

Chapter 791

What Makes Them Our Enemies

He was standing next to Gary, chatting in an oddly calm fashion given their presence in an underground necropolis. They both felt the surging disruption in the fabric of reality and Jason gave him a smile.

“See you on the other side, brother,” Jason said.

“Is this going to hurt?” Gary asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason told him. “You’re the first person I know to pick up a temp job as a god. Are you prone to exploding under dimensional duress?”

“I’m not a god, Jason, even a temporary one. That’s blasphemy.”

“That’s—”

“Kind of your thing, I know. I’m a demigod, and even that through the will of a true god.”

“So, you’re more like an intern?”

“What’s an intern?”

Suddenly Gary was gone and the world fell apart. He could still feel his own body but nothing else. The absence of even gravity’s familiar pull left him feeling untethered. Most of Jason’s mundane senses were blanked, with nothing to see, smell or hear. His magical perception suffered the opposite, bombarded with what once would have been an incomprehensible deluge of sensory input.

Jason had been through a lot since the last transformation zone back on Earth. While his essence abilities had barely shifted, his knowledge and power in other metrics had advanced by orders of magnitude. Half-transcendents stood at the peak of diamond-rank, be they essence-users, messengers or some other magical entity. The other half of transcendence was something many spend millennia trying and failing to achieve, while Jason was already striding down that path.

Between his gestalt body and his astral throne and gate, he was unharmed and unbothered. He observed the forces at play with detachment, seeing patterns in the seemingly random chaos. He only comprehended a fraction of what was going on around him, but it was a valuable education in the nature of both reality and the astral realm beyond it. He was glimpsing a realm that belonged to gods and those things that lay beyond them.

It was not the first time Jason had felt the universe break around him. This was his third transformation zone, and each time the experience was different. In the first, he had

broken into a zone already in place, with little power to manipulate the forces involved. The zone itself had transformed him, taking one of his outworlder powers and forcibly evolving it into the Spiritual Domain ability. This gave him the power to imprint himself on physical reality, reshaping it to his own will. It had been an early and critical step on the path to astral king.

For the second transformation zone, Jason possessed the power to reshape it from the beginning. In doing so, he had brought a fundamental change to Earth. The base level of magic had risen and magic no longer manifested in proto-astral spaces before spilling into the world. Jason had brought Earth into a new age of magic where monsters and essences appeared directly in the world.

The third time was set to be different again. Transformation zones on Earth were the result of the World-Phoenix intervening in eons past, to prevent Earth from breaking under the influence of magic. Pallimustus had no such need, not being as fragile. As a result, the dimensional rupture that had now appeared required another hand to trigger the transformation zone, and Jason was the only one available.

An unmoving stone is a whirlpool of cosmic power, Jason could feel the fundamental design of the universe. Imprints taken from countless realities that had come before, the original Builder had melded them into the blueprint for two linked universes. This cosmic experiment in recycling was the very act that had gotten the first Builder sanctioned.

As he sought out every scrap of power and knowledge within himself, he found a tenuous thread of power, something he was barely conscious of. Shade had called it destiny magic, a power to sense the most powerful and fundamental aspects of the cosmos.

Shade suggested that Jason had been using that power instinctively from his first introduction to magic, but they had also seen it used more actively. Gordon was a young familiar where Shade was ancient, but he had demonstrated a connection to that power, something even great astral beings were wary of. Jason suspected his connection to that power was the very reason the familiar had chosen him.

Jason called on that power, crudely and instinctively. He felt Gordon offering guidance and support from within Jason's soul realm, pushing him in the right direction. Jason followed that thread, feeling some distant thing at the far end. It was a whisper in the hurricane of power raging around him, but he put all that aside, reaching out with his soul.

He could barely sense what was tethered at the end of that thread. Stretching his senses to the limit he could feel that it was broken, yet was so much more vast than he was. Even sundered, it rivalled the might of the great astral beings.

Jason could barely touch it, unnoticed, like kelp brushing past a whale. Even so, just the echo of it helped Jason understand how to tame the power storming around him. The distant power was a thing of boundaries and that was what he needed. He could not control the power so much greater than himself, but he didn't need to. The right nudge, in the right way, would cause the power to bind itself, setting in motion the forces that would resolve into a transformation zone.

Jason drew on his soul realm. He tapped his astral throne and gate, along with his power to create spiritual domains. He took a delicate hand, aware of his shallow understanding of the forces at play, and the insignificance of his power before them. He used his meagre power, along with every scrap of knowledge and intuition he had painstakingly built up about cosmic forces and physical reality. He let the distant power guide him, a weak and imperfect vessel, but he was determined it would be enough. Jason had always done what he could with what he had. Now he had to be the butterfly, flapping its wings and waiting for the hurricane.

Jason felt it when the storm of dimensional forces took the first step towards forming a transformation zone. It was a tiny thing as the patterns within the chaos became slightly more ordered. The crux of a transformation zone coming into being was the imprints of older universes used by the old Builder. Broken shards of reality started collecting, taking shape in accordance with those imprints, forming the territories that would make up the zone.

The physical area containing the underground realm of the brighthearts stopped existing by most metrics. The astral space inside it ruptured and the whole area was encapsulated in a dimensional boundary. From there, the transformation zone began forming in earnest.

The transformation zones that Jason was familiar with weren't the common type that had appeared on Earth. Those were self-resolving, leaving a scar on the universe but repairing the damage they were a reaction to without intervention. It was the ones that formed over an astral space that were too unstable, requiring an extra hand to properly resolve without explosively ripping holes in the universe. Special transformation zones were comprised of territories that had to be unified before the transformation zone could serve as a repair to reality.

Jason had plenty of experience claiming and unifying transformation zone territories, and as he watched territories form in this new zone, he decided to get a jump on the competition. Given his access to the already forming zone, he was confident that he could not just pre-emptively claim a territory for himself but establish a solid foundation from which to expand and unify the entire zone.

Experience let Jason know that, in the early stages, claiming territories was easy. The more that were claimed, however, the more difficult it would become. The baseline was also set by the most powerful people within a zone. That meant gold-rank or even something more powerful given the presence of Gary and the avatar of Undeath. If the zone reacted to their divine power things would become even more dangerous than anticipated.

These thoughts galvanised Jason's resolve to establish himself quickly and strongly. He picked a single territory as it was forming, something that had a familiar feel so he could better work with it. The territory was something close to Earth-like, which made it easier for him to shape.

He exerted his will, shaping its formation and imprinting himself upon it. There were limits and restrictions, elements he didn't fully understand, but this was something he was comfortable with, both in scale and scope. Claimed transformation zone territories was something he'd done many times, and he was just getting in early. He couldn't define the specifics, but the territory would very much be a reflection of him as his will imprinted upon it.

The wild forces calmed as the transformation zone developed. Territories formed and linked together to establish the geography of the zone. The space was highly manipulated, like others he had seen, with the dimensional barrier containing it smaller than the space inside.

Everyone in the underground realm had been dragged in and would be scattered around the territories at random. Jason suspected that only he and Gary, who was filled with divine power, had managed to retain consciousness throughout the process. The Undeath avatar was an open question, as it was a direct conduit of Undeath's power and the god was now cut off. Ideally, they would eventually find it standing around doing nothing. The messengers were another question, with their gestalt bodies, but that alone was unlikely enough to let them keep their senses.

Jason had sensed presences floating through the dimensional chaos but had not dared reach out to them. Not only could he not identify them but he did not want to risk affecting them adversely. Essence users were highly resistant to change but not everyone

was an essence user. What effect the zone would have on the elemental messengers, the Builder cult converted and the brighthearts, Jason could only wait and see.

On Earth, many normal-rankers had been transformed into other races, in accordance with the transformation zones in which they found themselves. He'd seen people become leonids, celestines and other races native to neither Earth nor Pallimustus. Some managed to resist the change, but most were affected, their souls accepting the transformation. As best Jason understood, the process was a more gentle version of what the Builder had attempted on him when trying to implant a start seed: Applying pressure until the soul willingly accepted the change.

The various transformation zones settled into their final form and Jason pushed himself into the territory he had shaped for himself. It had taken the form of his hometown, the sleepy tourist destination of Casselton Beach, with one major change. There was a mountain behind the town that did not exist on Earth and had been carved into the shape of Jason's head. He manifested inside the reality, high in the air. His cloak formed around him, although it was his aura he used to hold himself aloft.

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- This area of the local physical reality has been in a state of dimensional flux and has been isolated by [Nascent ??? Intervention]. The influence of a broken astral space on the area has prevented the natural resolution of the transformation zone. This special transformation zone must be unified to restore stability, reintegrate it with physical reality and re-establish an astral space.
 - The transformation zone can be unified by claiming all non-central territories.
 - Territories can be claimed by eliminating a final anomaly that will appear in each territory when all other anomalies are eliminated. If multiple people are present in a territory when the conditions for claiming it are met, it must be ceded to one individual through conflict or forfeit.
 - Claiming additional territories after the first will unify them with already claimed territories.
 - The central territory cannot be claimed until all other territories are unified. The Central territory is in an incomplete state. The final state of the central territory shall be defined when it is unified with the other territories.
 - Final unification requires the ability to reshape the transformation zone to reintegrate it with physical reality. Final reunification without this ability will cause a dimensional rupture as the transformation zone attempts to reintegrate with physical reality.
 - Some inhabitants of the transformation surge have been affected by elements isolated in the central territory and cannot effectively function without replacing that influence. Those inhabitants have been placed into stasis in the territories in which they arrived. They will be imparted with the influence of whomsoever claims the territories in which they are held. The inhabitants in stasis may or may not survive this process, depending on the nature of the influence.

- The influence of the [Nascent ??? Intervention] on the special transformation zone has established an interface available to all inhabitants.
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Jason read over the system box, although some of this information was already imparted by his senses. He could feel his influence finalising his control over the territory below. His efforts had created it without anomalies, thus making it his own. He could feel the last vestiges of his influence still taking hold and he looked over the terrain while he waited for the power to settle.

