

Chapter 821

Asking For a Lot of Trust

In the dimension-warped M.C. Escher castle Garth had trapped them in, Jason watched Garth move across a bridge that was, from his perspective, upside down. The undead glared at him with the burning light inside the eyes of his skull sockets, but could do nothing more. Although they could look at one another, they could not fling attacks across the dimensional boundaries that invisibly segmented the space. Jason watched as Garth kept hunting him, growing visibly weaker by the minute.

“And you think this messenger set all this up?” Jason asked.

“I do not know anyone else who would have the information and access to put all this into play,” Shade said. “He knows a great deal about you, by means we have yet to determine.”

“You could have told me what a zemravore was when Garth did his big reveal.”

“And interrupt your villain banter?”

“Yeah, that’s fair.”

They continued to watch, Jason’s superior grasp of the dimensional properties of the space allowing them to easily avoid the undead. Garth’s movements grew more sluggish and awkward with each passing moment, slowing to a crawl as shimmering energy emanated from inside his bare ribcage. That energy kept growing, shuddering in instability before finally exploding, scattering shards of bone from Garth’s shattered body.

Jason closed his eyes as he felt the realm collapse. He was hurled through a realm of twisted astral forces, his senses bombarded with a vortex of colour and howling wind. It lasted only a moment and Jason opened his eyes when everything went still. He was back in the transformation zone, deep in the enemy battle line. The undead around him saw his sudden appearance and moved to the attack.

Jason expanded his aura, suppressing theirs and diminishing the undeath energy animating them. He picked up the nearby undead with his aura and flung them away, clearing a space around him. He looked to his feet where the shattered remains of Garth lay in a pile.

More undead were moving in on him but Jason wasn’t taking a stealth approach for the moment. A long shadow arm emerged from his back and drew his sword. It whipped and flailed in a blur of motion while Jason himself stood still. The sword delivered afflictions, including the ghost fire that was so devastating to the undead. Jason wasn’t going for the kill for the moment, only warding off those who disturbed his cleared space.

Jason looked over at his pyramidal cloud fortress, jutting above the fray. He extended his will and the fortress became a beacon for his aura, once more spreading it across the battlefield. He then joined the voice chat for his team, reassuring them of his safe return and the demise of Garth.

“You killed him?” Humphrey asked.

“Actually,” Jason said, “he just kind of got lost and then blew up. It was weird.”

“How?” Rufus asked.

“I suspect that’s something we need to ask Boris Ket Lundi,” Jason said.

“Conveniently enough, he’s heading this way.”

“Who?” Sophie asked.

“A messenger,” Jason said. “One who never seems to meet a faction he won’t pit against another, for reasons that are still unclear. He knows a suspicious amount about me, though.”

Jason knelt to loot Garth's body when purple runes started carving themselves into the broken bones as Garth's skeletal body reformed. Shattered splinters united to become whole, bones mending as if they'd never been broken. At the same time, an aura flooded across the battlefield, washing Jason's away like a sandcastle before the rising tide.

The avatar of Undeath came stomping through the boundary veil of the territory. It was too far away to see but the aura was unmistakable. This territory was claimed by it and claimed thoroughly, the way Jason did it. This was an entity that could create spirit domains. The avatar's aura infused everything as it returned, pressing down on the battlefield and everyone in it. Only the inside of Jason's pyramid was spared, his spiritual domain impenetrable to spiritual pressure.

The suppression of the undead by Jason's aura beaming out from his pyramid proved short-lived. Quashed by the avatar, the undead it had weakened were returned to full strength. The aura radiating from Jason himself wasn't suppressed, the avatar's influence more of a broad brush, but it was diminished. The undead hovering around his cleared space went from a few pushing in to all of them shambling in his direction.

In front of Jason, Garth's body reassembled itself. Jason looked at the skull where the intelligent red light in his eyes had been replaced with mindless purple. Jason had seen the same on countless undead. Everything from body language to aura told Jason that the true essence of Garth was in the Reaper's hands now. What remained was another undead drone; more powerful than those around him but without the spark that made him a person and not just a thing.

"The plan looks to be working," Jason said through voice chat as he vanished into the shadows, escaping the encroaching undead. "Garth got just back up as a mindless drone. His original aura is gone and the new one is chock full of divine undeath energy. That definitely came from the avatar."

