

Chapter 809

The Reason We Have To

Mahk Den Kahla found the messenger in front of him a worrying oddity. His mannerisms were bizarre, with none of the dignity he would expect of a messenger, especially a gold-rank one. Even his clothes were strange. Mahk had woken up in clothes not his own, but very much in the typical messenger style. This Boris Ket Lundi, as he introduced himself, wore clothes reminiscent of the servant races.

"I think it is clear which of us is the superior messenger," Mahk said. "Surrender your territories to me."

"I can't do that."

"You can and you will."

"Vesta Carmis Zell sent me here. Me and several others. To finish what you started."

"My astral king would never tolerate the likes of you."

"I don't belong to her. She bargained us from other astral kings because we have what she needed: Elemental powers that can resist the influence of the natural array. You do realise that is what corrupted you?"

Mahk frowned.

"Yes," he admitted.

Boris turned to look at the great tree jutting up somewhere past the horizon, so vast and distant that there was no guessing the true size. Mahk followed his gaze, feeling the distant echo of the tree's power.

"Did you know the natural array is a part of this place?" Boris asked.

"I can feel the power coming from the tree, but I sense no elemental energy."

"You won't at this distance. But someone has to get a lot closer before all this is done, Mahk. It will only end when someone confronts that power. Someone who hasn't already fallen to its corruption."

Mahk continued staring at the distant tree. Although many territories held mountains and other features that rose higher than the boundary veils, no such terrain was visible. Only the tree could be seen; the tree that filled Mahk with uncharacteristic doubt. Normally, the eternal presence of his astral king steeled Mahk's resolve in moments of uncertainty. Vesta Carmis Zell's touch still lay upon him, but he could feel the divide between them. In this place he was alone.

"It can't be me, can it?" Mahk asked softly.

"No," Boris answered gently.

The plan was to link Jason's five disconnected territory clusters. It would consolidate his area of control, make it easier to defend, and secure the messengers belonging to those territories. It would also establish a dominant position in the lower third of the transformation zone's map, giving them a base from which to expand upward.

The first step was connecting Jason's territory with those originally claimed by Amos and Gabriel. This would secure the now-free messengers in those territories from being taken over by an enemy. Jason and Jali successfully contacted the newly awakened messengers in the first target regions, convincing them not to attack the silver-rank teams he portalled in on sight.

Those teams went to work expanding the two territories towards one another, Jason swooping in at the last moment to claim each one. At the same time, gold-rankers expanded out from Jason's original domain, ultimately unifying the three territories into one.

This left two territories under Jason's control still isolated. One had belonged to the Builder cult and held minimal strategic value. The messengers that awakened there were already dead. The last territory became the new priority. Originally claimed by Councilwoman Lorenn of the brighthearts, control of the messengers she had awakened there was up for grabs if an enemy challenged for the territory and won.

That challenge came sooner than Jason and his allies would have liked, but not as soon as they feared. Having consolidated the first three territories, they were ready to move on to the next. Jason loaded up those willing to travel through his soul realm, which was not everyone.

The Builder cultists balked, refusing to submit themselves to that much of Jason's power and control. Amos Pensinata also held back, but they needed to leave the core area with defenders in any case. Marek Nior Vargas also stayed, despite his familiarity with the soul realm. He would not risk his people like that unless Jason forced him, which he did not. Marek was willing to at least stay behind and defend their main territory with the cultists and Amos.

The group had been confident in meeting any challenge, having a large force of gold and silver-rankers at their command. Even without using messenger slaves, they were confident. The challenge came from undead priests, the most likely candidates, but in greater numbers than anticipated. Not only did they have more essence users, but they led an army of pallid messengers and undead.

Numbers alone were not enough to deter adventurers. It deterred their allies a little, but they didn't worry about that. The silver-rankers focused on the minions while the gold-rankers went for the priests. Jason's new affliction, ghost fire, ravaged any undead it touched. His weren't the divine flames of the goddess of Death, but they still devastated the unliving elements of the enemy forces. It didn't harm the pallid messengers, but they were touched with undeath energy. Jason's aura suppressed such energy, diminishing their strength considerably. Once Gordon's butterflies got going, they fell in droves as well.

The battle was not a one-sided affair, however. The undeath priests were experts in wielding a less powerful but more numerous force against their enemies. The strongest weapon the priests had was an understanding of their opposition. The priests had a completely expendable army while the adventurers would be maimed with every loss. Messengers and undead were sent in suicide rushes, willing to trade five, ten or even twenty of their own if it meant a kill. The priests had less personal power, but they could use the undead as weapons, detonating them in explosions of bone or poison gas.

The adventurers and their allies understood the mathematics of attrition. If they were willing to take the losses, they would certainly win, but at a price. The priests bet on them not being willing to accept the sacrifice, and they bet right. While Jason and his companions devastated the minion army, they quickly learned not to push too hard. Anyone who advanced too boldly found themselves swarmed by enemies willing to trade deaths twenty to one.

The adventurers were elites amongst elites, learning fast and reacting effectively. They switched to a more conservative approach, watching each other's backs and pulling each other and their allies out of danger. They suffered casualties but managed to escape any deaths, although there were many near misses.

Adding to the danger were the priests. Their malignant powers made healing less effective or even harmful, something Jason could also accomplish. It could be dealt with by healers with the right expertise and power, which they did have. It couldn't be dealt with swiftly, however, diminishing the power of the adventurers.

In the end, neither side was willing to push hard enough for total victory. This was not the underground death city where the priests could replenish their undead forces all but infinitely. While they were willing to sacrifice their minions there was a limit, especially with adventurers devastating those forces. Building them up again would take time and they could not afford to lose them all here.

On the adventurer side, they weren't willing to spend the lives it would take to secure a complete victory. They already held the territory, so their priority was keeping people

alive. Even if the priests managed to slink away with much of their army still intact, the territory was retained.

In the aftermath, Jason worked on removing the malignant power of the Undeath priests on their wounded. Different powers excelled at removing different afflictions, and Jason's was perfect for this situation. His ability, Feast of Absolution, specialised in eliminating curses, diseases and unholy power, the exact kinds wielded by the priests. He's been using it in the battle, but now he was joining the healers for a more dedicated approach.

The power even circumvented some of the traps such afflictions held for ordinary cleansing, as that was not what his ability did. Rather than cleanse, it consumed, devouring the malignant magic to fuel Jason's power. The result left the patients grateful to Jason, but also wary.

As Jason worked, Miriam Vance approached him.

"Did we manage to save everyone?" he asked.

"Almost," she told him looking weary. "We lost a cultist and a couple of brighthearts, all silver-rank. That's damn near a miracle for a fight like that. We brought the best down that hole with us, and it's paying off now. And those brighthearts might not have the best training, but they're seasoned. I couldn't have asked for better forces to command."

