

## Chapter 833

### Binaries

Boris was human-sized and without his wings, but Jason couldn't help but notice the messenger was still a lot taller. They were still on the beach, Jason in a floral shirt and tan shorts. Boris was wearing what Jason could only describe as a blouse with only two buttons at the bottom done up. Like his hair, it was being gently tousled by a sea breeze that wasn't enough to cut through the scorching heat of the day. Jason looked down at Boris' legs.

"Are you wearing pantaloons?" Jason asked.

"I'm not going to take fashion criticism from someone dressed like a Japanese tourist in an American movie. From the eighties."

"Better that than the cover of some bargain-bin bodice-ripper. You look like you washed up from a pirate ship and have zero interest in consent."

"Are we going to do this or what?"

"Well, we were. The problem is that I'm starting to feel like the plantation owner's busty-yet-naïve daughter."

"I thought the problem was you suspected me of being a soul-engineered trap."

"What? Oh, yep. That's the problem. I didn't forget."

Boris shook his head and Jason raised a hand, one finger primed to flick.

"Really?" Boris asked. "You don't have a more mature way to—"

Jason flicked him on the forehead.

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Jason and Boris stood facing each other, barefoot in the sand. Jason looked around Boris' soul space. It was a blank, unnaturally flat desert that stretched out to the horizon. There were no rocks, no dunes, no clouds in the azure sky. Just a flat expanse of sand and a sun with its merciless heat.

"This is quite a soul space you've got here," Jason said.

"An astral king first helped me form this space before your planet existed. I've had a lot of time to work on it."

"And this is the foyer. All your secrets, far off where no one can see them."

"We both know that you could find them with little effort. This is my space, but I don't have the tools you do."

“I’m not going to go rummaging,” Jason said. “I only came in here because there’s no other way to clear the brand off your soul. Taking advantage of that would be a violation of the highest order.”

“I could show you around a little. That might help you trust me more.”

“You just told me how long you’ve had to work on this place. Are you telling me that in all that time, you couldn’t have sculpted up a reassuring and thoroughly deceitful playground to lead someone through? A theme park where the theme is you not being an evil scheming prick?”

Boris laughed.

“I could have done that, yes. In fact, I might get started on it as soon as we’re done here.”

“Put in a bouncy castle. Bouncy castles are awesome.”

“If you aren’t going to go poking around, I should lead you to the brand. It’s located in the traditional throne room.”

Jason lightly tapped his foot and sand rippled out from it like pond water after a rock was dropped into it.

“That get it done?” Jason ask.

Boris tilted his head as if listening for something.

“Yes,” he said, surprise in his voice. “I do believe that is enough that I can take it from here.”

“Good. I’m leaving before any more of your sketchy pirate friends show up.”

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Jason and Arabelle stood in the middle of a residential street in Jason’s replica town. There was no traffic, although there were parked cars. They were looking at a particular house.

“So, this is where you grew up,” Arabelle said.

“Yeah. My sister and her family own it now. I think. Their living situation got a bit complicated there for a while, as did society as a whole. Looking back, I hit Earth a bit like a bomb.”

“You blame yourself?”

“For what happened on Earth? Absolutely not. My arrival may have changed the exact outcomes, but things were going pear-shaped long before I turned up. With or without me, magic was going to go public sooner rather than later. The Builder’s shonky door was waiting for an outworlder to claim it hundreds of years before I was born.”

“I was more thinking on a personal level.”

“If I hadn’t returned, my family wouldn’t have had a normal life because no one would have. Things would have played out a little differently, but the existence of magic was coming out. There was no stopping it and that was just the beginning. It could have turned out fine or gone full zombie movie, I don’t know. Earth isn’t made for regular people anymore, and my showing up or not couldn’t change that. But I made my family not regular people anymore, and I left them as safe and well-off as I was able.”

“But you have regrets?”

“I don’t think there’s such thing as a life without regrets. I wasn’t equipped mentally for what Earth had waiting for me, but I did the best I could with what I had. There’s no shame in doing your best, even when it doesn’t work out.”

Arabelle gave him a side glance and he chuckled.

“I know,” he said. “Normally, after one of these crazy fights, I’m laid up for months and more than a little broody.”

“This was more than a crazy fight, Jason. You risked not just your life but your soul and your very identity. I saw your soul being corrupted and broken down.”

Jason nodded and started walking down the street, Arabelle following.

“It wasn’t actual damage,” Jason said. “Well, it was a bit, but not as much as you’d think. My soul is used to being knocked around from the inside and what you saw wasn’t actually happening. It was a metaphor for control; a board game playing out as my will clashed with the echo of Undeath’s.”