Similar reports came in from other adventurers. They had been avoiding killing the priests until the avatar arrived but it didn't seem to matter. Even those who died before the avatar's arrival were reanimating, drawing power from the avatar to become powerful but mindless revenants. Even the ones that had been undead in the first place were rising once more, although as echoes of their former selves.

Jason could sense the avatar moving closer to the battle at speed as another divine aura followed it into the territory.

➤ [Contact \[Gareth Xandier\] has entered voice chat range.](#)

Miriam was using the command channel to direct forces in the wake of the two divine beings' arrival. Jason pulled Gary into the team channel to take his report.

"You have a sense of how effective Clive's plan was, right?" Jason asked Gary. "We just confirmed on our side that any dead priest will take energy from the avatar, freshly killed or not. The question is, does killing these pricks off weaken the avatar?"

"It does," Gary confirmed.

"By how much?"

"By more than we'd feared and less than we'd hoped. We need to kill a lot more priests."

"Gary," Jason said. "You just gave me a little atheist chubby."

"Little, huh?" Neil said. "I hope you didn't disappoint—"

"Neil," Clive said, "I swear to your god, if you say a damn thing about my imaginary wife, your life will become a plague of tiny, hard-to-find ritual magic. Why is Neil's cloud bed so itchy? Turns out there's a tiny ritual circle. Why does Neil keep sneezing? Turns out there's a tiny ritual circle. Why do Neil's clothes never quite fit? No ritual circle; he just keeps wearing the clothes his aunt sends him."

"What do you expect me to do?" Neil asked. "She just keeps sending them. I'm not going to snub her good intentions and throw them away. She just sends so many; I don't even know how she always knows where I am. I've been roaming all over for years now. It's as if..."

The team channel fell silent for a long moment.

“Has someone,” Neil asked, his tone suggesting through clenched teeth, “been sending messages to my aunt, telling her where I am? Maybe that I go through a lot of clothes while adventuring? Maybe suggesting that they should be robust, as well as nice and loose to move around in. Padded for cold weather and brightly coloured so the team can spot me if I get in danger.”

“No,” Belinda said. “Although I definitely would have, if I’d thought of it.”

“I know one of you did it,” Neil said. “Just confess. I won’t be angry.”

“He’s definitely going to be angry,” Sophie said.

Clive let a groan out over voice chat.

“In case you haven’t noticed,” Clive said, “We’re in the middle of a battle.”

“Thank you, Clive,” Humphrey said.

“That’s why,” Clive said, “I’ll tell you who’s been doing it, Neil, on the condition that you don’t make a stink about it until after the battle.”

“Fine,” Neil said.

“That was a little too quick,” Belinda said. “He’s definitely going to make a stink.”

“Okay, I get it,” Neil said. “I won’t seek revenge until after the fighting is done. Just tell me who it is.”

“I don’t know if I should, now,” Clive said.

“Just tell me!” Neil snarled.

“Fine,” Clive said, his tone reluctant. “It was my wife.”

“Oh, you son of a—”

Miriam was keeping a sharp eye on the approaching messengers. They’d been happy to observe from their mountain perch thus far, but either the arrival of the avatar or the death of the Undeath high priest had stirred them to action. The concern was what that action would be.

“Operations Commander,” Miriam said. “You’re our designated messenger liaison. Can you go and get a sense of what those messengers are after?”

“What if they kill me?” Jason asked.

“Then we’ll have a pretty good idea of what they’re after.”

“What?” Jason exclaimed.

“What?” Miriam asked.

“You want me to go out and see if they kill me?”

“Sure,” Miriam said. “Or, you know, maybe use the voice chat we’re using right now so you don’t have to go near him.”

“Oh,” Jason said. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

➤ [Jason Asano] has invited you to a voice chat.

Boris looked at the floating window in front of him. It wasn't the first such screen he'd seen, with everyone in the transformation zone encountering a few. Jason had imprinted on the zone, causing such windows to pop up periodically, usually related to events in the zone.

Having the windows explain the rules had been a large part of letting enemies and allies alike understand what was happening, how and why. That was especially true for the messengers that weren't Boris himself. They had been the most ignorant going in, but the messages had filled in a large piece of the puzzle.

“So this is the Asano communication power,” Boris said. “Basing it on video game chat has made it very organised and efficient by the standards of communication powers. Are there emojis?”

“Don't try to bunny-ears-lawyer a bunny ears lawyer,” Jason warned him. “State your intentions, Boris, or we're coming for you.”