"The priests can't say the same," Jason said. "They're all about expendability."

"They'll most likely seek out unclaimed territory. Rebuild their forces by collecting more messengers and undead, animating anomalies as they go."

"Agreed," Jason said. "I have my shadow familiar tracking them, so he'll confirm it or alert us if they do something unexpected."

"We don't have time to wait for them to rebuild and come back," Miriam said. "We left minimal defenders in the larger territory we just unified and we need to reinforce them before someone else comes knocking at our door."

"You want to follow the priests. Finish the job."

"We'll recover to full strength faster than they will. Our people were hurt and shaken, but giving up the victory kept everyone alive. Even slow, painstaking healing is faster than animating a new army. A second round will have us at the advantage, especially if we're the aggressors."

Miriam followed Jason as he moved to the next group of afflicted. His power made their life force visible, vibrant red tainted with sickly colours. The taint streamed out of them, moving through the air in twisted tendrils for Jason to devour, absorbing them into

his outstretched hands. It cast his face in shifting, corrupted light, his nebulous eyes shining.

“If we chase, it’s into an unstable situation,” Jason said, resuming their conversation. Miriam blinked, his casual tone at odds with his villainous appearance.

“I’m sorry, what?” she asked.

“I’m saying that pursuing them into unclaimed territories is a bad idea,” he said. “The living anomalies are strong, now, and those priests aren’t fools. If we have to fight them and the anomalies at the same time, they’ll bleed us in a three-way fight. Even with their diminished forces, they can afford to soak losses we can’t. They’ve just shown us that a battle of attrition is fighting on their terms, not ours.”

“But if we could afford losses...”

She left the sentence hanging but he didn’t respond, focusing on healing the next group. Seeing he would keep ignoring her, she finished her thought.

“Jason, if you lift your moratorium on using our own messengers—”

“We don’t have messengers. I’ve set them free, Miriam. They’re not anyone’s to command but their own.”

“If you and Jali Corrik Fen asked, I think they would fight.”

“You’re probably right.”

Jason and Miriam stared each other down until she sighed.

“Jason, principles—”

“Are not how we win, I know. They’re the reason we have to. Don’t give me the hard choices speech, Miriam; I’ve walked that road and left a trail of bodies behind me.”

“Then what do you suggest, Operations Commander?”

“I want to take a multi-faceted approach. You agree that the priority is linking this territory with the main one we’ve unified already?”

“Yes. Once we can defend them as a collective whole, things will get a lot easier. We can afford to ignore the remaining territory for now. With no surviving messengers attached to it, it’s strategically all but worthless.”

“Agreed. I suggest we balance our forces between this territory and the main one. We don’t do any expanding other than to unify what we already have. Rick and Sophie are both out scouting for others, and finding more allies before taking the priests on again could tip the scales. More allies will play to our strengths while throwing messenger slaves at them will not. That’s how they fight, and they’ll be a lot better at it.”

Miriam nodded.

“That’s the best argument for not using the messengers I’ve heard.”

“More than not using enslaved child soldiers?”

“You’re the Operations Commander, Jason. Ethics is your area. I’m the tactical Commander, and my area is how to win.”

“I don’t believe you’re that callous, Miriam.”

“I have to be, with this much at stake. You seem determined to be soft, so I have to be hard.”

“And we meet somewhere in the middle?”

“Ideally. If we’re not going to recruit messengers to fight them, what will we do about the priests? I don’t think leaving them be and hoping more of our allies show up is a good approach.”

Jason let out a chuckle. As he was in the middle of devouring the dark power out of people, it came out as more than a little sinister.

“Miriam, you said yourself that they’ll take longer than we will to recover. I’d like to see if we can’t extend that timeframe. Not a direct attack but a harassment campaign. Attacks of opportunity, nibbling at their weak points. Striking from safety; shaving their numbers and getting out. Not enough to stop them rebuilding, just slow them down and frustrate their leadership. Exhaustion by a thousand cuts.”

“You want to do it yourself,” Miriam realised.

“I can hide from gold-rankers. Move alone and undetected. Since we all joined up, my role has been little more than showing up in freshly cleared territories to claim them. Since I’m jumping all over the place anyway, ducking in to annoy some priests isn’t out of my way.”

“Unless you make a mistake, get caught, and everything comes apart. Our leader and our territories gone. Yes, you have the skills and the power to evade and escape, but there are no guarantees. When the odds of failure are small but the price of failure is everything, it’s not worth the risk unless the risk is absolutely necessary. Which it isn’t.”

“You’re saying the captain shouldn’t go on the away mission.”

“I have no idea if that’s what I’m saying.”

“Would it help if I put on a red shirt?”

“I hope you talking nonsense means you’ve decided not to go risking your neck.”

“It does. You’ve talked me around, Tactical Commander, but I at least want to participate in clearing the territories some more. The anomalies are getting feisty and I haven’t had the chance to fight enemies like this for a while.”

“So long as you don’t do it alone.”

“Deal. I still think my strategy of harassing the priests is sound, though. See if you can’t assemble a small group that can handle that. Keep it small; we don’t want to divert too many resources, and stealth matters more than power.”

“I believe Lorenn has some brighthearts that may fit the task. They have ash and earth affinities, with powers more suited to stealth than fighting. Drifting on the breeze, moving through the ground, their auras blending into the elements around them such that even gold-rankers have trouble sensing them. Not as strong in a stand-up fight, but they’re the best scouts and assassins the brighthearts have, according to Lorenn.”

“That sounds perfect. We have them here?”

“Lorenn was lucky enough to assemble a good number of them on the way to finding us.”

“See what she thinks about using them, then. They’re her people, so let’s not just deploy them on her out of hand.”

Chapter 810

A Bitter Cup

Undeath's avatar moved through the lightning field in massive strides. As tall as the iron towers dotting the landscape, lightning peppered it to no effect. The magical electricity was more attracted to the avatar than the lightning rods. The undead behemoth reached the mesa in which the controls for the lightning were hidden. It was abandoned now, but electricity arced around the ring of towers on the top.

The giant undead avatar let out a roar that was not angry or pained but a mindless expression of power. It pulled back an arm and then unleashed it in a punch that staved in a massive section of the hollow mesa.

Several territories away, Neil and Gary's group were pushing through an unclaimed territory made up of wetlands and mud flats. Gary was annihilating anything and everything that got in their way, at that moment living anomaly mud monsters. He paused briefly before resuming battle.

Trailing behind the unstoppable demigod were adventurers, brighthearts and cultists. Amongst them was an anthropomorphic rabbit who paused at the exact same moment as Gary. Beside him, Dustin also stopped.