Below him was the town, the small mountain behind it not much more than a very large hill. Even so, having a mountain fortress in the shape of his own head ticked one of the big-ticket items off his bucket list. He looked at it proudly as his familiars manifested around him. Shade emerged from his void cloak while Gordon just appeared. Blood spilled from Jason's hand, collecting into a blob that became a replica of Jason himself. The blood clone conjured a starlight cloak to keep himself in the air.

"It would seem that you have much more control here," blood clone Colin said in Jason's voice. "No need to unlock powers and it appears everyone will have your system interface."

Shade was looking at the mountain fortress.

"You couldn't help yourself, could you, Mr Asano?"

"Hey, that just happened on its own," Jason said. "I only got to shape this place vaguely, not set all the details. It just turned out this way."

"Of course it did, Mr Asano."

Jason turned his gaze to the distance, far beyond the reach of his own territory. Although the air was hazy, the shape of an impossibly large tree loomed over the horizon.

"I'm pretty sure the messenger tree, soul forge or whatever it is got sealed away in that central territory," Jason said. "Now it's winner take all."

"We knew that going in," Colin said. "Learning the specifics doesn't change that."

"You're right," Jason agreed, "and we've even got a head start. I think we should use it to get a handle on things. Can you sense those people in the air, way above us?"

Shade and Colin looked up while Gordon flashed his orbs in the blue and orange flickering patterns he used to communicate. He was the familiar most closely tied to Jason's aura and his perception was boosted accordingly, so he had also sensed them.

"They're messengers," Jason said. "Held in stasis, which apparently means just hanging way up in the air. I think they were the elemental messengers, but with the tree sealed away, they're just regular messengers now. But without the imprinting of an astral

king, or even the corrupted imprint from the tree that left them all messed up, they're incomplete."

"The inhabitants that cannot effectively function," Shade said. "The ones mentioned in the system box. This means that when a territory is claimed, any messengers in it will be claimed as well."

"They could be trouble," Colin said. "I should go up there and eat them before they wake up."

The others all turned to look at him.

"It was just a suggestion," he said defensively.

"Not all the messengers were spawned by the tree," Jason pointed out. "Some were sent down by Jes Fin Kaal and already have an astral king. They're probably free of the tree's influence now and will be competitors."

"They were sent to create the soul forge from the natural array," Shade said. "They likely have the magical knowledge to unify the transformation zone properly."

"Yeah," Jason agreed grimly. "If they don't know how already, they can probably figure it out."

"Still doesn't change what we have to do," Colin said. "We fight, we win, we eat what's left. Oh, don't look at me like that; there aren't any vegans here."

"I think Shade and Gordon are technically vegan," Jason said. "They only eat raw magic. Mostly. I did keep catching Gordon disintegrating candy and trying to inhale the fumes, but only while we were in America. I think he likes high-fructose corn syrup."

Jason felt a shift as his influence finished permeating every corner of the territory.

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- Conditions to claim this territory have been met.
 - Due to your influence already having been established, other individuals in the territory cannot contest your claim.

 - You have claimed a territory.
 - You may extend your influence into another territory in order to claim it.

 - Your influence is being imposed on the inhabitants in stasis.
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Jason felt a connection to the space around him as if the land, air and sea were all extensions of himself. It felt like his spirit domains back on Earth. He could feel two people on the ground and hundreds of messengers in the air. His power, invested in the territory, was already reaching out to influence the messengers.

After helping the messengers in his soul space shrug off the influence of their astral king, Jason wasn't about to create an angelic slave army. Using his experience, he altered

the influence of his power as it seeped into the messengers. He guided the power as they awakened, leading them to not bear his brand but to each make one of their own, setting them free. It was the work of a few moments and soon the messengers were descending from on high.

“I assume you’ve set them free,” Shade said.

“Of course,” Jason said.

“Our enemies won’t do the same,” Colin pointed out. “They’ll use them as weapons.”

“Which is what makes them our enemies,” Jason said. “Also, how is setting them free worse than eating them? That is what you suggested, right?”

“It would make for better planning,” Colin said.

“How do you figure that?” Jason asked.

“I think better on a full stomach.”

Gordon’s orbs flashed a sequence that pointed out that Colin belonged to a species that devoured every living thing on entire planets, suggesting he was incapable of having a full stomach.

“That’s a good point,” Jason said as Colin glared at Gordon. “Do you even have a stomach?”

“Do you not remember when I ate that world-taker worm queen?” Colin complained. “It took me weeks to sleep that meal off.”

“Ooh, you’re right,” Jason conceded. “He’s got you there, Gordon.”

Gordon flashed more lights in response and Colin jabbed a finger in his direction.

“I do not look fat!”

Chapter 792

Share the Responsibility

Both in the underground realm of the brighthearts and previous transformation zones, dimensional powers had been tricky. Still floating in the air with his familiars, Jason tried opening a gate to his soul realm and was pleasantly surprised to find that it worked. A circle of milky white stone appeared in the air and was filled with rainbow light as the portal opened.

At least in the territory he had claimed, Jason had access to his soul realm and the resources within. What he needed right now were the messengers he had stashed away. Jali Corrik Fen and Marek Nior Vargas emerged from the portal.

Marek was a gold-ranker who had led his personal followers to Jason in hope of escaping the oppression of the messenger astral kings. His obsession was joining the Unorthodoxy, the messenger resistance movement. Before that could happen, he needed to convince Jason to set them free.

Jali was only silver-rank. Despite a life of misgivings about messenger doctrine she had carefully avoided becoming entangled with the Unorthodoxy out of fear. Used as a pawn by her masters, she had been liberated by Jason.

Messengers were far from aerodynamically sound but the magic that allowed them to fly was primarily seated in their wings. Marek and Jali both spread their wings to hold themselves aloft, situating themselves in front of Jason and his familiars. They turned their gazes upward, sensing the messengers that had been released from stasis, purged of the corrupted messenger tree's influence. They had stopped descending and were having some kind of discussion.

"Where are we?" Marek asked. "Some kind of dimensional space? A spirit domain? I can feel your power everywhere. Who are those messengers?"

"It's complicated," Jason said. "For now, just stand behind me and don't say anything unless I tell you to."

"I am your prisoner, Jason Asano, not your servant."

"Then go back through the portal; there's too much to explain right this second."

Marek looked at Jason, then the sky above them and then the still-open portal.

"This is not the moment to test me, Marek," Jason warned.

"Those are my people up there."

"You don't know what they are. And I just realised that having you here was a mistake. Go back in."

Marek stared Jason down for a long moment before turning and vanishing through the portal.

“He’ll want them for the Unorthodoxy,” Jason said. “I can’t let that happen.”

“Why not?” Jali asked. “Are you concerned that the other astral kings will actively pursue you if you start freeing messengers in large numbers?”

“I am now,” he said, giving her a pointed look. “But my concern is about something more important than that. These messengers are young. None are more than a year old, and until moments ago, their minds had been corrupted for their entire lives.”

“I can sense their confusion,” Jali said. “Their uncertainty. They’re worried about coming down to face us. Where did they come from?”

“They were elementally corrupted messengers.”

Jali had been one of the few messengers to see the underground realm and get out alive and uncorrupted, so she knew what he referred to.

“The corruption was removed when they were brought into this space, but it left them in a condition I suspect your kind are in directly after being created. They are, practically speaking, newborns.”

“That would mean they needed to be imprinted.”

“Because I’m already imprinted on this territory, it tried to spread my imprint to them. I intervened and had them form their own marks. Like you, but without the need to access your soul.”

“That’s normal for new messengers, but I’ve never heard of messengers being born without an astral king to obey. Not surprising, given that they’d probably purge entire collectives to cover something like that up. Where did they come from, though? There are more messengers up there now than were corrupted when we went down there.”

“A corrupted birthing tree.”

Jason pointed and Jali followed his gaze to the massive tree on the horizon. Her jaw dropped.

“That’s perverse,” Jali said. “A birthing tree outside of a birthing world? The messengers it produces would be—”

“Twisted monstrosities?” Jason finished. “Yes. But this place seems to have rectified the corruption.”

“It doesn’t matter. There’s no way they would ever be accepted. There’s a reason we worked with the Purity church to summon our forces into this world. Our doctrines fall into alignment in areas such as on excising the tainted.”

“Will you be able to accept them?”

"I don't know. My whole life I've been forcing myself to follow the line, even inside my mind. I need to re-examine everything I believed."

"And Marek?"

"I'm not sure. He rejects the astral kings so absolutely yet his thinking remains extremely traditional. But if he thinks he can use them as a weapon, he will."

"So much of what I've learned about your kind has profoundly disturbing implications. The need to brand newborns? I won't let Marek have these children."

"They're not children," Jali said. "We come into being with ancestral knowledge. Language; an understanding of the cosmos. The ways of conquest and war."

"Knowledge is not wisdom. It's not experience. You, of all people, understand the harm that can be done from an insulated upbringing built around a single, extreme point of view. I support the Unorthodoxy in principle, but Marek would turn them into child soldiers. I won't let him have them any more than I would an astral king."

"And if they want to go with Marek?"

"Then they'll have a chance to make that choice — once they're ready to make an informed one."

"And who decides when that is? You?"

"Us. You and me."

Her eyes went wide.

"I'm not ready to take responsibility for that. I've barely broken away from my own subjugation."

Jason laughed out loud.

"You think being ready has anything to do with it? I would love the chance to be ready for things. It really would have made the last half-dozen years a lot nicer. I'm sorry, Jali, but if you want to be ready for things, you need to get very far away from me. And, if I'm being honest, I think you're too late for that to be an option."

"Where would I go anyway? I don't want anything to do with the astral kings or the Unorthodoxy."

"You don't?"

"Marek Nior Vargas is passionate, but he's also driven to the point of rigidity. Whether serving or fighting the astral kings, he is entirely defined by his relationship to them. I want to figure out what I am apart from all that. The people that enslaved me as well as the ones fighting them. I don't know what to do or where to go, even assuming you allow me to go anywhere. I don't even know where I am now."

"I know that feeling. Lost, directionless. Suddenly aware of just how wrong you were about everything. Don't let it show. It's going to take some time to figure out, but until you do, don't let the world see it."

"Is that what you did?"

"Yeah."

"How did that work out?"

