glowing purple corruption were all over, with everything else drained of colour and life. They were being led by Nik and one of Shade's bodies, heading for an obvious landmark: the towering avatar.

"I thought that thing died," Sophie said.

"No," Gary said. "The avatar I fought was just a vessel for Undeath's power. When the power moved in here, the vessel out there was left empty and inert."

"So, you can fight it again?"

"Unfortunately," Shade said, "The divine power infusing Mr Xandier will not avail him in this place. Not unless he uses it to try and take over Mr Asano's soul. Which I will thank him not to."

"Why won't it work?" Sophie asked.

"Because Jason's soul realm isn't a true physical space," Clive said. "We're basically roaming around in Jason's imagination."

"Really?" Neil asked.

"No," Clive said. "but it's as good an explanation as you'll get. The reality is nothing like that, but the full explanation is wildly complex and involves metaphysical theory would take several years of study to grasp. I don't have the time to teach and you don't have time to learn."

"Or the inclination," Neil said.

"Or the ability, let's be honest," Sophie said. "There's no way I get through one lecture by Clive without falling asleep, let alone years of them."

"You don't know what you're missing," Belinda said. "A lot of people would jump at the chance to study under Clive."

"Thank you," Clive said.

"Mr Standish is correct in stating that Mr Asano's soul realm operates by different rules to a normal physical reality," Shade said. "That is more true now than ever. Because of the nature of this space, your essence abilities will be ineffective."

“Then how do we fight?” Humphrey asked.

“In this place, unless you start trying to take it over for yourselves, as Undeath’s power is doing, the only thing that you can use is will. The intent to impose yourself upon the world around you.”

“Using will as an active force is something only gold-rankers can do,” Arabelle said. Barring outliers like Jason.”

“The nature of this place changes that,” Shade explained. “As long as your intent is focused, you will find that enacting your will on the space around you is not just possible, but natural. It will even be a useful head start once they do reach gold-rank.”

“How do we use it?” Humphrey asked.

“As I stated,” Shade explained, “the key is focus. Having a structure to use as the framework for that focus should be extremely helpful. I would recommend attempting to recreate your usual abilities, as not only will this give you a familiar framework but allow you to act in accordance with your own experiences.”

“Wait,” Sophie said. “You said that using our essence abilities would be ineffective, but now you’re saying that the best thing to do is use them?”

“No,” Shade said. “I am not telling you to use your essence abilities. I’m telling you to exert your will upon the world around you in a way that replicates those to the nature of your essence abilities.”

“Which basically means using them while really, really wanting them to work,” Sophie pointed out.

“That is... not entirely inaccurate,” Shade reluctantly conceded. “But I would not call it genuinely representative of—”

“I can see why you're Jason's familiar,” Sophie said. “You're awful at explaining things.

Jason stood with eyes closed, shutting out everything. He set aside his sense of the world around him, his own body. His emotions, his exhaustion. Reaching a state of empty mind, he was even able to set aside the pain. Each thing he set aside was left for him to examine in his state of meditative calm.

As always, Shade had turned out to be right. Standing apart from them, he could see how much what he’d considered his core nature to be artificial. In his soul realm, even his mortality was a fiction he created for himself.

The things that were real were all external to himself; aliens to his personal realm. He could sense his friends, moving to his aid. The terrified masses of the brighthearts

underground. There were also the messengers, both his prisoners and those who had arrived with his friends.

The last thing that was real was the pain. That was the power of Undeath, growing like a cancer to take over everything it could. It was the only thing that challenged Jason's absolute control; the only thing that could change the rules of his world. Jason could turn off death and keep his friends safe, but the enemy could revert that change and kill them. That was unacceptable. If there was going to be a fight over his soul, Jason was going to choose the battlefield. He would set up a fight where his friends would not be sacrificed.

He cast off almost every part of himself, cutting them away until there was nothing left but will, power and the resolve to fight. The pain he would have to keep, to let back into himself in order to fight it. He opened his eyes and found himself before the avatar. He moved forward to accept the pain.

Chapter 828

The Hegemon

The contingent making their way through Jason's soul realm had two groups. One was Jason's companions, led by Nik and one of Shade's bodies. The other was Boris and his group of messengers. At the advice of Shade and Nik, both groups moved swiftly but not at a breakneck pace. With the world crumbling around them, even flying through the air they could run into a sudden breakout of corruption. They moved quickly, staying close to the ground but not on it. The messengers could fly, while the adventurers who could not floated along in Onslow's shell.

Being in a half-formed astral kingdom in the process of being devoured by a god was the rarest of things for Boris: a completely new experience. For his messengers, it was unnerving in the extreme and he used his aura to keep them settled.

They made their way through gardens wilting with rot and forests where the trees were falling around them. The ground underneath them randomly turned into venomous bog. Tremors shook the ground and air alike, at least one with each passing minute. The cloudless sky occasionally shot lightning and shifted from day to night, swiftly and without warning.