"Is there a problem?" Dustin asked.

"I'm a four-foot rabbit wading through mud that's knee-deep on a tree-trunk prick like you. Of course, there's a problem."

"You're not very likeable," Dustin told him and resumed his path forward.

Belinda, Taika, Humphrey and Stash had been rushing through territories, fighting when they had to and running when they could. The living anomalies had grown more dangerous with every region they passed through, leaving them increasingly happy at not having any territories of their own. Trying to hold them would have either pinned them down or forced them to leave their claimed territory undefended.

Unencumbered by land they couldn't leave or couldn't defend, they crossed hundreds of kilometres per day, moving through multiple territories. Their mode of travel varied from territory to territory, depending on the terrain. Sometimes Stash turned into a swift steed that could carry them all. Other times they went on foot, relying on silver-rank speed and endurance. One territory had featured floating rocks and Belinda had built them an improvised vehicle. She never had time to figure out why it exploded.

Moving fast proved critical as they realised both how large the transformation zone was and how far they were from their allies. They had encountered the edge of the zone in multiple territories, getting a sense of the geography. The edge was a silvery haze where the landscape broke down like pieces of biscuit dropped in a cup of tea.

They had run-ins with messengers and priests, but the living anomalies had steadily overtaken both as the greater threat. They had always been numerous, making them hard to avoid, but that hadn't been a problem until their power started approaching the strength of their auras.

In one territory, the group ended up hiding in a rocky crevice, a concealment ritual from Belinda making it seem like a flat wall. A massive herd of animals was going by, far too many to fight at their current strength. The creatures were vaguely like heidels but with strange features. They were stockier, with fur instead of scales and horns on their single head.

"Are these the horses Jason keeps talking about?" Belinda wondered.

"Nah, those are some kind of cow," Taika said. "Like aurochs or something."

"It doesn't matter what they are," Humphrey said. "It matters how strong they are. If this is their power now, we silver-rankers will end up as little more than prey once more territories have been claimed."

Onslow the rune tortoise had the power to change his size. Right now, he was the size of a small car with the neck poking out from his shell the width of a pony. A boy who looked around twelve was riding him and cheering, a leg slung over each side of that neck. The youth looked like a young Humphrey but with darker skin, along with silver hair and eyes.

"Faster!" boy Stash demanded, which Onslow was fully capable of if he flew. Instead, Onslow plodded over the grass on his thick legs, to Stash's ongoing complaint.

A group of adventurers looked on from the top of a large cloud vehicle, under the shade of an awning. Belinda and Clive's groups had stopped for a much-needed rest after running into one another. They were in another unclaimed territory, a grassy savannah where the living anomalies were large and powerful, but easy to see coming.

Humphrey, Belinda, Taika and Stash had been increasingly desperate by the time they encountered Clive's group. They had still been able to fight small groups of anomalies, but the need to move with care had drastically slowed their pace. More than once they had been fighting one group only to flee as another joined the fray. Now they had greater numbers, gold-rankers and, most importantly, friends.

“You don’t look so good, boss,” Belinda told Clive.

Clive’s group’s journey had been slower. They had left the territories held by himself and Constance, an anchor that had not weighed down Humphrey’s group. Those territories were undefended now, but they hoped to cede them to Jason before an enemy snatched them up. Their group’s subsequent movement had not been as fast as Belinda’s, their numbers forcing them to fight where the smaller group could hide and sneak.

The advantage had switched with the growing power of the anomalies. The smaller group were forced to slow down while the larger could still fight. Their numbers and gold-rankers had proven the match of anything they had encountered thus far.

“We can still punch a straight line through territories now we aren’t looking to claim them,” Emir explained. “There’s no dodging the fights, though, and no question they’re growing harder.”

He nodded at the bus-shaped cloud vehicle resting on the grass nearby.

“Since we were drawing anomalies like flies anyway, we’ve started barrelling through in my cloud vehicle. We usually stay close to the ground, though, as the sky has proven dangerous even to my vehicle. There was a swarm of storm locust anomalies that did some real damage, and one territory had clouds that tried to eat us. We fought them off easily enough, but that one made me nervous.”

“We need to find Jason,” Clive said, his voice shaky. As Belinda had observed, he did not look good. Silver-rankers didn’t normally perspire, regardless of the temperature.

Emir looked at his wife who fared a little better than Clive by virtue of her higher rank.

“Yes,” Emir said. “We need to find Jason. All the times he leaves his familiar in our shadows and, now we could use it, nothing. I think. Shade?”

He looked around suspiciously.

“He better not be here,” Emir grumbled.

In a territory of wetlands, mud flats and mangrove swamps, they couldn’t find a hard, flat surface to draw out a ritual circle. In the end, Neil had one of the earth brighthearts turn river clay into a flat plate and one of the fire brighthearts bake it dry. It wasn’t ideal but it was serviceable. They had tried calling up stone from beneath the mud but the earth brighthearts couldn’t find any.

The entire zone was clay and mud, all infused with elemental water energy that left the fire brighthearts uncomfortable. They had lived their lives with a constant background of fire energy from the natural array around which their society was built. Only the growing

chambers that fed them were different, and most of the fire and magma types were kept away.

Once the platform was finished, Neil went to work. Grand Renewal was the name of Neil's most powerful healing ability, an essence ability that required a ritual to use. One of its features, common to essence ability rituals, was that he could draw it out in lines of pale blue magic. This saved him needed to pour out lines of powder or draw them with chalk. Being an essence ability ritual also reduced the materials required, just a few judiciously placed piles of spirit coins.

Once the ritual diagram was complete, the brighthearts carefully placed a delirious Durrum in the middle. Durrum had been going through withdrawal-like symptoms, worsening as the group pushed itself to move fast. Neil had been putting him through the healing ritual each time they stopped to rest, getting him back into shape enough that he could move on his own instead of being carried.

Neil had become the de facto leader of the group after Durrum's territories were claimed by Gary. Gary might have been the most powerful member of the group but he didn't have the same trust with the brighthearts. Gary's power, and his role holding the wall against undead besiegement, were unquestionable. But to the brighthearts, he was more a phenomenon than a person.

Neil, by contrast, was approachable. They had seen him willing to work not just with but under their own kind, yet still prove not just an important, but effective leader. He had been critical to their successful fights against the Undeath priests, both in developing tactics and his using his powers, both on the battlefield and in the aftermath. Everyone loved a healer. Having proven himself without elevating himself, the majority brightheart group accepted his leadership given Durrum's incapacity.

Gary was isolated within the group. Where Neil and Dustin had made a place for themselves amongst the brighthearts, Gary was a walking miracle. He was venerated, but not incorporated. The fact that he was the singular force propelling them through the territories only highlighted this, widening both the group's admiration of him and the gap between them.