"Mixed results, if I'm being honest. But these messengers up there? Deciding if they're going to come down here and face us? They're more lost than you or I will ever be. We should at least give them the illusion that someone knows what they're doing."

"I don't know what's going on," Jali said. "What you've brought me into. But it's obviously complex and ongoing. It would have been more practical if you'd let your brand imprint on these and change it once things have calmed down."

"Even assuming the next crisis would be kind enough to wait for this one to pass," Jason said, "that's not acceptable. Yes, it would be more practical, but the thing about good and evil is that no one ever chooses evil. They choose selfishness or prejudice or easy answers over hard truths. They choose the expedient path, even if it means getting their hands a little dirty because they can make up for it later, right? Sometimes getting your hands dirty is what it takes. The ends justify the means."

Jason looked down at his own hands.

"I've told myself those things. Sometimes I've been right, and sometimes it was just an excuse. It would be easier to let those children become slaves. To pretend they're adults because they look like it, despite only having been truly conscious for a matter of minutes. If they do what they're told, at least for now, we wouldn't have to deal with their confusion. Instead of a liability they would be an asset, and a much-needed one for what lies ahead. And I could always erase my brand when it's over. Of course, that would be cutting them loose to face everything serving me pushed aside, plus the trauma they'd just been through. And there will be another threat they would be so useful for. I can set them free when there's time to stop and help them properly. I'll just leave the brand for now."

Jason's face was filled with disgust.

"We like to think we're better than we are," Jason said. "I've had to confront the fact that I'm not, but I've also seen that I can be. It takes discipline. Diligence. Determination. Recognising that while sometimes you do have to compromise, other times you don't. The temptation doesn't come with a choice between right and wrong. It comes with a choice between right and easy."

He ran his hands over his face and took a deep breath.

“I have a habit of going off on moralistic rants,” he explained. “It’s one of the ways I work through my insecurities about my own moral worth, and my friends tend to get caught up in it. And my enemies, sometimes. My dad. I have a lot of family troubles, but I have trouble imagining a life like yours where the concept of family is so alien. We think so differently, yet I find myself searching for common ground. I never found it with Marek.”

Jason and Jali were floating in the air. Their heads were at the same level which left the much shorter Jason’s feet somewhere around her thighs. He looked into her eyes, his nebulous eyes searching for something within her.

“Does anything I’ve said make sense to you?” he asked. “I’ve been trying to find some empathy in Marek for a while now, but you were right: His first concern is taking the fight to the astral kings. Even his companionship is more camaraderie than friendship. That’s not inherently bad, but it is a somewhat mercenary sensibility. I have higher hopes for you.”

“Why does any of this matter?”

“The way we treat people always matters. If you want something grander, then I’m still deciding how to interact with your people. I suspect that, in the millennia to come, how I deal with the messengers will affect a lot of people.”

“And what? You’re going to decide that based on me?”

“Not just that, of course, and not just now. But you have the chance to make me see something I don’t in Marek or Tera Jun Casta. What you and I learn from each other could end up being very important.”

“That’s too much responsibility.”

Jason grinned.

“I know, right? You get used to it. With a good support system and enough therapy.”

“You’re joking, but this isn’t a small thing you’re putting on me.”

“Yeah. Joking helps, trust me. I tried being super-serious and I turned into an angry prick.”

Jali turned her back to Jason, rotating in the air.

“This is too much to put on me.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “But you’re the person on the spot, and you’re stronger than you think. I saw you stand up to your astral king. The reality is, I don’t know how many free messengers are out there, but I’m guessing not a lot. That makes you important, and being important sucks. I’m hoping you can help me find a way forward with the messengers beyond the options I already have. The astral kings and their Nazi angel army obviously can’t be worked with. Marek’s Unorthodoxy has some real ‘victory or death’ energy, which

is less bad but definitely not good. I'm starting to get a Project Mayhem vibe that I don't like."

She turned back to face him.

"How much of what you say do people understand?"

"You're a smart woman, Jali. Are you telling me that you're not getting the gist from context clues?"

"No. But why would you talk to people like this?"

Jason held out his hand and squeezed with his fingers. Jali's magical senses felt the fabric of reality around her bend alarmingly. Then the sensation was gone as if it had never been.

"I have to remember who I am, Jali. I change, but if I ever let go of who I am without all this power, the power becomes who I am. That's not good for anyone. Except the god of dominion, maybe."

"You're sharing a lot with me."

"I'm hoping it will help you. You're not on the path I walked, but I think you'll see a lot of the same landmarks."

"Should you be thinking about things like this when you have more immediate issues to deal with?"

"Yes, I should. I've always had this idea in my head that I didn't choose the responsibilities that now rest on me, but that hasn't been true for a long time. I did choose, many times, and now I have to live up to that. You've sensed the brighthearts in my soul realm. I've kept them underground, away from the rest of you, but you've felt their presence."

"Yes."

"They represent what's left of an entire civilisation. An entire species. I'm responsible for them now because I chose to be. Just like you and I are about to be responsible for these messengers above us. And a lot more before we're done. This is just one territory of many."

He drifted closer and put his hands on her shoulders.

"If you don't want to be part of that, I get it. My asking you isn't fair, I know that. Not when there is so much I haven't told you and when you're still coming to terms with the massive changes you've gone through. The portal is right there. If you go through it, I won't ask you to do anything like this again. But I'm certain that you and I together can do better for these people than I can alone. I hope you'll choose to share the responsibility with me."

"I... you're asking a lot that I wasn't ready for."

"Yes. And you don't have a lot of time to choose."

They both looked up at the messengers gathered in the air. While Jason and Jali had been talking, so had they.

"I think they're picking someone to come and talk to us," Jason said. Proving him right, two of the messengers broke off and started floating downwards.

"Alright team," Jason said. "Let's not spook the hopefully nice baby angels."

Shade disappeared into the void of Jason's cloak, Colin dissolved into a blood mist that Jason absorbed and Gordon just vanished, Jason's aura pulsing as he did. Jason looked at Jali.

"I'll stay," she told him.

"Good. Now just try and look like you know what you're doing."

"I don't know what I'm doing."

"Which is when looking like you do is most important."

Jali floated to Jason's right and they hovered side by side to meet the pair of descending messengers. Jason pushed his hood back to show his face.

The messengers hovered in front of them, wings extended like Jali's. Jason's cloak floated out to his sides like the celestial wings of a star phoenix. The messenger pair showed no trace of elemental taint and wore diaphanous robes apparently conjured up by the transformation zone. One was female, with long dark hair, while the other was a sandy-haired male. Both had the statuesque proportions and exquisite features common to messengers. They glanced at Jali before locking their gazes on Jason.

"You are the ruler of this place," the female messenger said.

"I am," Jason said. "My name is Jason Asano."

"I... I should have a name," the female messenger said, her expression breaking into confusion and fear. "I can feel that I should have a name, but something is wrong."

"There is much you don't know," Jason said. "Yes, something has gone wrong and I know you have many questions. We have the answers you need."

The two messengers looked at him with a mixture of wariness and hope.

"You are right that you should have a name," Jali said.

"Then why don't we?" the male messenger asked.

"We'll go through everything," Jason told them. "Some of it will be hard to hear, but we can answer your questions, and we will. But I think we should tell all of you together."

He glanced up then back at the main messenger group, far above them, then back to the two in front of him. They shrank back, their nervousness almost startling coming from messengers.

“If you were hostile,” the female messenger said, “is there any place we could run from you?”

“Perhaps,” Jason said. “There are many territories in this realm and, for now, I only possess this one.”

“We were going to belong to it,” she said. “To you. We could feel your influence being imprinted upon us, but then it stopped.”

“I apologise for that experience,” Jason said. “It is an unfortunate interaction between the nature of this place, the nature of your kind and the circumstances that brought all this about. I will explain it all. For now, just know that I intervened because I do not own people. I made sure that I have no intrinsic hold on you.”

“He has helped me in a similar way,” Jali said. “I was slave to another and he freed me, as he has freed you.”

“Yet you serve him?” the man asked.

“I... stand by him,” Jali said, prompting a sideways glance from Jason. “That is my choice.”

The woman continued staring at Jason.

“You are not of our kind,” she told him. “Yet, I feel something from you. When we awoke, there was an instinct to kneel. To acknowledge ourselves as less than you. But what you did, what you changed, it altered that instinct as well. I sense your power, but I’m no longer driven to obey it.”

“Good,” Jason said. “As I already told you, I don’t own people. It’s a personal policy that’s caused me more problems than it really should.”

He gestured to Jali.

“This is Jali Corrik Fen. I hope you will collect your people and wait with her while I go deal with some of the others who share this space with us. Then we can have a nice long talk.”

Chapter 793

Contrition Born at the Point of a Sword

Rick Geller was not happy. He had no compunction about putting his life on the line to protect people; he was an adventurer and that was the job. He'd known that when he signed up and he'd lived that life ever since. But every time he was in the same city as Jason Asano, that job got extravagantly out of hand.

He knew Jason wasn't causing these things, or even involved all of the time. Jason hadn't participated in the disastrous expedition out of Greenstone or the fortress city battles in the Storm Kingdom. But there was no escaping that when Rick and his team were nowhere near Jason, they lived a regular adventuring life. Leisurely roaming from place to place, protecting normal people from ordinary monsters.

The moment they were anywhere near Jason, a monster surge felt relaxing by comparison. Suddenly it was kings and princesses, diamond-rankers, secret cultist armies and interdimensional invasions. The only time they got a break was when he got himself killed, sent to another universe or both.

Rick found it increasingly hard to not resent Jason, despite it being mostly undeserved. It seemed like every time the Adventure Society had Jason trouble they pulled in Rick to be the reluctant ambassador to their most troublesome silver-rank member. As often as not, he arrived to discover the problem had resolved itself already, leaving Rick and his team idle. And since they weren't doing anything else, why not bring them along on the latest insanity?

In this case, it was an underground expedition culminating in an unexpected undead army and being yanked into some bizarre unreality that, of course, only Jason understood. Now Rick was separated from his team in unfamiliar surroundings that were soaked in Jason's aura like a biscuit dipped in tea. If that wasn't enough, there was a mountain looming over the town, carved into the shape of Jason's head.