Boris understood what was happening more than anyone in their contingent save for possibly Shade. The nascent reality of Asano's soul realm was unravelling, moving from a physical realm to a nebulous conceptual space. If it moved too far down that path, everyone inside it would be annihilated.

Their destination was the avatar, a looming monolith in the distance. It wasn't moving because it didn't need to. The real power was infesting the land around them. Boris understood it was just a conceptual representation of Undeath's power, but that didn't mean it wasn't useful. It was something for them to focus on in their attempts to aid Asano.

As they drew closer, the building-sized avatar seemed even taller. Belinda leaned out from one of the open sides of Onslow's shell to look up at

"What's it doing?" she wondered aloud.

"The avatar is just a representation of Undeath's power," Shade said. "Its attack is not against any specific thing but the realm itself. The corruption going on around us is the damage it is causing."

The group pulled up in a large forest clearing mostly occupied by the avatar's feet. The space around it was oddly clear of its corrupting influence.

"What do we do now?" Taika asked. "Hit it in the ankle?"

“Something like that,” Nik said. “I’m going to mess this thing up.”

“Is it safe for you to be here?” Humphrey asked. “You don’t have essences.”

“Were you not listening to Shade’s terrible explanation?” Nik asked. “Essences don’t mean a damn thing. It’s no more or less dangerous for me than for you.”

“And this is not truly the avatar,” Shade said. “This is a creation of Mr Asano.”

“Why would he make the avatar in here?” Taika asked.

“So we have something to hit,” Sophie said. “Isn’t that what you were talking about with frameworks and will and whatever? The evil power is all over, rotting this place from the inside out. Running around punching trees and dirt won’t get us far, but this place is all imaginary. Jason imagined up something we can stick the boot into. If we can visualise something to hit, we can hit it.”

Everyone turned to look at Sophie.

“What?” she asked.

“I think,” Belinda said, “that they just realised that you find magic theory a lot more comprehensible when the end result is punching something.”

“We’re adventurers. If the end result isn’t punching something, what’s the point?”

“Miss Wexler is correct,” Shade said.

“She is?” Neil asked.

“About Mr Asano’s purpose, not about punching things.”

“I’m completely correct about punching things.”

“Mr Asano,” Shade continued, ignoring her interruption, “created this representation for you all to focus on. There is a danger, however. The same factors that allow you to employ the representation of the avatar as a target allow the power of Undeath to embody the representation.”

“Meaning what?” Humphrey asked.

“Meaning the avatar might decide to fight back,” Boris said, moving to join the adventurers. “That would be a good thing, though. We’re here to divert as much of this thing’s attention as we can. If we can push it to inhabit this thing and fight us, that will be a major diversion.”

“The suspicious man with the wings is correct,” Shade said. “If you can prompt the power to inhabit the representation of the avatar it will significantly reduce the challenge of Mr Asano’s task.”

“And standing around here having a nice chat will do nothing,” Nike said. “I’m going to attack that thing.”

“How?” Taika asked. “Are you going to throw a carrot at its knee?”

Nik started blowing air from his mouth with a sound like a blowing gale. He rapidly waved two fingers from one hand in front of his face, making a sharp swooshing sound. A small cloud appeared in the air and rushed down towards them.

“Bro, is that the Monkey Magic cloud?”

The cloud stopped in front of them and Nik climbed on. He then reached into the cloud at his feet, pulled out a massive flamethrower and slung it on. The cloud took off in the direction of the avatar, spewing white fire. Taika watched it all play out, jaw hanging down.

“What the hell was that?” Taika asked.

“The reality here is not reality at all,” Shade explained. “This place is only a concept, and that concept is breaking down. It affords a unique opportunity for a will without vast power behind it to shape the world as a god might. Master Nik understands this better than most as he has an affinity for this place. But I would advise replicating your essence powers as the most effective—”

“Bugger that for a bag of chips,” Taika said as a giant robot descended from the sky. Nik immediately came flying back, shouting swear words.

“What are you doing?” the rabbit man shouted.

“I summoned Voltron, obviously,” Taika shouted back.

“You summoned *vehicle* Voltron!” Nik accused.

“It’s the best Voltron!”

“I’m a month-old rabbit who’s never left the pocket universe he was born in and I know that’s the worst Voltron.”

“How?” Taika asked.

“I don’t know. I think knowing that vehicle Voltron sucks is a fundamental aspect of my species.”

“Yeah, he was created by Jason alright,” Farrah muttered. “Can we please stop talking about Voltron and go fight some evil?”

Farrah stepped forward, conjuring her massive obsidian sword. It was currently in its greatsword state, the blade made up of ragged stone protrusions like a crude saw.