He wasn't completely alone, of course. The adventurers had known him before drinking from the cup of heroes and offered both commiseration and companionship. It was just a very small group compared to the large collection of brighthearts and cultists.

They had picked up even more as they roamed around, mostly brighthearts but also a couple of cultists and even some essence users. One was another member of Korinne's team, Kalif, who had been roaming around with a gold-rank brightheart. The brightheart,

Jindella, had tried to take command of the group. After words failed, the support for Neil surprising her, she foolishly tried force. On that front, Gary's support was all Neil needed.

Also amongst the essence users were some non-adventurers; a pair of researchers from the Magic Society. They told the group about how almost half of the research contingent arrived in the transformation zone together, but now only two survived. The fate of the researchers they didn't arrive with they had no idea.

While on the move, Gary was their key to fast movement through territories. With Undeath's avatar the only thing able to challenge him, nothing was able to divert their path as they searched for others. The addition of the gold-rank Jindella gave them a strong presence to watch their backs, making progress even more stable.

No matter how strong the living anomalies grew, Gary ploughed through them. No matter how many Undeath priests appeared before him, they were driven back. The largest group they had seen was led by numerous gold-rankers, yet they turned around and fled on sight, not even attempting a battle.

The rabbit had been moving with them but did not enjoy the mud and water of the swamps and wetlands dominating their current territory. He was able to hop across the surface while on the move, but anytime they stopped he found himself chest deep. After waiting for Durrum's healing ritual to finish, the rabbit approached Neil and took him aside.

"What is it?" Neil asked.

"Turn on your privacy bubble thing," the rabbit said quietly.

Neil took a brooch from his pocket and pressed on the amber gem. A shimmering privacy field snapped into place around them. The rabbit looked over at Gary who was standing alone, radiating golden light as he watched for threats.

"You need to have a talk with your hairy golden god," the rabbit said.

"Why?"

"You know how I woke up just knowing how to use the controls in the lightning mesa?"

"Yeah."

"Well, now I've forgotten it all. Whatever link I had to that place is gone."

"You think someone else claimed the territory?"

"Someone claimed the territory twice already. First Pebbles, and then great gold merkin took it from him. Neither time I lost the connection."

"Then what are you thinking?"

"Well, shiny boy and the adventurers he had with him were talking about a size-changing undead super-monster with a penchant for random destruction. I think it claimed

the territory and smashed the mesa to rubble in the process. Or because it was angry lightning kept hitting it. Or just because. And given that he owned the territory at the time, there's no way the leader of the Thundercats over there failed to notice. You might want to enquire about that before Lion-O starts falling over on us too."

"I'll speak with him," Neil said. "But, before that, there's something you and I need to discuss while we're under this privacy screen."

"What's that?" the rabbit asked.

"You call Durrum Pebbles, and Gary a lot of things."

"So what?"

"So, they both have names and you're going to start using them," Neil said. "They've both made incredible sacrifices while you were sitting in a bunker, playing with lightning. As of the moment I drop this privacy screen, you are going to treat them with the dignity they have more than earned."

"Or what?"

"Or when we leave this place, you go one way and everyone else goes another."

"You'll kick me out over some nicknames?"

"I'll kick you out over disrespecting the people that have earned our respect the most."

The rabbit stared at Neil from where he was half-submerged in the muddy water of the flats.

"Fine," he said, then started pushing through the water and out of the screen.

Neil dropped the screen, walked over to Gary and put it up again.

"That damn rabbit," he grumbled.

"You really think Jason made him somehow?"

"He keeps spouting off nonsense that no one has ever heard of and doesn't seem to care."

"That's Jason alright."

"It's like Jason was saving up every bad personality trait he's gotten rid of or toned down since knew him, and he put them all in this rabbit."

"We'll see what happens when we put him in a room with Jason. But you didn't come over here to talk about the rabbit."

"No."

"You want to talk about the territory," Gary said.

"Yeah."

Gary's unified territory had become very large. Certainly larger than what had driven Durrum to the edge as Gary had added that to his existing territory and remained fine. Neil had initially worried about the effect of that on Gary's mind after what happened to Durrum, but it turned out he was unaffected. He'd just been grumpy about people asking questions when they should have been running away from the avatar of the evil god.

"Your territory is gone?" Neil asked.

"We left it undefended and it now it belongs to the avatar."

"We knew it was the most likely outcome when we set out."

"I could have commanded the messengers we left behind to hold it off."

"They'd have died without stopping it."

"They'd have died slowing it down."

"It's slow enough. You're the one who said it's too mindless to chase us efficiently. Has that changed?"

"Maybe. Once the Undeath high priest gets ahold of it, the avatar will stop roaming around, chasing after anything that wanders into view. You know all the messengers we left behind belong to the avatar now. The time will come when we have to fight them, and we could have avoided that. Made sure they died before they were turned against us."

"While they're alive, there's still a chance to save them."

"Messengers don't deserve saving. They deserve to die."

"I don't believe that. And I don't think you do either. I know you're angry, Gary. You were served a bitter cup and you have every right to be furious. But I also know you're too smart and too good to let yourself take it out on victims."

"You sound like Jason."

"Whatever Jason might think, Gary, our world had morals long before Jason arrived to bequeath us his otherworldly wisdom. You know when something is right or wrong just as well as I do. Yes, we kill the Undeath priests on sight. They've made their choices, but the messengers are slaves. Slaves with shackles on their hearts and minds, and those are the adult messengers. The ones we've been waking up in these territories are children. It might not seem that way, but that's what they are. Yes, we kill the ones we have to, but we save the ones we can."

Gary nodded. It was slight and reluctant, but he nodded.

"Now," Neil said. "You lost the territory. When?"

"A few hours ago. While we were on the move."

"Any symptoms? Anything like what Durrum is going through?"

"No."

“Are you sure? Don’t hide it from me, Gary. We’re relying on you, and we can make arrangements if you need rest. If you collapse on us at the wrong moment, though, we’re in real trouble.”

“I’m fine. Compared to the power inside me, what owning territories did was nothing.”
Neil looked him up and down.

“Alright. But if anything changes, let me know. I’m going to check on Durrum and then we can move out again.”

“How is he?”

“Getting stronger, but slower than I’d like. He needs proper rest.”

“Maybe he’ll get it soon. While we’ve been talking, a group crossed over into this territory.”

“Who?”

“Some adventurers and messengers. It looks like they’re moving together.”

Rick barrelled through the mud, splashing it aside like the prow of a boat until he reached Hannah and threw his arms around her. Behind him, Marek floated awkwardly over the mud under Gary’s suspicious glare. Next to him, Phoebe Geller stood on the surface of the wet mud as if it were solid ground. She gave Gary a friendly wave before going after Rick at a more sedate pace.