He had read through the long message that Jason's interface had shown him, but he partially understood what it had to say at best. Something about fighting something and claiming territory. It fit Jason's earlier warnings of how things would work but Rick didn't care. None of it helped him find his team, and getting them out alive was all that mattered. The rest was Jason business, and he could be the one to deal with it.

Step one was getting his bearings and finding anyone else nearby. He was in a town, on a street sealed with some manner of seamless black stone. That wasn't the only material he didn't recognise in the buildings pressed together, many with glass front walls.

He suspected it was a shopping district but couldn't read the language on the signs. There was writing everywhere as if they weren't concerned that most people couldn't read.

His aura senses were tamped down, either a natural effect of the transformation zone or from Jason's aura interfering, he wasn't sure. That meant he was startlingly close to the other person when he sensed them. It was the aura of an essence user, not a Builder cultist, brightheart or messenger. He didn't recognise the aura, which meant it wasn't a member of the expedition. That meant one of the Undeath priests, which suited Rick just fine. He was really in the mood to kill something.

Whoever it was clearly sensed him as well. They started moving in the other direction at speed, and a silver-ranker's speed was very fast. Rick conjured a spear and used a leap power, hurtling through the air in the next best thing to flight. He landed on another black street and leapt again immediately, rapidly closing the gap. A third leap put him in sight of the person, who had stopped and was standing in front of a portal.

Rick landed on the street, some way behind the person he'd been chasing. He was backing away from the portal, his body language afraid. Rick looked closer at the portal to realise that it wasn't a portal at all but Jason, wrapped in a void cloak that looked like a hole in the universe.

It truly appeared less like an article of clothing than a window into some deep, distant void where stars sparkled and colourful nebulas shone over impossible distances. That Jason didn't register to Rick's senses, despite his aura pervading everything else, added to the uncanny sense that Jason was not a person but a dimensional phenomenon.

As he walked forward at a measured pace, spear still in hand, Rick watched Jason and the other man. The stranger was a silver-ranker in grey scholar's robes, bulkier than the sleek combat robes used by some adventurers. Jason showed off such robes, the colour of dried blood, when he pushed back the cloak wrapped around him. It also revealed the sword at his hip, which he drew unhurriedly. The stranger fell to his knees and started begging.

"You don't have to do this."

"You belong to Undeath," Jason said, his tone cold as the rime on a frozen corpse.

"I never wanted any of this," the man pleaded. "I had no choice! My family all worship the dark gods."

"You think that helps your case?" Jason asked.

"My name is Jeffrey Colling-Setton. My family have served the dark churches for generations. If I ever went against them, ever tried to run, they'd have killed me. And you

know that wouldn't be the end of my torment, not with what they do. You can help me! And I can help you! You can save me from them and I can tell you their plans! We can..."

The man trailed off as Jason raised the tip of his sword to the man's face.

"I try to be merciful when I can," Jason said, his voice still cold but also faintly apologetic. "But these are not circumstances where I have the luxury of giving you a chance. There is too little time and too much risk. Contrition born at the point of a sword is not to be trusted."

The man scrambled into a run, sprinting away from Jason to find Rick in his path. Rick didn't waste time, dashing forward with a charge special attack to impale the man. Another power then shot barbs out of the spear, further digging into the man from the inside. Jason followed up and they made short work of him; he wasn't much of a fighter.

Jason flung off his cloak, the blood splattered on it falling to the ground as it vanished. He took out a vial of crystal wash and handed it silently to Rick. Rick's barbed spear powers were messy, leaving him covered in gore so he tipped the vial over his head. The liquid flowed over him, spreading to coat his entire body and wash off all the filth.

"Jason, I'm going to be honest and tell you that I don't care what nonsense you've got going on this time. I just want to make sure my team comes through it alive."

Jason nodded.

"I can respect that. There's a good chance that most of the people in this transformation zone are still unconscious, scattered around the territories," he explained. "You and his guy probably came through awake because I modified this territory as we entered it. It's more stable than the unclaimed ones. I need to expand it methodically, claiming one territory at a time. You're more free to leave this territory and search than I am. You can go looking for more of our allies, your team included."

"I'm all for that, but there are gold-rank threats out there. If I go alone, with no plan and no precautions, I'll get myself killed before I find anyone."

"Agreed," Jason said. "I might have a solution for that, but you're not going to like it."

"Not to sound unkind, Jason, but I've gotten used to not liking what's happening when I'm around you."

Rick looked down at the remains of Jeffrey.

"I think he was telling the truth about his family," he said. "Maybe not about wanting to leave, but I've heard of the Colling-Setton line. They crop up in every forbidden power group you can think of. Dark temples, necromancer covens, the Red Table, experiment programs into restricted list essences. In a lot of ways they're an evil counterpart to my family, and we've been clashing for centuries."

“Should we have kept him alive for questioning?”

“No, we couldn’t trust anything he said. So, what’s this plan I’m not going to like?”

“Well, you know those messengers I have prisoner?”

“The ones the Adventure Society wants you to hand over? The ones they want me to convince you to hand over?”

Jason’s expression grew awkward.

“Those are the ones, yeah. They have some gold-rankers amongst them. I want to put them under your command, to roam the territories, collect anyone on our side and bring them back.”

“You’re right; I don’t like it. You want to send me off with some messengers — including gold-rank messengers — under the assumption that they won’t turn on me the moment they’re clear of whatever hold you have on them?”

“I do assume that, yes. They don’t care enough to kill you because we’re not their enemies. The astral kings they used to serve are. Also, they know I’m a good ally and a bad enemy, especially here. I’ve got an avatar in my soul space explaining things to them already, so they understand that making an enemy of me before they’re free of the transformation zone is suicide.”

“Jason, your word is all well and good, but what if you’re wrong? Or only partly right? They may not kill me, but they could easily stop listening to me. Drag me around, doing whatever they like, or leave me behind entirely.”

“If you don’t want to do it, I won’t force you, but at least let me talk you through it. The leader of the messengers we’re talking about is named Marek Nior Vargas. For all his faults, he does care about his people, much like you care about yours. That’s going to be important.”

“That doesn’t sound like a messenger.”

“Not the messengers you know. Just sit down with me and him. We can talk it out and then you can make a decision.”

“Alright,” Rick said. “It’s not like I’m looking to go out there alone.”

The inside of Jason’s head-shaped mountain fortress was no less villainous on the inside than the outside. Imposing stone walkways looked out over massive chambers where lava flowed in channels along the floor for unclear purposes. More lava flowed through tubes that poked out from the dark stone of the walls and ceiling, providing the facility with ominous illumination.

In a massive conference room, Jason gathered with Rick and a panoply of messengers. He sat at the head of the table with a window wall behind him through which a lava waterfall could be seen spilling past. Rick sat in the first seat to his right and Jali to his left. Tera Jun Casta sat next to Jali while Marek Nior Vargas sat next to Rick, leaving the adventurer uncomfortable.

What came next was a lot of talking. Explanations of what was happening and why. Much of the time was spent giving the newborn messengers insight into their own kind and the unconventional circumstances of how they came into being. They introduced them to the messenger factions and the motivations of Marek Nior Vargas and his people.

The discussion process was extremely long, running into a third, fourth and fifth hour, but proved far more civil than Jason had anticipated. Rick took a mouth-closed, ears-open approach that Jason could never quite master. Or even get close to, if he was honest with himself.

Marek behaved himself after a warning from Jason about not attempting to recruit the new messengers to the Unorthodoxy. Jason's verbal rebuke was mild but the pinpoint spike of aura he sent Marek's way was a much sharper message.

Jason's largest concern had been Tera Jun Casta, who continued to hate him with a passion. She was the only member present who still venerated traditional messenger authority, even if that authority would have killed her on sight. Like Rick she sat and listened, contributing neither questions nor answers to the discussion. Jason quietly hoped that everything she heard would help open her narrow mind, even if by just a crack.

What all the discussion ultimately led to was the next step for each person at the table. Tera Jun Casta would be returned to Jason's soul realm and left there. She had no interest in contributing and couldn't be trusted if she did. Most of Marek's people would go with her. Marek agreed to aid Rick with his gold-rankers and some of his silver rankers. Rick reluctantly went along because most of Marek's group would be left with Jason who wished Rick hadn't used the word 'hostages' but took the win.

The new messengers would, for the moment, reside in Jason's mountain fortress. They were the most adrift and he had no doubt they would spend yet more hours talking amongst themselves about everything they had heard. He made Jali his liaison to them and could do little more than hope they didn't decide to found a new messenger empire or something equally unfortunate.

When the discussion was finally done, the various participants departed. Rick left with Marek and his people while the still-nameless messengers stayed in the conference room to talk amongst themselves. Tera and the rest of Marek's people returned to his soul

realm. Jason moved outside, sitting atop his massive stone head and soon found Jali joining him.

“At some point, they’re going to want names,” she said and sat down next to him. Her wings vanished as she shrank down to human size.

“Any idea on how that will go?” he asked.

“No. Normally they come into being with a name. I think the lack of a proper and situated birthing tree stopped that.”

“Then they’ll have to name themselves?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps their names will come after you decide what to do with that.”

She pointed to the vast tree looming over the horizon.

“Even if this does all go right, I don’t know that I’ll get to choose. It may be that whatever happens is going to happen and I don’t get a say.”

“Either way, we can decide then.”

“What about until then? Are they just going to refer to each other by numbers?”

“Messengers communicate through auras as much as other people do body language. They will differentiate themselves through that.”

“That doesn’t help me, so I might have to number them. I could make them all shirts.”

“You’ll be fine. You already communicate with your aura as we do. It’s one of the many reasons you unsettle us.”

“Wait, I do?”

“You didn’t notice? Haven’t you seen the extreme way people tend to react to you? That’s your aura at work.”

Jason tilted his head in thought.

“I guess I do,” he said. “I must have been doing it unconsciously. For years, maybe. I think it started when I started learning aura tricks to affect others more subtly, from a vampire I know. Huh.”

“It certainly helped you control that meeting we just had,” she told him. “I’ve never seen messengers interact like that before.”

“It seemed pretty normal to me,” Jason said. “What made it strange to you?”