“I’m going to use my essence powers as a framework,” she said, “but if we’re just making stuff happen...”

Music started blasting out of the sky and Farrah flew into the air, carried on wings of fire.

“Nutbush,” Taika said. “Nice. Let’s go, Voltron!”

“Pick a better Voltron!”

“Suck it, rabbit!”

Shade watched Taika get picked up by the giant robot, Nik flying alongside as they continued yelling at each other.

“I wonder if Anthony Hopkins needs a familiar?” he wondered.

“Who is Anthony Hopkins?” Clive asked.

“Was that out loud?” Shade asked. “Oh dear.”

The adventurers all moved to the attack while the avatar remained still. It showed no signs of injury from any form of attack, which Shade assured them was normal. The goal was to threaten the power, spreading its focus and buying Jason time. The only path to victory was Jason converting what remained of the power from undeath to death energy.

The messengers also went on the attack. Under the direction of Boris, they all started shooting feathers from their wings. The feathers all changed from their original colour during flight, glowing with the silver, gold and blue of transcendent power.

Half of the adventurers followed Shade’s suggestion and fought as they normally would. Sophie, Humphrey, Rufus and Arabelle all fought as they normally would, expressing their will through confidence in their abilities. Gary fought like his mortal self, although he was still larger than normal with a mane of gold fire.

Stash did not follow Humphrey’s example of fighting normally, as much as the shape-shifting dragon did anything normally. He turned into a massive version of Humphrey, as large as the avatar and Taika’s robot. He had a bushy moustache and was naked other than for a sandwich board with VOLTRON written across the front and back.

“DID I GET IT RIGHT?” giant Stash bellowed.

“Still not the worst Voltron!”

“Shut up, rabbit!”

“STASH!” Humphrey roared. “Put on some pants!”

Neil, being a healer, ignored his essence abilities and joined Nik and Taika in taking a more imaginative approach. He was standing on the ground, sending a line of massively overweight Jason clones awkwardly waddling towards the avatar, many of them tripping and having trouble getting back to their feet. On reaching the avatar, each one tried to crawl up its leg, failed miserably and exploded.

Onslow floated into the air with Clive and Belinda inside his shell. Clive waved his hands like a conductor as lines of gold light filled the sky, drawing dozens of ritual circles. Not only did they surround the avatar but also stacked up like slices of sausage.

“It would be a waste not to experiment with some of my combat ritual plans for gold-rank, given the opportunity,” he said.

Ritual circles appeared over Onslow’s shell, one in front of each of the runes on Onslow’s back. Clive reached his hand out and the little humanoid tortoise that was Onslow reached up to grab it. Clive smiled down at him.

“Go ahead.”

Elemental attacks blasted from the runes on Onslow’s back; lightning and fire, scouring winds and razor-thin jets of water that could cut steel. They all hit the ritual circles in front of them and vanished. They reappeared, replicated many times over as they emerged from Clive’s ritual circles. They passed through the layered stacks of circles, growing larger and more powerful with each one they passed through. Each attack became a storm of elemental power that crashed down on the avatar in a blinding cataclysm.

“I think we need some help,” Belinda said over voice chat.

“How is the voice chat up?” Humphrey asked. “Is Jason doing it?”

“Nope,” Belinda said. “It’s just that we can do essentially anything. Made sense to use the weird magic thing to talk to each other at least. I blocked Taika and the rabbit from joining in, through.”

“You said we need help,” Humphrey said. “What kind of...”

The land shook with the thunder of footfalls as a fourth giant appeared alongside the avatar, the robot and Stash. It looked like Clive, except with the clothing, physique and hairstyle of a woman.

“Belinda,” Clive said through clenched teeth.

“Yes, Clive?” She asked, innocent as a puppy.

“What is that?”

“I think you know who that is, Clive.”

“That is not my wife!”

“Oh,” Belinda said with an awkward wince. “Marital problems?”

Clive’s response died in his throat as they all turned to stare at the avatar as it finally started to move.

Hegemon was empty. It had cast away of almost every part of itself, from its mortality to its name. There was no space, no time. There was only will, power, resolve, and the pain. It needed to embrace the pain in order to destroy it, but it was unsure how. The pain was strong and hungry.

It was an external thing, something that did not belong. Then, there was something else. Something dancing around the pain like dry leaves floating on the hot air of a bonfire. If the fire flared they would be burned up. Hegemon found that unacceptable but could not remember why. It just knew that they belonged while the pain did not. It would not allow the pain to burn them.

It knew what to do now. How to fight. Not like a man, as it was not a man. It was the hegemon, and it was time for the pain to understand that. It would not let the pain harm the things around it, even if Hegemon still didn't know what they were. It knew that they had to be protected, and protected they would be.