“Thank the gods,” Rick sobbed, holding onto his fiancée as if he was trying to cocoon her.

“Rick, you got mud all over me,” she said, her words hard but her tone soft. She didn’t hide the relief flooding her aura.

The rest of their team, Phoebe, Dustin and Hannah’s twin Claire, all came together.

“Thank the gods,” Rick said again, his voice bursting with joy at having his full team reunited.

“Now we need to find everyone else,” Dustin said. “We were just about to head off in the direction you came from,”

“Good,” Phoebe said. “We’re scouting from a large group. Everyone is finally coming together.”

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.

Chapter 812

I Want Those Things For You

Jason looked at the rabbit standing nervously in the hall. His brow furrowed in thought as his mind started putting pieces together. The transformation zone, Healer's missing gift, the rabbit construct he created in his soul space. Now, this rabbit. It was no construct; there was a soul in there.

It was only normal-rank. It must have been terrifying, crossing all those territories when everyone else was so much more powerful than it. It had been looking for him, whether it understood that or not, and now Jason could see why. Its aura had stood out from the moment it arrived, and now it was standing in front of Jason he could see why. He understood it, like an architect looking at plans he had drawn up himself.

Jason knew that he had created this living being, even if he didn't remember doing it. But, however thrown he was by having created a fully realised being, he knew it was nothing compared to what the rabbit was going through. It had just met its maker.

"I can't imagine what you're feeling," Jason said. "Come into my office and sit down. We can try and sort some of it out."

There was a small town atop the shaft that had carried Jason and his companions deep into the planet. The town had sprung into being quickly, most of the development coming after the expedition had departed. It was a product of the Magic Society, ostensibly built for research, but there was only so much to be learned from a massive hole in the ground. In truth, the town was little more than a luxury resort; a place for the upper echelons of the Magic Society to escape the bleak ruins of Yaresh.

There was a large tea house, a square building composed of mezzanine levels around a central courtyard. There were basement levels catering to appetites beyond those for teas, but the legitimate upper levels did a brisk trade themselves. It was popular with adventurers, merchants and the many other goods suppliers that served the town and its Magic Society patrons.

Two people sat in a room on one of the higher floors, a gauzy curtain screening them from others looking out from their rooms. One was a Celestine with dark skin, silver eyes and a huge silver afro. The other was an elf whose green-flecked hair was a lighter shade of brown than her skin.

Despite their distinctive looks, none of the staff remembered them the moment they looked away. Jason had a similar aura trick to what they were using, but their mastery of it put anything he could do to shame.

“I don’t understand the continuing interest in him,” the man, Velius, said. “The Builder is done with this world and things are on track to reach stability once again. Yes, the link between worlds needs to be stabilised, but that is just a matter of time now Asano has the messenger magic. He even has that boy the Celestial Book likes so much to help him learn it all. And that’s the World-Phoenix’s affair anyway. Why isn’t her vessel the one languishing on this tedious rock? Why are we here instead of Helsveth?”

“You don’t know?” Raythe asked. “The Reaper didn’t tell you?”

“He’s not exactly chatty. I’m his vessel, not his friend. Were you told by the... what is your great astral being calling itself these days?”

“It is given many names, yet claims none.”

Velius groaned, shaking his head.

“That’s pretentious on a scale only a great astral being can accomplish. It should pick a damn name, if only to avoid a conversation like this every time someone talks about it.”

“My master does not want to be talked about.”

“Tough. What do you call it?”

“Master.”

Velius rolled his eyes.

“Surely you have a preference,” he said.

“I will confess a soft spot for the name ‘Keeper of the Sands.’ I like the hourglass imagery.”

“See? That wasn’t hard. And that’s a great name. If it doesn’t pick a name, people will just call it what they like. I once heard someone call your master ‘the Underclock.’ That’s just terrible.”

“Agreed.”

“So, you’ll suggest to your ‘Keeper of the Sands’ that it picks a name? It doesn’t have to be that one.”

“I will not.”

“Worth a try. Putting that aside, though, you know why we’re here? And why the World-Phoenix’s new prime vessel is not?”

“You know the astral beings are factionalising, do you not?”

“They’re always factionalising. I’ve seen signs, but that’s nothing new. These linked planets are a flashpoint, but that should be settling down.”

“It’s not about the planets anymore. As you said, that is the World-Phoenix’s affair. The concern is Asano. He is a seed that the World-Phoenix planted, but he has grown in ways that no one anticipated. His position at the nexus of various events has seen both our masters take an interest, along with gods and the messengers.”

“Is that what it’s about? Stirring up trouble with the messengers? What do we care if he becomes another original? There are more of them around than most of the astral kings realise. They don’t cause any trouble.”

“It’s not that,” Raythe said.

“Then what is it? What was worth sending you here? The Reaper sending me makes sense. He’s already involved himself with Asano multiple times, with one of his shadows as Asano’s familiar. But what interest does the Keeper of the Sands have in this? Why did it send you here instead of the World-Phoenix sending Helsveth? Is your master going to make one of his oh-so-rare interventions?”

“The World-Phoenix has no representative here because she will be at odds with us in what comes next.”

“Which is what?”

“Asano has started to touch intrinsic-mandate magic.”

“So? Also, how? He’s still mortal.”

“One of his familiars is an avatar of doom. He has already taken steps towards it becoming a Voice of the Will, forging a bond beyond summoner and familiar.”

“Alright. That’s unusual, but he’s not the first. It’s even normal by the standards of original astral kings. That’s not enough to get the Keeper of the Sands moving. Your master has always stood apart, even by the measure of great astral beings. You’re the least active of us all, so what changed? I haven’t even heard of your master intervening since...”

Raythe smiled as her counterpart’s eyes went wide.

“He’s turning an avatar of doom into a Voice of the Will,” Velius said, his voice flat.

“Yes.”

“So, he’s linked to the avatar through that bond. Are you saying that links him, through the avatar, to—”

“Yes.”

“Oh,” Velius said and drained his cup of tea. “Do our astral beings want him to—”

“Yes.”

“And you think my master wants this? Yours was always against the sundering, but mine supported it.”

“It seems that the Reaper has changed its mind. You are in a better position than me to ask.”

Velius let out a long-suffering laugh.

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” he said. “That’s because your great astral being actually tells you things. I only ever find them out when mine’s possessing me and the words are coming out of my mouth. When the intent is dancing through my mind like lightning.”

Velius went to pour another cup, found the teapot empty and sighed.

“I need something stronger,” he said. “You’ve been here a while, right?”

“We arrived at this teahouse together.”

“No, I mean on this planet. Have you found anything strong enough to get us drunk?”