“That we spoke as equals. For the most part. Your rebuke of Marek was the only interaction I saw that felt familiar. Messengers only enter discussion because a leader wants options or is playing her subordinates against one another. There’s always a hierarchy.”

“I don’t like hierarchies.”

“Which is odd coming from the one person who stood above all others in that room.”

Jason went to deny it but stopped, admitting to himself that it would have been a lie.

“I’m mentally exhausted after that,” he said instead. “I came up here to clear my head but I don’t have time. I need to set things in motion. Start expanding. As soon as I do, anomalies will start pouring in from the territory I’m invading and we’ll have to deal with them.”

“I’ve watched messengers push the people they enslave to their limits and beyond. Most of my kind care more about wielding power than doing so efficiently. If you rush because you think you should — or someone else thinks you should — then not only will you work slowly but you’ll work badly. If you rest, you’ll work better and make fewer mistakes.”

“Yeah,” he said, giving her a smiling side glance. “I know, yet I always seem to need someone to remind me in the moment.”

At the edge of the territory, Rick stood in front of a shadowy wall that marked the border between Jason’s domain and the unclaimed one beyond. Before he stepped through, he turned and looked back, his silver-rank vision picking out Jason on top of his fortress. He was sitting next to the messenger girl he’d been running around with, Jali. Without her wings and shrunken down, she was indistinguishable from a fair-skinned, brown-haired human.

“Even with messengers?” he muttered.

“What was that?” Marek asked.

“Nothing,” Rick said. “Let’s go.”

Chapter 794

Overestimating the Length

The main entrance to Jason's mountain fortress was the mouth of Jason's giant stone head. Inside was the central transport hub where three elevating platform shafts were set out in a triangle, giving access to the upper and lower reaches of the complex. Archways were set into the walls all around, one of which held an active portal. Filled with blue, silver and gold light, it led to Jason's soul realm and had been left open continuously.

Jason emerged from the portal with a sandwich and a yawn. He frowned as he expanded his senses over his claimed territory. He shoved the sandwich into his inventory and moved towards the open entrance, quickly building up to a sprint. Reaching the entrance, he leapt out with silver-rank strength that propelled him through the air. He used his aura to make adjustments in his trajectory but carefully, so as to not steal his momentum. He finally landed on the street in the replica of his hometown.

Jali had sensed his movement and followed, soaring on eagle-like wings of brown and white. When she landed beside Jason she found him leaning over the corpse of the priest of Undeath, peering curiously.

"What is this still doing here?" she asked.

"I was just wondering the same thing," he said. "It should have turned to rainbow smoke long ago, but it's just withered. It looks like it's been dead for more than just a few hours."

"This man was a priest of the undeath god, yes? Perhaps he's going to reanimate."

"Which makes me wonder why he hasn't yet. Maybe it's just an enchantment to prevent his body from decaying so his friends can reanimate it when they find him? Necromancers are big into organics recycling."

"Either way, we should destroy the body."

"Agreed."

"What about other undead?" Jali asked. "You said there were tens of thousands of them left and they would be scattered amongst the territories. Why was this guy here but none of his undead?"

"That's another good question. Probably because my aura is anathema to undead and this territory is infused with it. Any undead being placed here may have been ejected or destroyed outright. This guy would have gotten a pass due to being alive."

Jason poked the body with his shoe. He skittered back as the corpse spasmed on the ground.

“You may have been on the money with reanimating,” Jason said. “Are you feeling a draining sensation from it?”

“No, should I be? Do we need to get away from it?”

“I think we’re good. It’s not after life force or mana. It feels like it’s trying to drain something that isn’t there to drain. I think that’s why it’s not getting up.”

The body continued to thrash on the ground as if it were having a seizure. After a short time, it began to dissolve into rainbow smoke, slowly at first but accelerating until all that remained was an empty set of robes.

“That didn’t seem dangerous,” Jali said.

“No,” Jason said. “I could take some guesses as to what just happened, but that’s all they’d be. I hope we find Clive soon.”

The battle with the Undeath priests was extremely short. On one side was a trio of silver-rank priests commanding around a thousand assorted undead. On the other side were three gold-rank adventurers in Emir, Constance and the Healer high priestess, Hana Shavar. There were also two gold-rank non-adventurers in the commander of the Builder cult, Beaufort, and the brightheart commander, Marla. They commanded a large group of silver-rankers, including Kalif from team Storm Shredder, along with brighthearts and Builder cultists. Clive was also present, but attempts to command him weren’t working out. He had been constantly researching their new environment and he got snippy when people bothered him during his work.

The environment caused significant trouble for the brighthearts who had never seen the sky before. They reacted on a spectrum ranging from excitement and awe to existential crisis. The space around them was filled with thick towering trees into which a large town comprised of tree houses and rope bridges had been built. There were discrete buildings constructed around and into the trunks, as well as sprawling complexes held aloft by multiple massive trees.

The group were all on the ground below where they had dealt with the undead and the priests. The forest floor had been devastated by the battle and a few toppled trees had left the township above damaged as well, pulling down bridges and buildings.

The forest calm that followed the battle with the undead gave the group the chance to rest and for the brighthearts to acclimatise to such an alien environment. The pause did not last, however, as anomalies spawned by the transformation zone moved to the attack.

Humanoids with chihuahua-like heads started streaming from the undergrowth and dropping from the heights above. They registered as gold-rank to aura senses but their

physical prowess was more like high-end silver-rankers and they had no special powers. They posed a challenge for the silver-rankers and the gold-rankers weren't moving to defend. Beaufort and Marla had been about to, but the adventurers stopped them, giving the lower-rankers the chance for growth.

Clive did not participate in the battle. He could sense the unusual nature of the attackers and understood that they were the anomalies Jason had warned them about. He'd made a point of their value in ranking up, early in the transformation zone but there would be plenty more to come. Other opportunities took precedence.

One of the dead Undeath priests lay where he fell, amongst shin-high grass on the forest floor. The other two were less viable for examination. One was scattered liberally over a kilometre of forest while the other had gone into spasms when touched and then dissolved into rainbow smoke.

Clive had a suspicion as to the cause of the seizure and subsequent disintegration of the corpse. This came courtesy of the Healer priestess, Hana Shavar. She had reported an odd sense from the twitching undead before it dissolved, as if it were trying to draw in something when there was nothing to drain.

Hana stood back, observing as Clive pulled out a variety of objects, carefully setting them up around the corpse without touching it. She occasionally tossed a casual bolt of healing energy at the silver-rankers fighting the anomalies, most of her attention on Clive's work. Most of his devices were magical analysis tools, running the gamut from crystal lenses to more elaborate devices with elements that span or floated separately, slowly shifting colours.

A scream drew her attention to the fight and she saw a heavily injured adventurer. Clive glanced over before turning back to his work.

"His name's Kalif," Clive said. "He's one of the key damage dealers in one of those specialised Rimaros teams. He doesn't know how to watch his own back without a dedicated team to protect him. Go save him, and maybe tell him to stand at the back."

"I'm a gold-ranker and you're a silver-ranker. I'm meant to be the one giving orders."

"That's normally how it works, yes."

"If I tell you to do something, will you?"

"Probably not. I'm busy with this."

"Is your entire team like this?"

"No, we have one guy who does what he's told. By his mother."

Hana let out a grumbling sigh.

"I'm going to go heal that man."

“What’s this?” Hana asked, looking at the quivering rod Clive had pulled out immediately on her return.

“Grab it please,” he said. “I can’t leave it just flopping around in the grass.”

“Then perhaps you shouldn’t have taken it out.”

“I need it to be ready when I go to use it. So, would you please just grab it for me?”

She frowned but put her fingers around Clive’s throbbing shaft.

“I don’t like this sensation,” she said.

“You’ll get used to it,” Clive assured her. “I’ve found that most people come to enjoy how it feels. I think it’s the girth that puts them off at first.”

“I can handle the girth. I’m just not comfortable with it throbbing in my hand like this.”

“Even so, you should just use your hand until you know what you’re doing. Use both hands if you prefer.”

“I think you may be overestimating the length. What even is it?”

“It’s a threshold resonator. I can’t have it too close to the other devices until I’m ready or it’ll ruin their calibration.”

The last thing Clive took out of his inventory was not another magical measuring device but a small lidded pot. It was made of a lacquered ceramic, with the symbol of the church of Purity emblazoned upon it.

“Is that a god’s grace relic?” Hana asked.

“Yes,” Clive said as he dropped it casually into some soft grass, showing none of the care he had for his other equipment. He started making minor adjustments to the positioning of his devices and tossed a recording crystal into the air.

“How did you get that?” Hana asked.

“It’s a recording crystal. I bought it at a shop.”

“No, the relic.”

“While we thought Jason was dead — I don’t know how familiar you are with Jason but he dies a lot. There were a few years where we thought he was dead but he was just in his home universe. I spent a lot of that time mapping a dimensional travel network the Church of Purity and the Builder cult were using. This was after the Ecumenical Council declared Purity a fallen god. Me and a couple of friends spend a lot of time chasing that up until we finally got our full team together for a big operation. Oh, but Jason was still dead so we had a duck guy instead.”

“A duck guy?”

“Yeah, you know. Quack, ponds, being quite comfortable in the rain. Ducks.”

"I know what ducks are."

"Then it's odd you asked for clarification. Anyway, this operation led to us stumbling right into one of their big summoning plans and accidentally setting it off early. This was one of the messenger mass-summons that ended up happening all over."

"Are you talking about the first one? The one near Cyrion?"

"Yes."

"That was you?"

"Yes. Anyway, through that time chasing after the Purity loyalists, I picked up some holy relics here and there. It was a good chance to have a poke around and see how they work."

"The relics?"

"Kind of. The gods, more accurately."

"That's blasphemy."

"Is it? I was never clear on the difference between blasphemy and heresy. The people who yell stuff like that at me always wind up being terrible, so it never seemed worth finding out. And that's saying something because I love finding things out."

"And if the gods take issue and send their servants after you?"

"You say that like I've never killed a priest before. The first priest I ever killed was the archbishop of the local Purity church in my hometown. That was *before* the Ecumenical Council declared Purity a fallen god, but he had it coming. Plus, we'd just dropped a building on him, so it was going to be a fight either way."