Chapter 829

Miracles Work on a Different Scale

The avatar of Undeath in Jason's soul realm wasn't the melting, beleaguered mess the real thing had been when fighting Gary. It stood as tall as a fifteen-storey building, in the fullness of its might. Skinless, red-purple flesh; wounds that showed not weakness but power, purple light shining from within.

Jason's companions had been attacking it by means ranging from the ordinary to the absurd, the messengers piling on as well. Through it all, there had been no sign of the avatar even noticing. From fire to explosions to transcendent energy, neither essence powers nor bizarre tools of the imagination showed any visible impact. Nothing they did could damage it, but they got what they wanted: a reaction from the avatar.

The looming undead behemoth turned to look around, purple light blazing from empty eye sockets. It took in the giant distaff Clive and the robot made from cheap toy plastic. It didn't blink at the humungous moustachioed Humphrey, naked but for a sandwich board, or the swarm of smaller combatants scattered around it like insects.

The aura of the god of Undeath crashed over everything like a tsunami. The raw potency of it washed away the expressions of will being used to attack the avatar. Essence powers faltered; Mrs Clive and vehicle Voltron vanished, along with Clive's ritual circles that had, moments earlier, filled the sky. Stash was returned to his natural form of an elephant-sized dragon with iridescent rainbow scales. The Tina Turner music stopped blaring and those flying suddenly found themselves falling.

The avatar reached out for the largest of its falling enemies, Stash, moving quickly for its massive size. It grasped only air as thunder went off like a bomb, rocking the avatar back while leaving everyone else untouched. The thunder sounded out a word that shook the air, rumbling but unmistakable.

NO.

The avatar recovered and grasped at Stash a second time. A cloud of sparkling light appeared around the avatar's hand, completely arresting its motion. Although the cloud seemed thin, just motes of blue and orange light, the hand would not shift. As the avatar tugged its arm helplessly, more clouds appeared to catch the falling people and deliver them gently to the ground.

The cloud holding the avatar's hand did not budge, no matter how much the avatar yanked at it. It finally pulled its arm free when the undead flesh tore apart, severing the arm at the wrist. Light sprayed from the stump in fits and starts, like spurting blood. The

hand, still inside the cloud, was bleached to a sickly grey. Leached of colour, it burst into ethereal white flame.

On the ground, Jason's companions and their messenger allies were regrouping, recovering after being blasted by the avatar's aura. That aura had been pushed back hard from the moment the peal of thunder had echoed through the sky. Without it pressing on their minds, they could once again muster up the will to fight.

"Are we winning?" Neil asked as a trebuchet wheeled up next to him. "Getting a reaction is what we wanted, right? I'm assuming those clouds are Jason getting in on the fight."

"They are," Shade confirmed. "Mr Asano seems to have resumed converting the power of Undeath for his own ends. The question of whether he will succeed remains unanswered. My connection to him and my fellow familiars feels very odd right now and I am uncertain as to their conditions. I recommend continuing to distract the avatar."

"On it," Neil said. "This whole thing is bizarre."

"Yeah," Clive said, watching Neil pick up a van-sized bundle of Jason clones, squished together inside a net. "That's what's strange here."

Neil loaded the ball of Jason's into the trebuchet and pulled a lever. The trebuchet rocked as it flung the Jasons who let out squeals of terror until they splattered against the avatar.

"I'm not going to lie," Neil said. "This day is going much better than I expected."

"Neil," Clive said. "People have died today."

"Yeah, but not many, given the circumstances. Can you honestly say you expected casualties to be this low?"

"No," Clive admitted.

"Then take the good news where you can," Neil said. "We haven't gotten a lot of it since we first crawled into that giant hole. I want this all over and done with so I can see some sunlight again."

"I think we're all ready for this to be over," Clive said, "and I think it soon will be, one way or another. I just hope we can endure the consequences."

"You're not wrong," Farrah said, placing a hand on Clive's shoulder as she joined them. "But don't get too caught up in how grim things can be. Jason can be a slow learner, so I hope you figure out faster than he did to take your fun where you can. And since this is the most Jason fight you'll ever have, you may as well go wild."

“Hey,” Taika called out. “Does anyone know how to attach a chain gun to a pogo stick?”

The avatar did not dwell on its missing hand, instead turning its attention back on the people preparing to attack it. As it took a step towards them, a giant, nebulous eye appeared in the air in front of it. The avatar reached for the eye as it fired a beam of transcendent light. The beam was thick as it left the eye but narrowed to a pinpoint as it reached the avatar’s remaining hand. It swiftly carved a sigil into the monstrosity’s palm, the symbol shining with gold, silver and blue light. The moment the beam finished drawing it out, the sigil changed colour to blue and orange and the hand went limp, dangling from the avatar’s wrist.

The beam immediately moved on, this time carving sigils into the avatar’s forearm. More eyes manifested around the avatar, one after the other, each immediately drawing sigils across the avatar’s body. The avatar started producing glowing purple ichor from its eyes, mouth and the missing sections of its body.