“No.”

Velius groaned.

“How much longer is this transformation zone thing going to take?”

Jason and the child-sized rabbit were in the villain office of Jason’s mountain fortress. The rabbit was on the couch sitting opposite Jason in a cloud chair.

“...was when I realised that the gift Healer gave me was missing,” Jason continued.

“This gift that was meant to let you create a life,” the Rabbit said.

“Yes. I was involved in the inception of this transformation zone. All the things inside of this zone, myself included, were in a state of flux. Anything with a soul remained intact, but everything else was up for being remade. That includes the giant tree out on the horizon that was, as best I can tell, intended to be a soul forge. Somewhere in all that, surrounded by the power of creation, I think I subconsciously tapped into that power and used the gift.”

“To create me.”

“Yes.”

“So, I was some magic puppet you made and then you brought it to life.”

“No. You’re not a puppet. That construct still exists; it’s not you and you’re not it. You are your own entity, complete with a soul. A true being, in your own right. I think I just modelled you after the construct. It wasn’t a conscious act.”

“Why give me the shape of some toy you made?” the rabbit asked.

“Again, I wasn’t making conscious decisions in this. That means I can only try to figure out what was going on in my head when I performed this... act of creation. I like the

rabbit construct. It's fun and happy. If I'm going to create a living thing, I want it to have a life of fun and happiness. I want those things for you."

"What about the rest?"

"The rest?"

"Why was I in that lightning tower."

"I don't know. My best guess would be because I have no idea of what I'm doing."

"Oh, great. That's what everyone wants to hear from their creator. As gods go, you're pretty [bleep] at this."

"I'm not a god."

"Exactly. You're so bad at being a god that you aren't one. This is a total [bleep] show."

"What was that?" Jason asked.

"What is what?"

"The bleeping."

"You don't know?" the rabbit exclaimed, hopping to its feet on the couch. "Oh, great. You did this to me and you don't even know what it is or why?"

Jason winced.

"I might know," he said.

"Then [bleep]ing well tell me, for [bleep]'s sake."

"I can be kind of a prick sometimes."

The rabbit looked at him in disbelief.

"That's it? That's all you've got?"

"It's not what you wanted to hear, I know."

"Not what I wanted to hear? NOT WHAT I WANTED TO HEAR? You [bleep]ing..."

Jason waited through the rabbit's tirade, an indecipherable series of bleeps interspersed with anatomically implausible threats. Despite the comical nature of it, he didn't find it funny at all. While he was coming to grips with having created a living thing like some deity of old, the person he created was much worse off. Coming face to face with his creator should have answered all his questions. Instead, he discovered that his creator was weak, petty and flawed.

After waiting for the rabbit to wind down and collapse back on the couch, emotionally exhausted, Jason spoke.

"I can't make any promises," Jason said, "but I recognise that I have a responsibility to you. I don't know how much I can help you, but I'm willing to try."

Jason got up from his chair.

“Come with me,” he told the rabbit.

The marina parking lot was mostly empty, a fresh team having just set out to claim another territory. There were still a few people about, mostly lost-looking silver-rankers. Miriam had started excluding people from the teams as the threat grew too great for them to handle. That mostly meant brighthearts, but also the Magic Society researchers. Some were resting in the empty houses but others hovered around, unsure of what to do. They had no tasks but didn't feel right to sit around, doing nothing. As the danger grew, more and more silver-rankers would face the same idle dilemma.

Jason led the rabbit to the soul realm portal currently open near the railing by the water. They stopped in front of it, looking at the rainbow sheet of energy contained in the white stone arch.

“What does it feel like?” Jason asked, his voice carefully neutral. The rabbit took a long time to answer, staring at the archway.

“Home,” he said finally, his voice barely a whisper.

“Do you want to go inside?”

The rabbit nodded and Jason made an inviting gesture. After a glance at Jason, it moved to the arch, hesitating only a moment before stepping through. The rabbit stepped out the other side, wobbling dizzily for a moment. He was unused to portal travel, but the soul realm portal was gentler than a normal one. Otherwise, the rabbit would have been throwing up on the grass.

He looked around, first noticing that Jason had already been waiting when he arrived. He looked between Jason and the portal in confusion.

“An avatar,” Jason explained. “I am everywhere in this place.”

The rabbit looked around. They were in a glade with a small pond, the sun shining down from a sky pleasantly, but not oppressively, warm. Around the glade was forest, with several inviting pathways leading through the trees. The forested areas not on the path looked ordinary but felt ominous.

“The construct,” the rabbit said. “The one that—”

“Gone,” Jason said. “I can recreate it, if you want to see, but it's an empty thing. You are real.”

The rabbit's gaze turned sharply to look at Jason.

“You're real,” Jason repeated. “I know that you feel lost. Uncertain of who you are and what your role in the universe is.”

“Is that why you brought me here? To tell me?”

"That is for you to choose," Jason said. "I know I disappoint you."

"It would be nice if the being that created me wasn't just some guy."

The avatar looked pointedly at the arch, then vanished. The rabbit looked at the space it had occupied, then back at the portal. The real Jason stepped through and the rabbit felt it, like being caught in a riptide. Jason was connected to this place, far more than simply a person. It felt as if the tide would rise and fall with his breath; that he could bring the night by closing his eyes. His power was unfathomable, the world itself made flesh. This was the Creator he'd been looking for.

The rabbit swallowed hard and suddenly the sensation was gone. Once again, Jason was just a man. Jason smiled, reached out and patted him on the head.

"Your very short," Jason said.

"Kiss my arse."

The rabbit's eyes went wide. He started reeling off profanities, interspersed with joyous laughter. Jason waited patiently for him to settle down, the rabbit standing in front of Jason with a huge grin.

"Is it...?"

"Permanent? Yes. You are my creation. I can change anything about you not shielded by your soul, and that too, if you want. I could turn you into a human. An elf, or a stag. A chainsaw cyborg leonid."

The rabbit looked down at his hands.

"Could you make me powerful?" he asked.

"Silver-rank is as high as I take it and have you walk out of here safe and whole."

"Can you make me an essence user?"

"Not at silver-rank. Essences are between you and your soul. Neither gods nor great astral beings can elevate you as an essence user. Not without breaking you. Some things belong to the cosmos."

"Why am I just a normal-ranker? I did not like having to leave that tower when everyone and everything could have killed me by accident. One sleepy silver-ranker whacks me with a careless arm while yawning and I'm dead. I only left the tower because the one thing worse than leaving was staying there alone."

"I suspect you are normal-rank because being at the beginning gives you more potential than I can imbue. I can give you power, if that is what you want, but not essence abilities. What I can do is give you essences and let you take them for yourself."

"How long do I have to choose?"