"You dropped a building on him?"

"Yes, but he had a solid shield power. Hard to kill, especially being silver rank to our bronze. We took a proper beating, but Humphrey's hard to kill as well. Jason not so much, but the trick with him is in getting the death to stick. It was a year or so after that when I start collecting relics, seeing if I can't figure out how divine power works."

"I still say it's blasphemy."

"Go ahead. After being on my team I could run a lecture series on the praxis of blasphemy. Or heresy, whichever one it is. I'd have to look that up before the first lecture."

"Your team cannot be entirely heretical. Your healer is a priest in my church."

"He doesn't blaspheme," Clive admitted, then tilted his head in thought. "Which is odd, now that I think about it. Neil seems the type. Also, Jason hangs out with gods and I'm pretty sure he convinced Death to use a miracle. I'm not sure he's a heretic so much as a rude acquaintance."

Clive picked up the small pot he'd dropped earlier.

"These are fun," he said. "I never made much headway on the rules of divine influence on magic, but these little pots store a tiny bit of holy power. More an echo of it, really, but even third hand, divine power's not to be dismissed."

"Yet you dismiss the danger of angering the gods."

"My friend Rufus backhanded a priest of Knowledge right across the face once. Now, the way these little pots work is—"

"I know how god's grace relics work, Mr Standish. Even if Purity is fallen, I do not like the way you are treating such objects."

"Are you going to do something about it?"

"Not right now."

"Then I don't care. Now, the great thing about Purity's holy power is that it does all manner of interesting things when you taint it. I had no idea why that worked rather than dispelling the purity power, until it turned out that Purity was the god of disguise this whole time. That way, it makes more sense that the holy power adapts when altered rather than dispersing—"

"Is there a point you're trying to make, Mr Standish."

"No. I was trying to work while the priestess watching me kept asking questions in an increasingly judgemental tone."

"What are you using the holy relic for?"

"I suspect that the Undeath priests have had enchantments placed into them. Possibly engraved onto their bones."

"That's used for punishing criminals by... hold on."

She extended her arm and chanted a spell.

"Knit the flesh and salve the wound."

A surge of healing magic washed out of her and off towards the ongoing combat. The other gold-rankers were still letting the silver-rankers take care of it and injuries were accumulating.

"As I was saying," Hana continued. "Engraving skeleton enchantments is for permanently suppressing the powers of criminals."

"There's a lot more potential to the practice than that," Clive said. "It's just incredibly wrong to use it. The process is excruciating and very risky. Did you know that one in four criminals sentenced to it doesn't survive? I don't even think it should be used on criminals. If you're going to kill someone, do it clean and quick. Unless your whole power set is slowly rotting people's flesh off. But do you expect the Church of Undeath to share my misgivings?"

“No,” Hana said. “I do not.”

“Exactly. I think the Undeath priests have been enchanted to rise as some form of undead if they get killed. Maybe just garden variety zombies for the weaker ones, but probably revenants for silvers and golds running around in this place.”

“But they didn’t rise as undead. That one corpse we disturbed...”

They wrinkled their noses as patches of rainbow smoke rose from all around.

“...did that,” Hana finished.

“Someone must have stepped on a finger or something of that third priest,” Clive said. “I’m surprised it took this long. And yes, the Undeath priest corpses are breaking down when disturbed, but what you said sparked an idea.”

“What I said?”

“That they were trying to drain some power that only you could sense. I think what they need is divine power. The god of undeath’s energy is required to animate them, which normally isn’t a problem. But if it is, and that power isn’t available, they break down instead. These territories are dimensionally locked; we can physically pass through the boundaries but magic can’t. Not even that of the gods.”

“None of that explains what you’re doing with that relic.”

“I’m seeing if I can get this corpse to react to divine power. As I said, it’s just an echo of the real thing, but that’s good. I don’t want to go animating this priest by accident.”

“That relic is from Purity. You’ve got the wrong god to try animating the dead.”

“Yes, but I’ll tweak it a bit.”

“Tweak it?”

“I told you I didn’t make much headway on how divine magic works. I never told you I didn’t make any.”

“That’s—”

“Yes, blasphemy, I know. I’m starting to see where Jason is coming from.”

Clive finished placing his devices around the corpse laying in the grass and picked up the pot. He held a hand out to Hana.

“Threshold resonator, please.”

She handed him the rod. He then held the pot over the corpse and waved the rod around it twice before letting the pot go. It floated in the air over the corpse by itself. Clive reached out and removed the lid. White light shone from within the small pot and the corpse sat up, identical white light shining from its eyes. Then its head caught on fire and it rapidly dissolved into rainbow smoke.

“Yeah, I’m fairly certain they need the power of their god to reanimate. Otherwise, they’ll lay dormant until something disturbs them and they forcibly attempt to animate. That’s when they break down.”

“We need to make sure we destroy the bodies when we kill the Undeath priests,” Hana said. “If a live priest finds them, they could be animated into something powerful.”

“No,” Clive said. “We don’t destroy the bodies. We don’t even kill them. We need to start taking them alive.”

Chapter 795

Good Friends

Jason slowly meandered along an empty street with shops to his left and the beach to his right. The ghost town wasn't a true replica of his hometown but a nostalgic version of it from his youth. There was an Aussie rules football memorabilia store, several of which had cropped up, failed and closed as he grew up. He stopped in front of Mrs Kim's Takeaway, a favourite before she sold up and moved to Coffs Harbour.

He stared at the glass storefront, plastered in the usual stickers advertising ice creams and soft drinks. He went inside, the bell on the door jingling. There were no people, but the bain-marie was filled with artery-clogging delights, steam teasing at the bottom of the glass case. Jason opened the flip-top counter and moved behind it, then slid open its glass door. The smell of deep-fried oil wafted out, the scent of his childhood summers. He smiled sadly.

"I wish the territory hadn't taken this form," he said.

"Why is that?" Shade asked, emerging from Jason's shadow.

"Because it's time to expand my territory. As soon as that boundary thins, living anomalies will come swarming in. Even if they don't trash everything, I'm going to paint this town with their bodies. I don't want to see that. There aren't many memories of Earth I have left that aren't tainted in some way."

Jason grabbed a metal scoop and a paper bag, half-filling it with hot chips. He gave it a liberal sprinkle of chicken salt from a shaker before filling the bag and doing it again. He let the bag drop lightly to the bench a couple of times to shake down the salt.

"You look like you've done that before," Shade observed.

"I worked here for the summer when I was sixteen. The last summer before Mrs Kim sold the place. The new owner wasn't as good, but he didn't have to be. If you sell chips so close to the beach in this town, you can make enough money in the summer to coast through the rest of the year."

Jason plucked a chip from the bag and bit off half its length.

"Just as good as I remember," he said. "Which is probably better than they actually were. Memory is funny like that. For me, anyway. I imagine yours is a lot better than mine, you being immortal and all."

"Yes, Mr Asano, but that doesn't always mean better. I will never get to experience the kind of nostalgia you are feeling right now. Becoming a familiar allows astral entities like myself to slowly accumulate authority, but that was never my motivation. I want to

experience the cosmos in ways that I, as a shadow creature of the astral, otherwise could not.”

Jason looked at Shade with a speculative expression.

“You know, Shade, I use your senses all the time. See and hear what you see.”

“Yes, Mr Asano.”

“Do you think we could do it the other way?”

“We cannot, Mr Asano.”

“Something to work on when I summon your next vessel, then.”

Jason let out a cleansing sigh and put the other half of the chip in his mouth. He wandered outside and used his aura to float up into the air, Shade rising beside him. He looked over the town while snacking on his chips.

“Enough putting it off,” he said.

He closed his eyes, spreading his senses out through his territory. Each of the transformation zones Jason had experienced was a little different from the others. A quirk of this one was that expansion wasn't a matter of spreading out in every direction but choosing a neighbouring territory and expanding into that one specifically. He had no information on the neighbouring territories, so he chose one on the opposite side of the mountain from the town. He would spare it for as long as he could.

Jason conjured his cloak and flew around the mountain. He soared over green bushland that ran up to the shadowy veil that marked the territorial boundary. When he expanded his power to try and claim the territory, the veil would thin and living anomalies would start spilling through. The bushland was good terrain for him, hard for large numbers to group up and filled with shadows.

Jason closed his eyes, letting his senses blend into the space around him. He felt the earth, the trees and the air; the people inside the fortress and even the dim sims in Mrs Kim's bain-marie. He pushed out, the territorial boundary resisting for a moment before starting to shimmer.

-
- You have chosen to expand the territory of your established spirit domain into an adjacent genesis space. Expanding your spirit domain into a territory of unstable genesis space will define and stabilise it but trigger anomalous reactions from the territory expanded into.
-

He sensed the living anomalies spilling in through the veil and let himself drop from the sky. He fell through the canopy below, letting the bush swallow him.

The territory Rick was in looked like a city where architect and alchemist was the same job, one carried out with extreme enthusiasm. It was a cross between a dirty industrial centre and a giant's alchemy set, with glass vats sticking out of walls and massive pipes running under steel catwalks that ran between buildings.

Rick jabbed his spear into the cobbled street vertically, like tapping a ceremonial staff. Dozen of spears pierced back up in a wide area around him, each one impaling a gelatinous creature. The spears then immediately sprouted barbs that riddled their bodies, visible through their semi-translucent flesh.

The creatures were vaguely humanoid, in a 'getting craned out of your house on the news' kind way. Their bodies looked like someone had put something they shouldn't in a jelly mould when the mould itself was already dubious. They were naked and fully, although not generously, anatomically equipped. They didn't have a mouth or nose, but they did have large eyeballs floating in their jelly heads.

More unpleasant than the appearance of the creatures was their smell. This was made significantly worse when they tore themselves off Rick's barbed spears, shredding their bodies in the process. This left them a splattered mess on the ground, crawling slowly in his direction. Marek descended from the sky to land next to Rick and immediately winced at the stench.

"I do not care for your approach to combat against these particular foes," Marek told him. "From a tactical perspective, it is a sound path to victory. From an olfactory one, it feels like defeat."

"We're not here to win," Rick told him. "We're here to scout the territory, find any allies and move on."