Glowing brightly, the viscous liquid crawled over the avatar’s flesh. It erased any partially inscribed sigils but did not affect the completed ones. Those had already set in, paralysing parts of the avatar’s body.

The avatar paid no more attention to Jason’s allies as it concentrated on erasing the sigils. It was a losing fight as there was not enough of the liquid to cover its entire body. The progress was slow, but one sigil after another was completed, each one paralysing a body part. A foot, a forearm. An entire leg, although that was not enough to make the avatar topple. It floated in the air, the foot of one leg and the entirety of the other hanging limp.

On the ground, while the others renewed their attacks, Clive stood peering at the sigils being etched into the avatar’s flesh.

“Those look like divine marks,” he muttered to himself.

“What are divine marks?” Taika asked distractedly. Most of his attention was on the large round bomb he was manhandling into the sidecar of a motorcycle. He was rushing to get it done before the fuse finished burning down. After getting it in, he slapped Nik, who was sitting astride the motorcycle, on the back. The rabbit man gunned the throttle and tore off in the direction of the avatar, tyres kicking up dirt and grass. Taika then moved next to Clive.

“What are divine marks?” he asked again. “Is there another god sticking their head in? Isn’t it Jason doing that?”

“I have no idea,” Clive said. “Divine marks show up when gods perform miracles. Churches record and study them, as you might expect. Mostly they’re hard to see, like soft etchings carved into the landscape around the area where the miracle took place.”

Taika pointed at the sigils glowing brightly on the avatar.

“Those aren’t hard to see, bro.”

“Sometimes they’re very easy to spot,” Gary said, moving to join them. His conjured armour vanished, revealing glowing gold sigils carved all over his bare torso.

“These are Hero’s divine marks,” he said.

“They look different to the ones on that avatar,” Taika said.

“Each god has their own,” Arabelle said. She strolled over while streams of energy flew out from a jar floating over her head to attack the avatar. “I saw the site of one of Healer’s miracles. Those markings were hard to find, mostly drawn into dust and dirt on the ground. We had to rush to record them before the wind blew them away.”

“The symbols being drawn on the avatar belong to Jason,” Boris said. “They are his, and his alone.”

The others turned to look at Boris, still leading the messengers some distance away. The tan, muscular messenger’s long blond hair was whipping around him, the air kicked up by the storm of feathers constantly erupting from his wings. There were so many that they partially obscured him as they rushed forward in a deluge, transforming into transcendent energy as they went. The other messengers were attacking in the same way, but none with Boris’ capability. Not only was he throwing more feathers than the others but his formed a torrent that shifted back and forth like a slithering snake.

The group looked at each other and back at Boris who didn’t seem to be paying them any attention, yet his voice had appeared right amongst them.

“I’m manipulating sound with my aura to reproduce my voice,” Boris explained, his voice once again coming from the air right next to them. “Technically, I’m employing an act of will to replicate my aura manipulating sound to reproduce my voice.”

“What do you mean by those divine marks belonging to Jason?” Clive asked. “He’s not a god.”

“Divine markings is your term,” Boris said. “I imagine you ended up calling them divine markings because gods are the only people on your world using that magic. The marks are the after-effects of using powerful intrinsic-mandate magic. When your gods do something to physical reality, they’re using authority. If they want to project their image into a town square or send a message into the head of one of their worshippers, just having authority is enough for something like that. They don’t need to expend any of it. Miracles

work on a different scale. Authority isn't intended for use in physical reality, and when you use enough of it, it leaves a mark. For gods, that tends to be subtle because intrinsic-mandate magic is like breathing for them. Unless they use it to alter a person, it's a smooth process. Jason is still feeling his way through it, though. What he's doing is like carving his name in the laws of nature with a blunt knife."

"I didn't think Jason understood intrinsic-mandate magic enough to use it like this," Clive said.

"Oh, he's not," Boris said. "He's done something to himself to make this possible. I told you that gods have a natural understanding of it. I think Jason has used the fact that he's basically a god in here to make himself more like an actual god."

"I believe that my intervention was responsible for that choice," Shade said. "I convinced Mr Asano to take a characteristically drastic step. As I feel the bond with him grow more muted, however, I become increasingly fearful of where the course I have set him on leads."

They all looked up at the suffering avatar. There was little doubt that it was losing out as it hung in the air, mostly paralysed as it thrashed like a strung-up animal.

"What's happening to it?" Neil asked as he stuffed Jason into a cannon with a stick.

"Our efforts have given Jason the chance to play spider," Boris said. "While the power of Undeath was distracted, he snared it in a web. Now it's tangled up and he can slowly devour it. The good news is, we've won. We just have to wait for Asano to finish the job."

"What's the bad news?" Neil asked.