“I think you have bigger issues than me,” Boris said. “That avatar is moving fast. It'll be here any moment now.”

“It's just power with no intellect behind it, now that Garth's dead,” Jason told him. “You're good at playing sly but you showed your hand a little killing him like that. You played us like duelling banjos and I don't want to end up like Ned Beatty with you telling me to squeal like a pig.”

“Really? You're going with *Deliverance*? That scene? Not a classy reference. I thought *Battle of the Planets* or *A-Team* would be more your speed. Oh, you're checking if I really have been on Earth. Well, I have. For a lot longer than you.”

“Good to know, but that's something to get into later. What are you and your friends up to?”

“I've been watching your people avoid the priests. That's smart. If they come back right after they die, they'll draw more power out of the avatar than if they've been dead for a while.”

“You seem to know a lot about everything.”

“A lot of experience and a very good memory.”

“Something that makes you exceedingly dangerous.”

"A lot of people say the same thing about you."

"Yeah. Then they try and kill me."

"Are you going to kill me as a precaution then?"

"No," Jason said. "Like I said, people try that on me all the time. It hardly ever works and turns a potential threat into a guaranteed one."

"What now, then?"

"Now you answer the question you dodged. What are you and your messengers doing?"

"Coming to help."

"You, I can believe. Maybe. But that many messengers?"

"There were more. I've turned these two golds to the Unorthodoxy and killed the ones who refused. The silvers obey because they're silvers."

"You played Garth and me off against one another. If he'd won, would you be flying to help his side?"

"You're not so dense as to believe that. You and Garth were both smart enough to realise that I set him all the way up. The only good outcome for me was you being the one to come out of that. If you were so incompetent that you couldn't win with everything I put in place, you weren't worth coming down here for in the first place."

"You came here for me?"

"I'm from Earth, Asano. What do you think I came here for?"

"After the way you treated Marla? The lax sexual harassment laws."

Boris let out a laugh.

"Boris, as far as I'm concerned, you're the biggest potential threat on this battlefield. I don't think trying to kill you is a good idea, but I've been stuck with plenty of bad ones in my short but exciting career. If I think for a second that your people are going to turn on us, we'll prioritise putting you down over the avatar."

"And here I thought we were getting along."

"I think you know what not-getting-along-with-me looks like Boris, and that this isn't it. And I think that you're smarter, older and more cunning than I am. So I'm going to be very careful."

"I thought you'd appreciate a little scheming."

"I do. I respect it, too, which is why I'm going to be so careful."

"Well, I guess I can accept that. I'll follow your lead, Asano. Where do you want me to attack from?"

"The Wangaratta Performing Arts & Convention Centre."

Boris laughed again.

"That may be a little further than is strictly practical," he pointed out.

"Come at them from the opposite side to where my people are," Jason said. "Stay clear of my people and focus on the priests. If we all come through this, we'll talk again. While you and yours are standing on the ground, right next to my friend Gary."

"That's asking for a lot of trust from me."

"You're messengers."

"That's racial profiling."

"Tough. Your entire species is an Iranian wearing a 'death to America' t-shirt through airport security. You don't like those terms, you can sod off back to your mountain."

Chapter 822

It Used to Be Completely Dark

The two divine combatants were the unquestionable focus of the battlefield. Looming as tall as houses, they flung powers back and forth. Gary wielded hammers and conjured chains, all wreathed in golden fire. He called up his foundry golem summon, far larger than normal and filled with metal melted by divine fire. The avatar plucked undead from the ground and pallid messengers from the air, melding them into grotesque whips of dead flesh. It grabbed fistfuls of undead and flung them like grenades that exploded with purple fire.

Overall, Gary had a slight edge, but not enough to be definitive. Both were simply too hard to kill, recovering from any damage instantaneously. The adventurers and their allies fought to shift this balance, hunting down the priests of Undeath. Each one that fell absorbed a little of the avatar's power to rise again as a revenant. They were mindless and lacked the magical powers of their previous selves, but were stronger, fearless and extremely hard to kill.

Jason watched Boris as the messenger carved a path through the undead. The weapons in his hands shifted every few blows; a greatsword burst into a cloud of embers that blinded and scorched the undead before reforming into a rapier and sword-catcher. Next was a spear, then a sword-staff, then a pair of flails.

As he fought, he employed other powers, all variations of burning embers. Feathers shot out, burying themselves in enemies and burning them from the inside. Clouds of sparks and ash exploded like cluster bombs, Boris vanishing into one and emerging from another.