“How does that even work? How does willpower have an echo?”

“Gods,” Jason said and he clapped his hands together. “When I do that, it makes a sound. Something you and I can do because we’re physical in nature. A god is spiritual in nature, and exhaustively powerful.”

Jason clapped again, this time doing so with all of his silver-rank strength to cause a loud crack of noise.

“How loud could a diamond-ranker clap?” he asked. “Could they knock over these houses with the sheer force of it? A god is far more powerful than even a diamond-ranker, so when they spiritually clap, it has power. Power enough to give the avatar something that mimics a will of its own. More power than I can handle as a mortal man. I have one foot in the spiritual realm, which is what allowed me to fight at all, but a god is a god.”

“And in your soul realm, you are the closest thing there is to a god.”

“Yes. But I had to let myself become more god-like in order to act like one. Once I did, the remnant of Undeath’s will was a paltry thing, but I had to put both feet on the spiritual side to get there. Coming back wasn’t easy.”

"I find it hard to imagine going through that didn't leave some kind of trauma."

"I was surprised as well. I've been waiting for the backlash to come, but it's been just the opposite."

"Oh?"

"I'm changing. We've talked about my fear of what I end up becoming, but I just got a really good look."

"You're going to turn into some god-thing with no identity?"

"No, thankfully. That was me fumbling around with power I didn't understand. Again. But the experience gave me insight into the spiritual power that's been growing inside me. The aspects of myself that are shedding mortality."

He glanced at Arabelle walking beside him.

"Most importantly," he continued, "the experience has helped me accept the parts of myself I've been holding at arm's length out of fear. I never explored the limits of my spiritual power because I was afraid of what I would become."

"But dealing with the avatar of Undeath forced your hand."

"Yes. A lack of understanding meant that my approach was more dangerous than it had to be because I was learning how under the worst circumstances. The exact situation Humphrey told me off for forcing all of you into, as it happens."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Like I made the latest in a long series of stuff-ups. To be honest, I think Hump beat you to the punch in making me realise how I was sabotaging myself and the people that matter the most to me."

"What did you learn?"

"That I have to not just talk about trust but actually be trusting. The price of a mistake always seems so obvious in hindsight."

"I'm afraid that we've gone beyond the scope of my knowledge regarding mental health," Arabelle said. "What you're describing, what does it mean from a practical perspective? What's changed?"

"I've been exploring that over the last few weeks. As a gestalt being, my body has been both physical and spiritual for several years. Now, my mind is as well and I've been delving into the spiritual parts of myself. If I'd been willing to do that when it was safer, I wouldn't have had to take such risks. If I had to fight that battle of wills again now, I wouldn't need to carve parts of myself away. I've stopped segregating my mind into the parts I accept and the parts I'm afraid of. I've stopped pretending it's a binary and accepted that I'm going to change."

They drew close to the beach and Jason led them off the road. He pushed the branches of a bush out of the way and took them onto a trail that ran alongside a small creek. It was Australian bushland; eucalyptus trees with their heavy scent and bushes sporting sharp prickles as often as leaves. Long grass crowded the trail on both sides and Arabelle felt some brush her leg. She stopped to inspect her pants and found a neat, straight slice in them.

“Cutting grass,” Jason said as she stopped to examine her pants. “Likes to make unpleasant cuts. Paper cuts, basically. You’re gold-rank, so you don’t have to worry.”

“My pants do. What does this cutting grass look like?”

“The rest of the grass. Welcome to Australia. Well, fake Australia.”

Arabelle watched as Jason crossed the creek by stepping on a sequence of unstable-looking rocks. Arabelle simply jumped across; a laughable task for her gold-rank physical prowess. Just as easy for Jason, but he’d chosen to hop across the rocks like a normal person. He did so with a confidence that came not from prowess but practise.

“Where are you taking us?” Arabelle asked. “Or is this just a tour of your childhood haunts?”

“This creek runs out of a duck pond,” Jason said. “I wanted to see if the ducks were there.”

“You already know the answer to that.”

Jason nodded but kept walking. There were no ordinary animals in the transformation zone. They reached a clearing and the promised pond. There wasn’t much to it but Arabelle could see why it would be a treasure to children. Hidden away in the bush, an escape from parents, even if that was an illusion. Those same parents would remember the way from their own childhoods, just as Jason had led them here now.