"The Reaper's shadow may have understated when he said Asano did something drastic," Boris explained. "Whatever Asano did to himself, I don't know how much of him will be able to come back from that."

"I think I know what he means," Farrah said. "My bond with Jason feels like what Shade described. Muted; blanked maybe. Like parts of him are gone."

"Bond with Jason?" Taika asked. "Have you secretly been his familiar this whole time? Is that how he brought you back from the dead?"

"No," Farrah said. "We do have a bond, and yes, it was formed when we came back from the dead together."

"You're totally his familiar."

"I am not his familiar!" Farrah snapped. "Once Jason started down this astral king path, that was when he realised the bond was there. We discussed it and decided to strengthen it, even though he had no idea what he was doing. We barely notice it, even now. Not unless one of us is really in distress, which is inevitably him, obviously."

“Get back to what Jason has done to himself,” Clive said. “You said he’s been blanked somehow? What did you mean by parts of him are missing?”

Boris answered in place of Farrah.

“There are conclusions we can draw based on what we’ve seen here and what the Reaper’s child and the lovely Farrah have described,” he said.

“Might I suggest,” Shade interrupted, “that you avoid harassing one of Mr Asano’s most precious friends while he is in the middle of a rampage using the same mechanisms as a god does when performing a miracle.”

“That is an excellent point,” Boris said. “Anyway, I believe that Asano has given over his mortal aspect to the part of himself that is becoming an astral king. But that astral king part is incomplete and his mortal aspect is too weak. He’s in danger of losing himself.”

“I know,” Jason’s voice said. “Scary, right?”

They turned to look at what looked like Jason standing behind them in his blood robes.

“Colin,” Shade said. “You’re his Voice of the Will; your connection to Mr Asano is stronger than anyone. Do you know what is happening to him?”

“Yep,” Colin said. “Dad basically put himself in a box so he could go full god mode.”

He winced in pain and staggered as the front of his head turned into smooth, featureless skin. His blank face shifted as if something was crawling under it before returning to normal.

“That was rough,” he said, his voice strained. “As I was saying, he put himself in a box so he could go back to normal when he was gone playing god, and I’m the box. The problem is, while being so close to him meant he could copy himself onto me, he wasn’t exactly precise about wiping himself away.”

“Whatever he did to himself,” Clive said, “it’s spreading to you.”

“Yeah,” Colin said. “I’m going to need some help from someone else with a bond once he’s done with his little project. As soon as he’s done consuming the power, we need to turn him back to normal.”

“What of Gordon?” Shade asked. “He’s not a Voice of the Will, but he did bond with Mr Asano as an avatar. His connection is stronger than mine or Miss Farrah’s.”

Colin waved at the sky full of eyebeams.

“Dad roped him into making all that work. I don’t think he’ll be up to it.”

“Well, then,” Farrah said. “I guess you’d best tell us what we need to do.”

Chapter 830

Right Now

The avatar was gone. Pieces of it had been wrenched away, one by one, and consumed by white fire. The final destruction of the avatar marked the final excision of the god of Undeath's power and Jason's soul realm immediately grew more stable. White flames kicked up into an inferno that was harmless to the living but swept across the landscape. Where it passed, damage was repaired and the marks of corruption were wiped away.

From the moment that process had begun, Shade, Farrah and Colin had been trying to contact Jason. They stood facing each other in silence, eyes closed, as everyone else looked on. They stayed that way for a long time, no one saying anything.

"So," Nik said. "This is exciting."

"Hush, you," Arabelle told him.

"You're not the boss of..."

Nik trailed off as he met Arabelle's gaze. As he bowed his head, Rufus gave him a brotherly pat on the shoulder.

Colin opened his eyes, followed by Farrah.

"This isn't working," Farrah said.

"We're reaching him," Colin said. "He's not reaching back. I don't think there's enough of him left to understand who or what we are. If we can just get him to connect with me, it will all—"

He was cut off as his facial features were once again replaced with blank skin. It was happening for longer each time, and with each restoration, more of Jason's divine markings were being etched into Colin's body.

"We have to find a way to make him reach out for me," Colin said. "I don't know how much longer before I'm as blank as he is and we're both lost."

"We need something that resonates with Mr Asano," Shade said. "Something that links him to the parts of himself he left in Colin, but is still part of him as he is now."

"He purged all of that and put it into me," Colin said. "There's nothing left."

"Some things are left," Farrah said. "God Jason didn't just defend himself against Undeath's power; he protected us. He left enough of his normal self in there to know what was important. Part of him is still in there."

“That is what we need,” Shade said. “Something from Mr Asano’s very core. Something so intrinsic to who he is that it remains a part of him, no matter how much of himself he casts aside.”

Farrah paced around, rubbing a hand over her tired face. She froze when her eyes fell on Nik.

“Something intrinsic,” she said.