“As long as you like. If you go back through that portal, you will resume ageing. In here, nothing can harm you. Not even time.”

“Unless you want it to.”

“Yes. But there’s nothing you can do about what I want. The question is, what do *you* want?”

The rabbit frowned, contemplating, before looking back up at Jason.

“A name.”

Chapter 813

Small, Easy or Inconsequential

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

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

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

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

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

Jason chuckled.

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

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

Jason let out a laugh.

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

“I’m not sure why.”

“Let me get there. There’s no rush.”

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

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

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

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

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

Jason laughed again.

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah. Apparently, people love Colin."

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

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

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

"Uh, okay."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason nodded.

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

"You have something in mind?"

"Nik."

"Nick? How is that new?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Apple?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jason nodded again.

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

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

"The problem with—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No," Jason told him.

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

"Yes."

"And if we insist?"

"Then that would be unfortunate."

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

"It isn't."

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

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

Jason panned the room, his gaze meeting only silence.

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 814

Another Astral King

Mahk Den Kahla was an unhappy messenger. Ever since meeting Boris Ket Lundi, things had been spiralling out of control. Boris was dominant force, his arguments for Mahk handing over his territory compelling. And Mahk was not the last to be swayed, with other messengers they encountered having fallen into line as well. Not every gold-ranker was convinced by words, but those who survived challenging Boris ultimately accepted their subordination. Boris was not just an outstanding combatant but one well-versed in fighting other messengers.

Each individual step that brought them to their current situation had made sense. The options weren't always desirable, but they were acceptable, and Boris had a way of presenting them not just as the right choice, but as the only real choice. That was how they ended up where they were, every step the right one, yet leading down a path Mahk would never have chosen himself.

Seeking an alliance, Boris had led them right into the hands of the Undeath priests. Their massive army of undead blanketed the ground and the messengers they has awoken with their territories dotted the sky. Standing out most of all was the towering figure of Undeath's avatar, holding claim over the unliving's unified territories that the high priest of Undeath could not himself.

The messengers they had on hand were too few to handle the Undeath priests, at least until they spent themselves against the adventurers and their allies. But false alliances with the filthy unliving was not the messenger way. Power and dominance was their way and, through words or weapons, how Boris had managed to keep the other messengers in check. But having watched him closely, Mahk saw far too much that was odd about the man. Too much that was unlike a messenger.

Boris was off alone, negotiating with the Undeath high priest. Mahk and the rest of the messengers were settled high on a mountain, some way from the plateau holding the Undeath forces. Most of the territory was an endless span of red rock, sand and dust. The upper reaches of the mountain held the only greenery, the cooler air of altitude allowing the growth of some sparse woodland. The desert heat was not harmful to them, but that did not make it pleasant.

The messengers had no real place for themselves, with no lesser races to construct abodes. They rested on the lightly wooded mountainside, finding what limited comfort they could. Mahk hovered in the air above the trees, waiting for Boris to return from negotiating

with the Undeath high priest. He could see the plateau in the distance where the unliving forces were gathered. The undead blanketed the ground while messengers taken by claiming territory dotted the sky. What held his attention most was the avatar; a beacon of power, radiating corruption.

It left Mahk unsettled, his own corruption behind him but not forgotten. He only remembered his time serving the strange tree as dream-like scraps of memory, lurking in his mind like hidden traitors.

When Boris came flying through the air, Mahk flew out to meet him. Boris slowed and stopped, unhurried in his movements.

“We need to speak, Boris,” Mahk demanded. Boris didn’t react to the challenge in his tone, his amused smile irking Mahk.

“Yes, Mahk, we do. Are we going to talk floating here in the air, or can we find somewhere to sit down.”

“This is exactly what I want to talk about. Sit down? We are superior beings, Boris. We float above the ground to show our lessers that we don’t just stand taller than them but stand above them entirely. We are their sky, and when we choose sit, we sit on thrones.”

“You think I lack the dignity of a messenger,” Boris said.

“You walk on the ground. You slouch. You lounge.”

“Then stop me,” Boris said, the suspect lightness of his tone a promise of danger. “If you want to stand above me, Mahk, then cut me down. Take my place.”

Mahk scowled.

“We both know I cannot,” he said.

“Then perhaps you need to revise what your concept of standing above is, Mahk. You can talk about dignity all you like, but what does prattling on about honour or principle sound like when you lack the power to enforce it?”

Mahk pressed his lips together tightly, as if to trap his next words, but they escaped nonetheless.

“A servant race,” he said through gritted teeth. “It sounds like a servant race.”

“Yes,” Boris said. “Now, let’s go find somewhere to sit down.”

High Priest Garth stood on a hill atop a rocky desert plateau. A bloody red sunset pooled across the sky, blue fading into darkness as if the day had been stabbed to death. Garth’s grin was permanent as his head was a skull with only pinpricks of red light for eyes. His robe draped over a body clearly not human in shape, a sharp hump and various odd protrusions tenting the fabric in odd places.

Garth looked over his forces, gathered on the plateau. The ground was almost impossible to see, blanketed in the undead. The sky was dotted with messengers, not as thick as the undead but still a considerable force. Less pleasing was the lack of priests, the few dozen remaining representing less than half the original number.

Some had doubtless fallen victim to the transformation zone itself, or had a run-in with messengers or adventurers. The forces of the living had shifted from claiming territory to hunting them, and Garth wanted to know why. They weren't trying to snatch territory but priests, taking prisoners in a series of hit-and-run attacks. Given that he was unlikely to get an answer otherwise, Garth had decided he would wring it from their throats himself. Building up new undead was getting hard now that the anomalies were so strong, so the time to remove their enemies had come.

The biggest piece of the puzzle was now in place, the avatar of Undeath looming over their forces. It held control over their territories now, Garth himself having been pushed to the limit. His unusual nature had allowed him to hold more territories than most, and recover faster from their loss. The avatar controlled them now and Garth controlled the avatar, until such time as he could return it to Undeath.

When the battle came, the avatar would tie up the demigod while their massive horde handled the rest. Once that was done, the horde would turn on the demigod as well, breaking the stalemate between the two divine entities.

Aside from the empowered leonid, only one of their foes was a concern: whoever had the power to weaken their undead forces as a whole. The ghost fire they spread wasn't as powerful as that of Death's miracle, but clearly they were of a kind. There was also this issue of their aura suppressing the magic of undeath. That would have to be dealt with or their numerical advantage would have little impact.

Jameela strode up the hill towards Garth, graceful on her long legs. She was wearing an elegant combat robe and heavy boots, red with dust. Garth was again struck by the longing she engendered in him, despite his unliving body. The little living tissue he possessed should not be enough for such feelings. He would never act upon them, of course, not allowing himself such a lack of discipline. There was also the issue of his body being as ill-equipped to slake such urges as it should have been to feel them at all.