There was a grace and flow to the way Boris moved. It wasn't flashy, just profoundly efficient in a way that seemed almost prescient. Enemies moved to the attack just as he moved out of the way; not a dodge but a natural motion, as if they had been swinging to miss. There was no haste in his actions. Boris moved little faster than a silver-ranker, yet was always doing the exact right thing at the exact right time.

Jason had never seen anything like it. Not from Sophie, not from Rufus and not even from Dawn. He didn't know what to make of fighting that treated the world as a partner in a dance to which only he knew the steps. Jason knew that gold-rankers had what amounted to perfect memories, but how many battles did Boris remember? How much cumulative

combat experience did it take to reach that level? Centuries? Millennia? Had Boris spent more time on the battlefield than Jason's homeworld had been recording history?

Not to say that Boris was invincible. He was a messenger, without the vast array of powers an essence user held. He was also a specific kind of fighter. He fought in close, using fire powers to complement his fighting and extend his reach into the mid-range. That put him in a similar role to Farrah, but a deft needle to her crude hammer.

If it came to a fight, they could take Boris down, but it would be a hard, ugly fight. Jason could face off against a gold-ranker with enough buffs, but not a gold-ranker like Boris. That was a place for gold-rankers only, and even outnumbering him, they would pay a price. Jason was very much hoping it didn't come to that.

While keeping an eye on Boris, Jason was not idle. He made his way through the battle, spreading ghost fire and his other afflictions to the undead masses. His role was to thin out the mindless undead and the pallid messengers, who weren't brainless but were far from imaginative.

Given the horde blanketing the ground, Jason was going to need Gordon's butterflies to spread his afflictions. Gordon had been taken out by Garth but was more than just a familiar, now. Gordon's vessel had been reconstituted in Jason's soul space and was again available for battle.

Getting the butterflies to spread in sufficient numbers was easier said than done. Even ignoring all their minions, the Undeath priests outnumbered both the adventurers and Boris' messengers combined. They were also very aware of Jason and the various threats he posed. They understood the weaknesses of the butterflies and his ghost fire and put no small effort into hampering them.

The key to the butterflies was to turn enough foes into factories producing more butterflies. Everywhere that Jason popped up, there were priests ready to wipe out any butterflies they saw, along with any undead or pallid messengers producing them. They had minions enough to spare so long as they could shut Jason down.

Jason remembered back to the messenger invasion of Yareh. For the vast majority of that battle, he'd been running around in a futile attempt to get a butterfly engine up and running. The messengers hadn't allowed that to happen and the Undeath priests were doing the same. During the invasion, he'd tried to avoid the team of messengers tasked with shutting him down. This time he wouldn't make the same mistake.

Emerging from a shadow amongst a cluster of priests, Jason's swordplay felt clumsy after watching Boris. The messenger somehow gave a master class in elegance with what, from anyone else, would have been a frenzied onslaught. While he was dwelling on the

unflattering comparison, the priests were having a very different experience. To them, Jason was anything but clumsy and inelegant.

The priests diligently crushed the easily spotted glowing butterflies, along with destroying any undead producing more of them. The retaliation began when they found themselves surrounded by what looked like void portals, but they moved around like people. These were Shade bodies, draped in the same cloak Jason wore.

Jason had Shade spread his many bodies amongst the priests while conjuring his starry cloak over each one. With all of them moving swiftly, and Jason shadow-jumping between them, it was all but impossible to pick out the real Jason.

The priests started attacking the Shades and Jason alike. Their direct attack magic was quite similar to Jason's, with curses and necrotic magic featuring heavily. This affected Shade not at all, while each attack came with a price for the priests.

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- [\[Undeath Priest\] has attacked your familiar \[Shade\].](#)
 - [Ability \[Hegemony\] has inflicted \[Undeath Priest\] with an instance of \[Sin\].](#)
-

The priests weren't completely helpless against Shade. They were masters of the undead, including deathly shadows and ethereal ghosts. Shade wasn't an undead, so not vulnerable to their control, but many had attacks that could harm him. Once they realised what they were dealing with, the priests started to attack his bodies. Shade focused on staying elusive and avoiding their powers, but they did successfully cut some of his bodies down.