“That’s right,” Shade said. “To connect him with the aspects of his identity that he set aside, we need to find a fragment of his original identity that he retains even now. Something fundamental to who he is.”

Farrah grinned.

Hegemon was uncertain. It did not know the path forward. It had understood exactly what it needed to do: excise the antagonist, take the pain and consume it. That was done and now its purpose was gone. Its realm was clear. There were outside elements it did not understand, but they were not the antagonist. They were not the pain. They were from the outside, but they belonged.

Prisoners; friends; refugees. Hegemon knew the words, if not their meaning; taken from memories put aside because they kept it from being what it had needed to be. What he knew was that they’d needed protection, so protect them it did. Now, some of them were reaching out, but Hegemon did not understand. Strange connections reached out but they meant nothing. They spoke to parts of Hegemon that had been sent away that he might become what he was.

The connections stopped. It felt a loss but was unsure why. Then they came back, with a one message, not the scattered meaningless garble of before. This was singular, speaking to a part of Hegemon that it did not realise remained. Something buried deep within itself, like the key to a lock. He heard a voice and thought of strawberry blond hair, a savage smile and a voice reaching out.

“Vehicle Voltron is the best Voltron.”

Hegemon felt something surge up from within. A response, driven by a part of itself it did not know still existed.

Well, that is some bullsh—

“—it right there,” Jason said, suddenly standing between Farrah, Colin and Shade. He blinked as if waking up to find he’d been sleepwalking. He was naked but for a pair of lion Voltron boxer shorts. Colin slammed into him, wrapping him in a hug.

"Oh, hey, buddy. You did good."

"I'm so glad you're back," Colin said.

"Me too."

"I want to eat people again like normal."

"He meant to say 'eat like normal people again,' right?" Neil asked.

"Sure," Jason said unconvincingly.

"All I've wanted to eat since this started was sandwiches," Colin complained. "It's been awful."

"I know, buddy," Jason said, patting him on the back.

"I haven't thought about marinating Neil's thighs this whole time."

"Wait, what did he just say?" Neil asked.

"Don't worry about it," Jason said.

"I'm extremely worried about it!"

"Neil, it's fine," Jason assured him. "Colin's a good boy and he's done very well. Which is why he deserves a treat, and since you're a healer..."

"Absolutely not! I want a soul portal out of here right now."

One popped up right next to him and he immediately all but jumped through it. A moment later, he came back out with a glower on his face.

"Jason," he said through gritted teeth.

"Yes, Neil?" Jason asked as Colin finally let him go.

"That portal did not lead outside your soul realm but into a kitchen."

"Did it? The old powers must still be a bit wonky. I just fought a god, you know."

The messengers were shuffling through the portal to leave Jason's soul realm. Boris stood beside him, watching his people leave.

"Not you," Jason said and Tera Jun Casta was plucked out of the group as if by an invisible hand, loudly protesting as she was whisked away.

"Who is that?" Boris asked. "She's not one of mine."

"She's... it's complicated. She challenged me with a duelling power and I had to do something drastic to keep us both alive."

"You survived a duel power?"

"Yeah. But I had to break her to do it. Torment her soul until she opened it up and I could shut the power down. I purged her brand while I was at it, but I had no idea what I was doing. I still don't know how much damage I did. She's a true believer, and she hates me."

"That's good," Boris said.

"Really? Because everything I just said seems bad to me. She's in my soul, so I know everything she does. Everything she feels. The loss of purpose; the loss of faith. How she hates what I've made her as much as she hates me for doing it. Sometimes I wonder if it wouldn't have been kinder to kill her."

"The hate is good. She'll need to get past it, but it means she's fighting. There's passion there. The trauma of attacking someone's soul until they open it up is something many don't come back from. They just shut down. Of course she's damaged, but she's alive and she's fighting. There's a path forward, however long and rocky it might be. That's good. And setting her free is good, even if she hates you for it. I have no time for that 'slavery is good because house elves like serving humans,' crap."

"I don't know what to do with her. I have these other messengers who are keen to join the Unorthodoxy but that also makes her angry. And they're a bit zealous. I don't think fanaticism from the other side of messenger politics is what Tera needs."

"You have messengers that want to join the Unorthodoxy?"

"I don't think they realise how many of you are out there," Jason said. "Their leader seems to think it's a few isolated cells. Keeps talking about 'the seeds of revolution' and such. I don't think he'll know what to do with himself when he finds out the rest of you are out there. Can you take them off my hands?"

"I can do that. I'd like... could I prevail upon you to keep this conversation private?"

The air around them shimmered as a privacy screen was set in place.

"Thank you," Boris said. "As I was saying, I would like your aid in erasing my soul brand, and sooner rather than later. The astral king I used is an ally but I don't like not being my own man."

"That's a lot of trust, letting me in your soul."

"I'm in yours right now."

"And what does being in mine tell you?"