"Then move on we shall," Marek said, his voice choked off as he tried to not use his nose. "I envy your ability to shut off your sense of smell."

"I thought envying the 'lesser races' was against your religion."

"It's indoctrination, not religion, as much as Jason Asano is disinclined to recognise the difference. But if it were, my companions and I would be in apostasy. As has been explained to you at length."

"A couple of months ago you were cutting down adventurers for the people you claim to hate now."

"Our actions could not have been different. I will not lie and claim to feel great remorse for what I have done as a slave of the astral kings, but know that the alternative for us was death."

"Some things are worth dying for. Like not killing a city's worth of innocent people."

“I do not expect you to understand, Rick Geller. I hope you never do. Having your very soul enslaved is not something I would wish on another. But we took our chance to escape that fate. We did not turn against our old masters at the point of Jason Asano’s sword; we sought him out. To go against him at this point would obviate the purpose of everything we have done while soiling a relationship I expect to benefit us for centuries. Furthermore, attempting to escape him now would be suicide. As would trying to escape later once he unites the transformation zone. All of which means that you put us in an awkward position. I can only hope that you can see how our interests are aligned.”

The sloppy, stinking blob creatures were crawling closer and the pair left, Rick leaping to the rooftop of a three-storey building and Marek flying after him.

“My people found only undead and these living anomalies in this territory,” Marek said. “No allies or intelligent enemies, so we should head for the next.”

“Agreed,” Rick said.

Marek sent out aura pulses that serves as simple commands for his scattered allies. They had access to Jason's interface, but only as it pertained to the territories. They couldn't use functions like group chat. He and Rick stood waiting for them to regroup before setting out.

“What did you mean by me putting you in an awkward position?” Rick asked.

“If anything happens to you, whether I could have prevented it or not, Jason Asano will hold me responsible. That makes your life more valuable than mine, or that of any of my people individually. Asano did not put that dynamic in place by accident. You are more valuable to him than any of us.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that you and your band of murder angels could kill me any time you feel like. Telling me that you promise not to when we were fighting each other not that long ago doesn’t fill me with confidence.”

“Trust is built over time and this is the beginning of that time. We have mutual interests.”

“Oh, mutual interests, great. I’m starting to understand Jason’s approach of making friends rather than allies.”

“I suspect that we would not make good friends, Rickard Geller.”

The living anomalies that swarmed into Jason’s territory took the form of bone feasters. His early days in Rimaros included a supply delivery to a fortress town besieged by this type of monster, although the living anomaly version was not quite the same.

The appearance was a match, being emaciated purple humanoids with giant mouths for faces. They had the power to grow and reshape bone, creating blades, projectiles and armour they wielded with surprising skill for frenzied monsters. That and their impressive agility served to compensate for a lack of raw power. They were monsters that could easily punish unskilled adventurers.

The normal version was silver-rank and relatively weak, manifesting in massive numbers. During the monster surge, Jason had fought what amounted to an army of them to lift the siege on the town. He swiftly found that these living anomaly replicas were different, courtesy of their higher rank.

While the anomaly feasters were ostensibly gold-rank, their power level was not. By the later stages of the transformation zone, when the last territories were being claimed, the anomalies would be a match for most monsters of their rank. In this early stage, they were relatively pitiful. This meant that Jason could handle them, although not easily. They still had gold-rank damage reduction and resistances against lower ranks, but many elite adventurers could ignore the rank disparity, Jason included. Capable silver-rank adventurers could handle anomalies at this stage, to the point that they made good training.

While the anomaly feasters were even weaker for their rank than the real thing, weak for gold-rank was still a large power spike over weak for silver. Their strength and speed were closer to that of a high-end silver-rank monster, and their bone powers were also enhanced. They couldn't do anything new with them, but the resilience and growth of their bones were much higher.

The anomaly feasters also grew the bones with more refined shaping than the real monsters could manage. This made for weapons that were sharper yet stronger, and armour that was less restrictive. This meant superior coverage with less impedance to their agility.

The difference between these bone feasters and the ones Jason knew meant that he needed to make the most of his advantages. His most prominent asset was the environment they were fighting in. His battle with the real feasters had been in a wide-open gulch with countless enemies and nowhere to hide. Fighting the anomaly feasters in the same environment would force him to quickly flee at best, and quickly die at worst.

In this replica of the Australian bush, it was a different story. It wasn't the thick rainforest of the far north but the feasters were still forced to break up to navigate the terrain. Jason, on the other hand, could move undetected and untouched, a wraith in the darkness. He was weakest at the start of fights when he had yet to harvest the life force of

the defeated. Even two or three of the bone feasters were dangerous in the beginning, being faster and stronger than he was. Their agility also allowed them to fight relatively well despite the uneven ground, mixed surfaces and obstacle-filled environment.

That was not enough to compensate for Jason's hit-and-run tactics as he flickered through shadows like a staccato ghost, landing hits and vanishing. They made the most of his moments of exposure, however, landing hits with arm blades or bone darts. It put his regenerative powers through a workout.

The armour of the bone feasters made it hard for Jason to score early kills. Their armour not only had superior coverage than regular bone feasters but also blocked many forms of magic attack. Jason's afflictions were largely ineffective and Colin's leeches couldn't find gaps to dig through before being scraped off or squished between armour segments.

Jason had a solution to this in another advantage he'd lacked when fighting the real feasters. His sword, Hegemon's Will, could not only absorb the power of Jason's conjured dagger but added a corrosion affliction when it did so. This proved effective not just at melting holes in the armour but preventing it from growing back.

This offered Jason weak points to target and land afflictions, although the whole process was laborious. He tried using Gordon's butterflies to spread afflictions faster but it proved futile. The projectile attacks and incredible reflexes of the feasters meant that the butterflies were taken out before they could spread. The scant few that did slip through proved incapable of sinking through the bone armour to be absorbed and were quickly scraped off. Jason discarded that strategy and resolved to finish things the hard way, which he ultimately did not mind. Fights like this would push his sluggish essence abilities towards faster advancement.

As the long and gruelling fight dragged on, Jason finally began making headway. Bone feasters were starting to fall to his afflictions and he was diligent in draining their remnant life force. This boosted his speed until it overtook that of his enemies, allowing him to fight more safely, even as he fought more boldly. Even so, there was still a long fight ahead of him. He knew that painstakingly whittling the feasters down would be a lengthy process unless something changed.

That change came with two silver-rank auras that shot out of the territorial boundary at speeds that would satisfy gold-rankers. Immediately after they arrived, a column of lava smashed down like a satellite weapon, incinerating bushland and bone feaster alike. The column swept back and forth, carving a fiery swath of destruction.

Jason rose through the canopy to where he could see Farrah, in obsidian armour and held aloft by fiery wings. She was blasting down with her lava cannon power, setting fire to the bushland. Sophie, floating next to her, moved next to Jason in a blur of motion he could barely track.

“We thought we’d help,” Sophie told him. “From what I’m sensing down there, it looks like you’re kind of slow. Well, not kind of slow as much as just slow. Really, really slow.”

“You think you would be faster?”

“Than you? Yes. Than Farrah? Well, she’s going to run out of mana pretty quick like that.”

“She’s starting a huge bushfire in my territory.”

“She uses fire to replenish her mana.”

“And I use my territory to not be burned to the ground!”

Sophie turned slowly in the air, taking a look at Jason’s territory.

“Why does that mountain look like the back of your head?”

Chapter 796

Lackeys

Farrah wore obsidian armour, covering everything but her head. She flew down to join Jason and Sophie just over the bush canopy, rubbing her temples. All around them, the bush was aflame.

"There's still plenty of them left," Farrah said. "I'll go again once I get some mana back. The lava cannon is fun, but not especially precise, and these monsters seem quite springy. I don't remember bone feasters being this quick on their feet while armoured up."

"They're not really monsters," Jason explained. "They're fakes. Also, maybe we could try an approach other than a massive lava cannon that most of them just dodge. One that doesn't involve burning my territory to the ground."

"What's the big deal?" Farrah asked. "I bet that mountain has whatever passes for a central base in it. No fire's getting in there. Did you carve it into the shape of your own head?"

"The big deal," Jason said, "is that on the other side of this mountain is a replica of Casselton Beach, which a bushfire will rip through. Including the ice cream shop."

"What?" Farrah yelped. "Okay, hold on. There's a fire and we need to stop it. This is fine, it's all going to be fine. Right, I can absorb fire to get mana back. I just have to absorb all the fire and everything will be okay. You two can deal with the monsters."

She shot off towards the nearest batch of flames.

Jason shook his head and turned to Sophie.

"Shall we?" he asked, pointing down into the bushland and the anomalies within.

"Let's," she said and let herself fall.

Korinne Pescos frantically scrambled between massive rocks in the bottom of the vast desert canyon. She stopped, pressing her back against the stone left scorching hot by the unyielding sun. She glanced up at the massive crystal jutting from the rock she was hiding behind. The powerful alien aura it pulsed out was masking her presence from her gold-rank pursuer.

The crystal was one of many, blanketing the canyon that was kilometres across and dozens of kilometres long. The clashing auras they produced left her with a splitting headache but she was grateful for them nonetheless. The Undeath priest hunting her could not sense her any more than she could him, and there were plenty of rocks, gullies and overhangs to hide her.

She'd been so happy in the beginning. Of all the places she could have been dropped in the transformation zone, she ran into two of her team members almost immediately. Then they had met the priest, and now the animated bodies of Jetta and Polix were chasing her through the canyon. They were trying to flush her out like hunting hounds while she had to flee, even as she mourned them.

The priest was in no rush, loudly and gleefully taunting her. He had the power and was making a game of it. He could track her down and make short work of her if he tried but, instead, teased her like a cat with a mouse. Korinne knew it was only a matter of time until he got bored or she made a lethal mistake. She could feel the despair clawing at her like an animal, stalking around in the shattered remains of her hope.

Suddenly she felt a surge of power that somehow cut through the pervasive aura of the crystals. Almost the moment she felt it there was a massive crash that thundered in her ears and shook the ground. Dust flooded the canyon like a tidal wave, washing past her and cutting off her vision.