It cost Jason a lot of mana to restore one of Shade's bodies. Early in his adventuring career, doing so had taken a lot of downtime, draining most of his mana to replace just one. It was still prohibitively expensive in most cases, but not always. Jason had mana to spare, in vast excess of his normal maximum. He'd drained mana from countless undead throughout the battle, taking him well above his usual limit. He couldn't keep replacing Shade's bodies indefinitely, but in the short term, he could spit them out as fast as they were destroyed.

As for Jason himself, the priests realised that trying to pin him down was useless. They turned to powers that blanketed the area, less powerful but much harder to avoid. A purple miasma flooded the area, covering Jason and Shade, although it had no effect on the familiar.

The necrotic damage ulcerated Jason's skin, but the unfocused attack power was too weak to impede him. It would have gotten worse over time if not for Jason's formidable

regeneration, although the hard-to-heal necrosis did prove persistent. The miasma also carried more insidious effects, but insidious was the wrong move against Jason Asano.

- You have suffered necrotic damage.
 - Ability [Hegemony] has inflicted [Undeath Priest] with an instance of [Sin].
 - You have been affected by [Creeping Death].
 - You have resisted [Creeping Death].
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant] from ability [Sin Eater].
 - You have gained an instance of [Integrity] from ability [Sin Eater].
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- [Undeath Priest] has attacked multiple instances of your familiar [Shade].
 - Ability [Hegemony] has inflicted [Undeath Priest] with an instance of [Sin] for each affected instance.
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Jason noted the affliction with amusement, as it was one he could deliver himself. It wouldn't affect undead, being a disease, but he wouldn't let something like that stop him. The same power he used to inflict it, his shadow hands, also inflicted Weakness of the Flesh. That affliction made even the unliving subject to necrosis and disease, meaning that Jason could turn the power of the Undeath priests back onto them and their unliving minions as well.

Jason did exactly that, loading the priests up with those afflictions and more, consuming any sent his way and turning them into boons that boosted his healing and mana supplies. More afflictions were levied against the priests by the simple act of attacking Jason and Shade.

Jason's aura power left everyone who attacked him or an ally with the Sin affliction, which increased his necrotic damage. With enough Sin, even a small amount of such damage would melt flesh like it was month-old meat left out in the tropics. And, as it happened, Jason had a special attack with no cooldown that dealt a small amount of necrotic damage.

There was a pause in the battle as Jason and the Shades stopped moving. Jason stood, surrounded by a half-dozen silver-rank priests. Wet blood dripped from his sword's black blade onto the red sand of the desert. He looked around at the wary faces of the priests. Signs of necrosis blackened their flesh, even that of the undead one whose flesh was not alive. They variously wore combat robes like Jason or more tight-fitting outfits, suited for combat. They held staves, swords and maces; one even had a scythe that looked impressive but wasn't practical for combat.

"You could run," Jason told them.

"We have faith," one of them said.

“Good,” Jason said. “I have some specific opinions on faith.”

A staff with a glowing purple crystal at the end was swung at Jason. He smoothly dodged around it and counterattacked, resuming the fight. He became a dancing shadow and his sword a black blur. The priests used their full bag of tricks, from dark magic to exploding minions, to little avail. He consumed their afflictions and avoided their blasts, the priests unable to tell him from his familiar.

While he felt awkward comparing himself to Boris, Jason was a shadowy demon to the priests. Every strike he landed split to reveal rotting flesh underneath. Normally the masters of dark powers, Jason’s aura shredded their resistances, more with each instance of Sin that piled up. Jason moved through the priests and their undead minions like a ghost; untouchable, unavoidable and unstoppable.

Some held their faith and fell to Jason’s blade. Others fled and he let them go, as killing priests was ultimately not his role. There were plenty of adventurers doing that, but he was the only affliction specialist on the field.

For all that he had ramped up, loaded with boons that increased his speed, bolstered his healing and left him flush with mana, Jason was not swift at killing. The priests he killed rose as revenants; mindless but swift, fearless and extremely hard to put down. By the time he had dealt with them, more priests were moving in to harass him.

“Miriam,” he said in the command channel. “I’m getting more pressure than I’d like from the priests. I’m practically bait. Can you free up my team to run blocker for me?”

“I need their versatility to handle some of the stranger priest powers,” Miriam said. “If the priests are chasing you that hard, how about we use you as bait? Pull in some priests, start a big clash and let you slip free in the chaos?”

“That’ll do.”

“We’ll start small to try and lure them in by stages. I’m sending Rick Geller’s team your way.”