Boris chuckled.

"That making you an enemy would be a very bad idea. I would like your trust, Asano. Jason. I know that's hard when I'm a messenger who knows so many answers you want. So much about you, and you aren't sure how or why."

"I know you have to have been on Earth, and not for a short time. I know that Earth went through a lot and I didn't see you coming out to help."

"We were there, and we did what we could from the shadows. Do you think a secret army of angels appearing would have calmed things down? When magic had just been revealed, the monster surges were happening and the religions were already in a frenzy?"

"I can see there would be complications."

"There was also the matter of an agreement made long ago. To hide ourselves from you until the time was right."

"An agreement with whom?"

"Noreth. You might know him as—"

"Mr North. The rune spider."

"We were wondering how much he revealed to you."

"I knew he had more secrets. Things he refused to tell me. For my own good, so he claims."

"For what it is worth, I believe he was right."

"Then you won't tell me what he was hiding? Other than your existence, obviously."

"I won't. I realise that will make it harder to gain your trust."

"Not as much as you'd think. Someone I already trust also warned me not to try and find out. That it would do more damage than it would prevent."

"You speak of Dawn?"

"You know her?"

"Only by reputation. And occasionally spotting her with you when there was footage of you on the news. Farrah is a somewhat known quantity to the people of Earth, but Dawn remains a mystery. The internet theories are—"

"I know what internet theories are like."

Boris laughed again.

"So, the issue of trust. It seems that if I want your trust, then giving you mine is a strong, perhaps even necessary first step. And since I need someone to go into my soul for some spring cleaning, that works out nicely."

"You've done this before, haven't you? Taken on a brand to infiltrate messenger operations?"

"Many times."

"You'd have to have a fairly well-developed soul space then."

"I do. There's no budging a brand without an astral king's help, though. I can finish it myself, once the process has begun. I've done it enough times that I'm an old hand at it now, but I need someone to loosen the jar before I can get at the pickles."

Jason nodded.

"Once I step out of here, I'm going to get hit with the side effects of having claimed around a quarter of the whole transformation zone from the avatar. Once I get over that I'll do it."

"What about side effects from your fight in here?"

"It's fine. I've rampaged through here a few times myself. Used my astral throne and astral gate more than I should."

"You're an incomplete astral king. You shouldn't be using them at all."

"I know, right? But I've battered things up in here enough that I'm pretty much inured to the level of damage Undeath's power did. It'll finish healing up before I'm done absorbing that massive chunk of transformation zone."

"You are a dangerous man, Jason Asano."

"I suspect, Boris, that you are more dangerous still."

"I've had a long time to work on it. You're younger than *Jurassic Park* and I'm older than the Jurassic period. By a considerable margin."

"How considerable?"

"Enough that I suspect I'll be dodging your friend Clive and his questions for some time."

"I might have a few questions of my own."

"As I said, there are some I won't answer. I suspect I have a lot of historical context to offer, but knowledge is power, and power does not come cheap."

"How about we start with why you're still gold-rank if you're that old?"

"That is an important secret of the Unorthodoxy. Sharing it would be a greater act of trust than letting you in my soul. It imperils not just me but my entire people."

"You're telling me that the Unorthodoxy has some secret that no enemy astral king has dug out in the last however many squillion years?"

"That's not a real number."

"But that is a real deflection. You're trying to sell me a secret the other side probably found out before my planet existed."

Boris let out a villain's laugh.

"You can't blame a guy for trying. It is a secret, though, just not from the enemy astral kings. It's from the rank-and-file messengers."

"Because it's related to how their astral kings drain their potential for authority?"

"Exactly. What we've discovered is that we can learn to tap into our own potential. Stall ourselves out at a given rank in return for more power at that rank. We can't generate authority from it the way an astral king can, but it gives us what amounts to overcharged

mana that we can use to enhance our abilities. I wasn't lying about its importance to the Unorthodoxy. It's one of our key weapons."

Jason looked around, despite it not being necessary to know anything happening in his realm. He had an odd sense that if he didn't take the time to act like a mortal he might fall out of the habit.

"Your people are almost all out," he said, "and mine are getting suspicious about my secret talks with the enemy."

"I'm not your enemy."

"I'm not going to start putting everyone with wings into camps, Boris, but the messengers have a lot to answer for. Fair or not, it's going to take a lot to build goodwill with people. Including with me. At some stage, we need to talk about why you're here and what you want."

"We do. But, as you said, my people are all out and yours are looking at us funny. That's my cue to go."

Jason's companions followed the messengers out through the portal until Jason and Humphrey were watching the last of their friends depart.

"Not going?" Jason asked.

"Jason, you and I need to talk."

"It seems like my near future involves a lot of serious conversations. Is right now really the time to do this?"

"Yes, Jason. This is the time and the place."

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."

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."

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."

"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.”