Arabelle watched Jason as he stood, staring at the small pond and the lack of ducks. She waited, giving him as much time to think as he wanted. He took a lot of it. There was an eerie quiet without animals or insects. A breeze occasionally rustled eucalyptus leaves.

“I remember it being bigger,” he said, finally breaking the silence. “Nothing stays the way it was, does it? Even if a place doesn’t change, it does to us because we do. Something that used to be so familiar feels the same, but also different enough to be uncanny. Like finding an old shirt that you loved growing up, one you wore until it had holes and then you kept wearing it anyway. But now it’s too small, like it belongs to someone else. Someone you used to be but aren’t anymore.”

Arabelle stayed quiet. She recognised that he wasn’t really talking to her.

“I’m going to change,” he said, repeating his earlier words. “I’m going to trust myself that the changes will be for the better, and not cost me everything that I am. I didn’t trust myself or my friends during the avatar fight. Not until I had to. If I’d had the courage to stop hiding from the inevitable, it wouldn’t have been so dangerous.”

He turned and smiled at Arabelle.

“Let’s go,” he said and led them to another path Arabelle had not noticed before Jason pushed aside a bush.

“I’ve been talking about my mistakes and my feelings,” Jason said. “We’ve covered that ground so often over the years that I already know how to move forward. There are other things that need my focus right now.”

“Such as?”

“The transformation zone. I can feel it, stronger than ever now.”

“Because you’ve claimed half of it?”

“That’s part of it. I’ve gained a fairly good sense of it and it’s different to the transformation zones I encountered on Earth.”

“More powerful?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t matter. The issue is that it’s more complex. On Earth, the zones were straightforward dimension patches; scabs grown over wounds in the universe. This transformation zone has been stuffed with extreme influences. Divine power; a warped natural array; a half-formed soul forge. Even me. I didn’t have my astral gate and astral throne back on Earth, and they have definitely influenced the zone.”

Arabelle turned her head but the mountain shaped like Jason’s head was obscured by the trees around them.

“We’ve noticed,” she said dryly.

“All those factors are like infections trapped under the scab, making the healing process harder. It also means that claiming a quarter of the zone all at once hit me like a train. Not as bad as losing territories — nothing got ripped out of my soul — but that many territories all at once? It hit me harder than losing a much smaller territory did.”

“Did you learn anything helpful from your connection to the transformation zone? Something we can use?”

“Yeah. I have a stronger sense of the territory than I did for the transformation zones on Earth, at least before I claimed them fully. I can feel the natural array. The soul forge. I think I’ve even figured out what the messengers kept getting wrong. Why their attempts to turn the natural array into a soul forge didn’t work.”

“Which is?”

“Better discussed with Clive and Farrah, frankly. The short version is that they kept looking at the natural array and its power as a single thing when they’re actually two. Connected but not combined. The natural array and its power are binary, like the body and soul of a human.”

“Body and soul,” Arabelle said. “Not an accidental comparison I take it.”

“No,” Jason said. “It’s like the messengers were blinded by their gestalt nature. They thought of the soul forge as something belonging to astral kings and, by extension, messengers as a whole. It was theirs, not just *for* them but *of* them. That led them to applying messenger sensibilities and treating the two aspects of the array as a gestalt.”

“Their gestalt nature is one of the cornerstones of the messenger sense of superiority,” Arabelle said. “So, when they look at something they associate with themselves, they don’t think in binaries. It’s a blind spot for them.”

“Exactly,” Jason said. “What they needed was the power, but they kept corrupting it by trying to incorporate the physical array. I think the messengers gave us a device they thought would extract the soul forge, but they were wrong. It’s a good thing we used it for something else.”

“Does this mean you can take the soul forge if we manage to claim this entire zone?”

“I believe so. I have a better idea of what the soul forge is now. Only the very basics, but learning to use my astral throne and astral gate have helped. And there was Dawn saying I should leave them alone.”

“You didn’t listen to her at all, did you?”

“I did, but you know how it is. If you need a sword but the only one available has spikes on the handle, you still grab it. Saving a life is more important than a bloody hand.”

“You and I have discussed your propensity for self-sacrifice, Jason. Be wary of overlooking alternatives and jumping directly into self-destructive behaviour.”

“I know,” Jason said in the tone of a child promising to make his bed.

“What other insights have you gleaned?”

“My improved understanding of my spiritual side and the soul forge have given me a better idea of what happens next. When I’m reforming the transformation zone and reintegrating it with normal reality, I’ll separate the natural array and the soul forge that are corrupting one another, then claim the soul forge for myself. That will trigger my transfiguration into a full astral king. I’ll begin the process of becoming a half-transcendent.”