She came out from her hiding place, navigating carefully with her hands held out in front of her. All she could see was dust and an occasional golden flash in the distance. A ringing sound of hammering metal rang out like a blacksmith working a piece of iron.

Korinne flinched back when she almost stumbled into Jetta. Her friend, now a slack-jawed corpse, showed no reaction to Korinne and stood still as a mannequin. She continued towards the sound, barely caring if the commotion was made by enemy or ally. Finally, she encountered two figures walking through the dust cloud, their blurry shapes resolving into people she recognised.

One was the leonid, Gareth Xandier, but larger than she remembered by some two feet. His eyes blazed with golden light and she could sense his aura when she concentrated on it, even through the interference of the crystals. He was gold-rank despite having been silver when she had seen him just hours previous. The man walking alongside him was Rufus Remore, looking unchanged. Korinne quickly approached them, looking up at the leonid.

"The priest?" she asked. Dust crawled into her mouth, leaving it dry and chalky.

"Dealt with," Gary told her.

"What happened to you?"

"Cup of Heroes."

"Oh. I'm sorry. How long do you have?"

"In this place? As long as we're here. Perhaps another three hours after we leave."

"You get to keep the power that long?" she asked.

“The gods cannot reach us here. There is nowhere for the power to return to, so it does not try.”

Rufus, who had remained silent, walked past her to look at Jetta’s unmoving body. The dust was beginning to settle, increasing visibility distance. Rufus’ expression turned dark as he asked Korinne a question.

“Isn’t this—”

“My team member, yes,” Korinne told him. “There’s another one out there somewhere. I suppose the dust will have to clear before we find him.”

“Would you like me to put them to rest?” Rufus asked.

“No,” Korinne said. “I couldn’t save them, but at least I can do this.”

Tears cut through the dust caking her face as she marched grimly towards Jetta. Rufus glanced at Gary but said nothing.

The messengers were in a state of confusion. Their last clear memories were of initiating the ritual that would convert the natural array into a soul forge. After that was an incoherent mess of images and sensations that could only be called memories by the most generous definition.

Now that the external influence of the corrupted messenger tree had been purged, they were trying to put together the pieces of what had happened. They needed to know where they were, what their circumstances were and what to do about it. They had some information from the system message, Jason's power having imprinted elements of his system interface on the entire zone. The messengers, however, lacked critical elements of context.

There were two gold-ranked and what they believed were five silver-ranked messengers. Belinda wasn’t sure how many of the messengers had been overtaken by the elemental tree, rather than spawned from it, but she guessed this was a good percentage of those that survived. The gold-rankers seemed well-versed in magical theory which made sense. These were the ones sent to transform the natural array into a soul forge. Given that they had failed spectacularly, their competence in employing that theory was up in the air.

The messengers were gathered atop the ruins of a stone ziggurat, one of many ruins poking out from the canopy of a sprawling jungle. Belinda wasn’t sure about the size of most territories, but this one was enormous. There were plateaued mountains in one direction, some hundred kilometres away. In the opposite direction, that land was mostly flat to the horizon, blanketed in lush green jungle. The air was hot and wet, the sun

scathing in a clear sky. Insects buzzed around but were not fool enough to approach such powerful auras.

They had all been dumped in the transformation zone separately, wiping out undead and living anomalies until they found one another. The anomalies took the form of jungle beasts, from lizards and cats to clouds of insects and lurking bog monsters. Belinda had been doubly lucky, first in finding an isolated silver-rank messenger. The others were too distant to sense Belinda killing her and sinking her to the bottom of a swamp. A concealment and preservation ritual would prevent the corpse from turning to rainbow smoke too quickly, and make her hard to find. It would take a gold-ranker making a concerted search at relatively close range to find it.

Belinda's other lucky break was that the messengers were isolated from their astral king. This meant that they could not rely on that connection to identify an outsider in their midst. She hadn't been certain of that point until she'd already infiltrated the group, but their conversation quickly confirmed it.

Infiltrating the messenger group had been a gamble, but several key things had gone her way. Being isolated from their astral king was one, and their confusion another. She had no idea of the personality of the messenger she had replaced but generic arrogant prick seemed a safe bet. With all of the messengers out of sorts from their ordeal, being at least somewhat out of character would fit right in.

The gold-rankers had managed to scavenge enough materials for a basic ritual to assess their environment. Messenger bodies were highly magical and their feathers could stand in for various materials. Their blood likewise made good material to draw out the lines and sigils. Naturally, one of the silver-rankers was 'volunteered' to supply them, the gold-rankers unwilling to pluck their own feathers.

Belinda got lucky that they didn't pick her, as her shape-shifting power would not imbue her body with the intrinsic magic of the messengers. Just maintaining a messenger-like aura was tricky enough; the strength and nature her aura seemed to have would easily crack under scrutiny.

Along with messenger body parts, they spread out to gather material from the jungle around them. Plants and rocks with high concentrations of magic weren't too hard to find and they gathered the required material in a few hours. Belinda's knowledge would have allowed her to go faster, but she had quickly realised that the silver-rankers were not meant to have a lot of magical knowledge. That was for the gold-rankers while the rest of them were merely lackeys.

Belinda hadn't figured out the name of her identity yet. Unless someone else used it, she might have to take a risk to get it. If someone used it and she didn't answer, not realising they were speaking to her, that could be the end. It was a dangerous contradiction that could help or ruin her, depending on how it went. Her best bet was to try and get someone to use it, but that held risks in itself.

The gold-rank messengers proved that they were quite good at not just using magic but interpreting the results, despite their failure with the natural array. As an enthusiast of improvised magic herself, Belinda learned a lot from the process of the messengers cobbling together their ritual. She hoped that studying the messengers and their magic would give her a critical chance down the line.

The ritual itself was not much to look at, just the gold rankers floating in the air above the ritual circle. Afterwards, they discussed what the ritual had shown them, along with their physical exploration of the zone and the scattered memories from their time under the messenger tree's control.

Messenger arrogance helped Belinda out as they did not bother with the silver-rankers at all during this process. The gold-rankers decided that only their insights and recollections were valuable, saving Belinda from the need to invent some.

The messengers demonstrated some impressive deductive reasoning, grasping the main points of their circumstances. They didn't have everything, but put together more than she expected, relative to what she and the other expedition members had been told by Jason.

Galis Jay Vahal was one of the gold-rankers, the other being named Kol Kelis Vel.

"In short," Galis said, "we need to claim and unify these territories before anyone else in here. If that means eliminating any opposition we encounter then all the better. We do not know everything yet, so we can extract answers from them before we let them die."

"Should we?" one of the silver-rankers asked. "Haven't we been tainted by what happened to us? Removed from the pure messenger ideal? Perhaps we should destroy ourselves, rather than return to Vesta Carmis Zell corrupted."

"Don't be an idiot," Belinda snapped, hoping this was her moment. "If the gold-rankers thought that, they would have destroyed us already. We need to listen to their words and obey their commands. Thinking for yourself will get you nowhere. Obviously."

Galis looked to Belinda with approval, then at the other messenger.

"Relia Vin Vala is correct," he said. "Do not presume that your understanding of anything is greater than ours, Cas Vin Baral. You should thank Relia Vin Vala as her wisdom has saved you from a more violent education at my hands."

The look Cas Vin Baral gave Belinda was not one of gratitude. She had made an enemy, but getting her name and ingratiating herself with the gold-rankers had been worth it. It was a good beginning.

Neil's early days as an adventurer had been a mixed bag. Assigned as a lackey to Thadwick Mercer through family obligation, dealing with a fool whose arrogance and incompetence only escalated over time had been a miserable experience. Outside of Thadwick himself, however, things had been good.

The Mercer family seemed to understand exactly what they had piled onto Neil and went out of their way to compensate. From the day his training began, years before absorbing his essences, the Mercer family had given him training, facilities and resources that only the Gellers could match.

Whether all that was from guilt or a desire to give Thadwick the best companions, Neil still didn't know. If it came down to Thadwick's mother, he would put faith in her good intentions. But the Mercer family was large and Thadwick was raised primarily by his father. In his good intentions, Neil had no faith at all.

Other aspects of Neil's early years made life with Thadwick bearable. He was another face in the crowd when it came to being an admirer of Thadwick's sister, Cassandra, but had more proximity than most. His early hostility to Jason had not come from any loyalty to Thadwick but outrage that Cassandra had chosen Jason, of all people. He would eventually — and grudgingly — come to recognise that Jason wasn't without virtue, but remained convinced that Jason had unscrupulously seduced her through otherworldly culinary delights.

More than any of that, what had gotten Neil through working with Thadwick was the third member of their team, Dustin Kettering. Dustin was in the same position as Neil, forced to train and work with Thadwick through the obligation of his family to the Mercers. Neil and Dustin, two people in the same circumstance, with the same problems, unsurprisingly built up a camaraderie.

Dustin had joined Rick's team, not long after Neil had joined Jason and Humphrey. Like Neil and Dustin, Rick's group were struggling with the repercussions of the disastrous expedition out of Greenstone. Thadwick and Rick's party member, Jonas, had both been captured by the Builder cult and implanted with star seeds, leading to unpleasant ends for both. Dustin might not have cared for Thadwick, but there was an understanding that allowed him to find a place with Rick and his teammates.

Both Neil and Dustin had been lost after Thadwick had gone completely off the rails. Neil had been lured into Jason's team, mostly by the assurances of Humphrey's mother. He still might have refused because of Jason himself if Jason hadn't paid Neil a visit. Jason's approach of honesty had made Neil realise that Jason would be an annoyance, but one he could live with. Respect had taken quite a bit longer and a large number of sandwiches, reaffirming Neil's suspicions about Jason and Cassandra.

When Neil and Dustin found themselves dropped in the same territory, it made for a welcome reunion. It also gave them a frontline and healer combination. They discussed this as they walked beside a canal in a city with looming gothic architecture.

"We need some damage dealers," Dustin said.

"Sure, but that can be anyone," Neil said dismissively. "Damage dealers get all the glory, but it's people like you and me that determine victory and defeat. We just need to recruit the first idiot we encounter who can lob a firebolt or shoot an arrow. I'd even be willing to accept an affliction specialist, so long as he brings snacks."