"You have answers?" he demanded as she crested the hill.

"It's Jason Asano," she said, moving to stand beside him.

"The same one claiming their territories?"

"Yes."

"Interesting; you are not the first to bring his name up today. You're sure?"

"I captured some of the brighthearts who were around him when he enacted Death's miracle, as well as a pair of essence users. Asano is the one."

"Essence users? Adventurers?"

"Magic Society researchers. I now have answers on what adventurers were doing underground. I brought them all in alive, in case you want to question them yourself before I kill and animate them."

"No, I trust your ability to make them speak the truth."

"Then we need to target Asano during the battle. Once we eliminate him, not only will they lose their power to weaken our undead but they will lose their territories. It won't cost them power immediately, but it will hurt their morale."

Garth nodded.

"He's silver-rank, which makes him vulnerable, but we need to be careful in our approach. There is a reason that Death granted him a miracle. That he's the one claiming territories when they have the demigod. Undeath himself saw fit to warn me about Asano, which says enough. He is not to be underestimated, and the enemy will protect him with care."

"Perhaps," Jameela said. "My information is that he involves himself in battles more than the people around him would like. His aura will diminish the power of our undead, but he needs to use his powers directly to spread the ghost fire."

"Perhaps we dilute the battlefield. Strike from multiple points; spread our forces over a wider area than a silver-rank aura can cover."

"Relying on such a strategy might not be best," Jameela suggested. "I extracted as much information I could about Asano from the prisoners. They claim that his aura is like a gold-ranker, both in strength and coverage."

"That sounds unlikely. How hard did you press them on this topic?"

"Hard. The Magic Society researchers were highly convinced of this information's authenticity. They claim Asano has been training under Amos Pensinata."

Garth jerked his head, turning his gaze from the forces arrayed below them to his subordinate priestess.

"Pensinata? Is he here, in this place?"

"Yes. I have a full list of names, but Pensinata aside, the highlights are Gabrielle and Arabelle Remore, along with their old team member, Emir Bahadir."

"The treasure hunter? Those are Vitesse adventurers. What are they doing here?"

"They are allies of Asano. The son of the Remores is on his team."

A dissatisfied sound passed through Garth's skeletal mouth.

“No wonder they did so much damage with so few gold-rankers if that is the calibre of them.”

“The high priestess of the Healer from Yaresh is also amongst them.”

“Who is this Asano that he can rally such people around him? Adventurers from the other side of the world. Even the god of death is paying him attention?”

“According to the researchers, Asano is the reason the Builder left this world before the monster surge was over.”

Garth didn't have the eyelids to make his eyes go wide, but the red lights in the sockets of his skull shone a little brighter for a moment.

“The more I learn,” Garth said, “the more this man troubles me.”

“How will you deal with him?” Jameela asked.

“While you were off finding the name of our enemy,” Garth said, “I was making new allies.”

“The messengers?”

“Yes. They know that they lack the power to overcome either us or the adventurers and their allies. And they claim Asano is an existing enemy to them. They have offered their assistance so long as they are allowed to leave the transformation zone alive and Asano is not.”

“They will attempt to play us off against the forces of the living and swoop in at the end.”

“Yes. Tell me what you got from the researchers about what the messengers are doing here.”

Boris was sitting on a mossy rock, under a tree that shaded him from the glaring sun above. He used his aura to create a privacy screen, a shimmering dome covering himself and Mahk. The other messenger had consented to sit, but was floating in the air, cross-legged.

“You are a strange messenger, Boris.”

“Of course I am. To be ordinary violates the core philosophy of our culture. Being like every other messenger is to be mundane.”

“We are taught to obey.”

“Yeah. Funny, that. Lot's of ‘you are the greatest beings in the cosmos, now shut up and do what you're told.’ You can't have reached gold-rank without spotting the contradictions.”

“I’ve seen you do this enough times to recognise it, Boris Ket Lundi. You are moving the discussion from you to me, but this is about you. Your eccentricities are more than just some attempt to stand out amongst our kind. Your strength does that enough that you have no need for such foolishness. You aren’t one of us, are you? You’re part of the Unorthodoxy.”

“Yes,” Boris admitted casually. Mahk uncrossed his legs and floated higher into the air.

“You lied to me,” Mahk said.

“I’ve never lied to you, Mahk. I haven’t always told the truth, but you’ve never heard me tell a lie.”

“That doesn’t matter. What matters is that you are the enemy. The ultimate enemy.”

“Do you really believe that? Mahk? You’re gold-rank. Surely you’ve seen through at least some of the indoctrination they put you. I never lied to you, but will you lie to me and say you’ve never had doubts about what was drilled into your mind?”

“Don’t try that with me, Boris Ket Lundi. We quash doubts because they will cost us everything. The astral king—”

“Can’t get you here!” Boris cut him off. “For your entire life, Mahk Den Kahla, there has been a sword dangling over your head. It’s been waiting to strike should you even think the wrong way. But, for now, the sword is gone. For the first time in your life, you are genuinely free. Use this to think, to really think, the way you’ve never been allowed.”

“You won’t corrupt me.”

“You’ve already been corrupted. You think Vesta Carmis Zell will take you back? After not only failing, but failing so spectacularly that the prize you were meant to deliver to her turned you into a mindless slave? One tainted by base power?”

“I am cleansed.”

“By the actions of Jason Asano, which is enough by itself that she will never trust you again, soul brand or not. If you go back, you won’t be welcomed into the fold. You’ll be made an example of.”

“You don’t know that.”

Boris let out a sigh.

“I do, Mahk,” he said softly. “And so do you. It’s just a matter of whether you’ll admit it to yourself before the ignorance kills you.”

“You said you didn’t lie to me, but Vesta Carmis Zell would never accept a member of the Unorthodoxy.”

“She didn’t. She bargained for the services of messengers with elemental powers and didn’t much care where they came from. Do you have any idea how many astral kings are outside the Council of Kings? The council doesn’t. Astral kings are older than universes and never die. She has no idea that I’m Unorthodoxy.”

“But if I tell her about you, it will lead back to a major nest of enemies.”

“Yes,” Boris said and Mahk narrowed his eyes.

“You’re not trusting me. You’re telling me to switch sides or you’ll kill me for my silence.”

“Yes. The reality is, you won’t get to tell her about me, Mahk. You still have her brand on your soul, and she’ll use it to scour your mind the moment you are back in her grasp. She’ll know everything and credit you with nothing. She’ll kill you for having had this conversation.”

“Then you might as well kill me now. There is no escaping the brand.”

“No,” Boris agreed. “Not without another astral king.”