“A peak diamond-ranker?”

“No. That’s the other half of half transcendent. Transcending requires two things: transcending mortal power and transcending mortal nature. Peak diamond-rank is about becoming so powerful that mortality itself can barely hold onto you. That’s the half that most people achieve first, often never managing the other half.”

“But you just had to be different.”

“I guess it’s kind of my thing. I still have to get to peak diamond the long way. The part most people have trouble with is truly stepping over the line between mortal and immortal. To transcend mortality itself. That’s not something you can do just by growing your power.”

“And you’ll do that by becoming an astral king.”

“Astral king or nearest offer. I won’t be the first to turn into an astral king the hard way, and those that do are all a bit odd, apparently. I guess regular folk don’t end up at this stage. But becoming an astral king isn’t the only way to shrug off mortality.”

“Didn’t Dawn go off to become a transcendent?”

“Yes, but I have no idea how.”

“She didn’t tell you?”

“I didn’t ask. The fact that she was leaving always seemed more important than why.”

Arabelle smiled to herself. Jason led them out of a bush and onto the side of a road. It was somewhere on the outskirts of the town with houses more spread out. She looked back and would have had trouble finding the path again.

They started walking down the middle of the road, which felt hot and soft. Arabelle’s foot sank slightly into it at one point, a patch of road having melted underfoot. Jason turned to see why she had stopped and he broke into a broad smile.

“Cheap surfacing materials,” he said happily. “Gets melty on hot summer days. I always loved that.”

Arabelle shook her head and they kept going.

“What are the practical aspects of becoming an astral king?” she asked.

“It means consolidating my soul realm into an actual pocket universe. Something floating out in the astral that people could go and visit in a dimension ship. It will arguably become a dimension ship itself.”

“That you can return to Earth in?”

“Yeah. Probably my cloud vessel too, given its connection to me. I can’t steer it, though. Clive and I have been looking at dimensional navigation and we can’t get our heads around it. Boris said he’ll give me the magic I need to ride the link between worlds,



no navigation necessary. Of course, Clive and I will check it as thoroughly as we can before ever using it.”

“You’re going to turn into an astral king. How long will that take?”

“Years.”

“And you’ll have to stay inside your soul realm the whole time?”

“More than that. I have to become my soul realm. A body-spirit gestalt is like a seed. Very close to literally, for messengers. When I become an astral king, that seed will germinate and become a universe.”

“If your body becomes a universe, won’t you be stuck floating through the astral?”

“Once the process is complete, I’ll create an avatar. A prime avatar that embodies everything about me. They’re normally peak diamond, with a goodly chunk of extra spirit power behind them, but mine will be stuck at my rank. You can only have one at a time, even when you’re a full-strength astral king, but it lets astral kings operate in physical reality. They generate less authority than gods or great astral beings but, through their prime avatars, have a freedom to act in physical reality that other zenith astral entities can’t match. Astral kings maintain that physical aspect that gods and great astral beings never had.”

“Doesn’t that mean that the astral kings could send their ludicrously powerful avatars here?”

“That’s what I was wondering. Theoretically, yes. In practice, there’s a lot of political wrangling with local gods. The disadvantage of maintaining a physical and spiritual existence is that you’re subject to the rules and limitations of both. Gods won’t let astral kings invading their world send powerful avatars, and astral kings don’t ask. Replacing a prime avatar is, by all accounts, no small thing.”

“That’s a lot to take in.”

“I know, right? I’m going to turn into a universe. And I’m going to be so obnoxious about it, too. I’ll talk about it more than if I became a vegan; I’ll be completely intolerable.”

Arabelle sighed.

“It’s good that you know what is coming for you,” she said. “Better that you seem at peace with it. But do any of these new insights help us with claiming the rest of the transformation zone?”

“Yeah, actually. Clive had a hypothesis that I can now confirm and we’ve been discussing how to make use of it. Right now, Gary is hard carrying us in claiming territories, but we don’t know what’s waiting for us at the end. Clive, Farrah and I have been cooking up something to give us an extra bit of punch when...”

He trailed off and they both moved to the side of the road. They watched as a bright yellow car moved erratically down the street. Inside it was a messenger, shrunken down to human size but with white fire blazing in her eyes. They watched her unsteady progress, her expression of distracted determination not even glancing their way.

“Uh...” Jason said at an uncharacteristic loss for words. “Did I just see a messenger driving Mrs Berrigan’s ‘73 Holden Torana?”