There weren’t a lot of terrain features in the red desert. A few scraggly plants, some rare patches of yellow grass. Mostly it was the occasional rock casting long shadows in the blazing sun. Jason hid in the shadow of one such rock, in a relatively sparse area of the battlefield that kept spreading over the flat landscape. He found himself again watching Boris and his almost hypnotic skill.

“Garth,” he said to himself.

“Mr Asano?” Shade asked.

“Garth was the key. We’re going to win because Garth wasn’t here to direct the avatar intelligently. For all it’s power, it’s mindless. It has no plan to fight back with, or even the ability to recognise how our plan is weakening it. It’s not a matter of win or lose, now, but how much it costs us. Boris saw that. He knew it from the start and planned the excision of the problem area like a surgeon. We’re all dancing in his palm.”

“What do you intend to do about that?”

“That’s the problem. The best course of action is to go along with what he’s doing. My concern is over what happens when what he wants and what we want stops being the same. Will we have gone too far to do anything about it? Will we even see it coming? Based on what we’ve seen so far, my guess would be no.”

“I believe that you’re overthinking it, Mr Asano. The answer is to do what you always do.”

Jason let out a sigh.

“The best I can with what I’ve got, I know.”

He stepped out of the shadow, getting the attention of a pallid messenger overhead. Jason used his aura to crush the messenger’s and then yank it out of the sky, smashing it into the ground. He conjured his black and red dagger and held it over the fallen messenger. He then jerked the messenger up onto the dagger and then back to the ground, each stab delivering a special attack. At the same time, he chanted a series of spells, delivering even more afflictions.

More undead and pallid messengers were swarming in on him, having noticed his actions. Jason didn’t bother to move, allowing Rick and his team to intercept. They’d been rushing in his direction already and flung out powers at the approaching enemy. A wall of ice, incongruous in the scalding desert, appeared to block some of the enemy. Others were struck with spears or arrows.

One of Gordon’s orbs emerged from Jason’s body and entered that of the messenger bouncing up and down under his dagger. It immediately started shedding butterflies that carried each of the afflictions the messenger was suffering.

“There’s a group of priests heading from over there,” Jason said as Rick’s team arrived beside him. They looked at the beleaguered messenger and then at Jason.

“What?” he asked.

“Your cloak is different,” said Claire Adeah, the archer. “From when we fought you in Greenstone.”

“And it used to be completely dark in your hood,” her twin Hannah said. “I can see the shape of your face a little bit now. Your chin really sticks out.”

“Would you please go fight those priests?” Jason said. “I need to get these butterflies going.”

“They’re pretty,” said Dustin, Neil’s friend and Rick’s frontliner.

“They’re also plague-bearing harbingers of doom,” Jason said.

“Adorable harbingers of doom,” Claire said.

“You know,” Jason said, “I liked it better when I could freak you all out.”

“We’re not iron-rankers anymore,” Rick said. “Now, we’ll go tie up these priests and then you can show us why you’re worth getting dragged across the continent every six months for.”

The battle, in the end, was an inexorable but heavily drawn-out affair. The battle that decided everything was always going to be that between Gary and the avatar, and the avatar lacked the conscious mind to fight it. All it did was attack, driven by the remnant arrogance of the god who spawned it. Even as the battle around it slowly sapped its power, it did nothing but continue the attack. Garth had designated a priest to direct the avatar, but that priest’s authority to do so had died with Garth.

The field saw many epic battles played out. Team Storm Shredder had lost two of their members while regrouping after first entering the transformation zone. They went on a rampage of revenge, cutting down many of the enemy before overextending and being caught out. Half of the team held the line for the rest to escape.

Zara Nareen, the former Hurricane Princess, was reluctantly forced back by Orin, the only member of the team with the strength to make her. They were guided back to friendly lines by the team scout, Rose. She found a way through the enemy throng that had them arriving battered but alive, quickly taken away by the healers. The rest of the team, including the leader, Korinne, fell covering their retreat.

Miriam’s team, Moon’s Edge, was the most powerful force on the battlefield other than the cloud buildings and the two divine entities. Boris was stronger individually, but the teamwork of the gold-rank adventurers outstripped Boris and his subordinate messengers who were not up to his standard.

Jason’s team also acted with distinction, handling the more exotic silver-rank threats. They even took on a few of the weaker, isolated gold-rank enemies. Mostly, this meant the mindless undead, but not always. The team had plenty of experience and the right powers when it came to ethereal enemies, so they took down a shadow-giant priest and his army of undead wraiths.

Team Biscuit also brought about the final demise of Garth, whose revenant Jason had left behind after seeing it was mindless. The gold-rank revenant had none of Garth's powers but was incredibly hard to kill. Jason even rejoined his team briefly, just so his escalating affliction damage could carve through all the corrupted, undead vitality.

As more and more priests fell, it became easier for Jason's butterflies to become a swarm that covered the battlefield like a cloud. Rick's team helped him get started but the pallid messengers proved a large impediment. Swift and alert, more and more of them joined the fight to suppress the butterflies. Like the Undeath side as a whole, however, they fought a slow but losing battle. The more priests fell, the more Miriam devoted forces to covering Gordon's butterflies until they reached a critical mass.

The priesthood as an organised force fell apart, falling into clusters that fought in increasing isolation. Some fled, seeking to escape the battle and find some way to live on. Most realised that there was nothing but more death out there and fought to the bitter end. One of the final priests to die was Jameela, Garth's most trusted subordinate. She refused to go down easy, fighting to the bitter end. Finally, she died, her beauty destroyed by Taika's fists and her unwillingness to accept that her cause was lost.

By the time even the most stubborn enemy accepted that it was over, the sky was hidden under the cloud of butterflies, blazing sunlight replaced with a blue and orange glow. The pallid messengers had no place left in the sky and were all but wiped out. The undead horde was faring little better, the numbers that had seemed so endless were scattered and bedevilled with afflictions.

Only the avatar was still fighting. In death, the priests drained the avatar of power, turning them into revenants. That power was then snuffed out as the revenants were destroyed. Everything that could be taken from the avatar had been taken. Its battle with Gary had become one-sided, the avatar's counterattacks weaker and less frequent. The adventurers and their allies were freed to pile on ranged attacks and massive blasts of power came from the two cloud buildings.

The avatar showed no signs of collapsing under the weight of the attacks. The power that had not been siphoned away was stubbornly refusing to be annihilated. Gold-rankers were extremely hard to kill while diamond-rankers were touching on immortality. Gods weren't killable at all, and though the avatar was little more than an echo, it simply refused to die.

The sky was painted blue and orange with butterflies. At Jason's behest, Gordon directed the millions of butterflies to swarm on the avatar. As if the sky itself were moving, they flooded the avatar, disappearing into it and delivering all the accumulated afflictions

they carried. The sheer number of afflictions was unlike anything Jason had ever delivered to an enemy. It was unlikely he would ever match the number again. Once delivered, all those afflictions kept multiplying, over and over, ravaging the avatar until even a diamond-ranker would have melted.

The avatar did as well, its flesh reduced to necrotic soup, yet it did not fall. Its undead flesh melted and regenerated so swiftly that it looked less like a zombie than some corrupted water elemental. It became a roiling humanoid mass of black liquid, lit from within by swirling purple light.

The avatar became the sole foe remaining from the army of Undeath. A few priests had fled to other territories, taking some scattered minions with them, but most had been eliminated. The red desert was painted with black ichor and decorated in shattered, stained, white bones. The adventurers and their allies had startlingly few casualties, their healers proving their worth. Most of the fallen were brighthearts and Builder cultists.

Miriam and Jason, the tactical and operations commanders, stood watching Gary and the strange liquid avatar. They clashed over and over in a stalemate the adventurers had failed to break, despite how much of Undeath's power they had managed to siphon away.

Adventurers and brighthearts continued to pour out ranged attacks in support. The massive buildings struck it with attacks that had savaged entire battle lines, yet the avatar would not collapse. Jason even turned the countless afflictions into transcendent damage before firing off execute after execute. He wasn't the only one using transcendent damage either, yet the avatar would not fall.

"What do we do?" Miriam asked. "It holds the territories, so it has to die, but it won't. It just won't. How do you kill a god?"

Jason turned to look at her.

"What?" she asked, looking at his expression. "You've thought of something."

"You don't kill gods," Jason told her. "You sanction them."

Chapter 823

He Likes to Name-Drop

The battlefield was oddly stalled out. Undeath's army was a spent force, the priests dead or fleeing while the remnant undead were mopped up by the adventurers and their allies. Few of the enemy messengers with their pallid, corpse-like skin remained. Most had been killed by the butterflies that had blanketed the sky until they were sent to attack the avatar. Those that remained were being captured alive. Miriam had ordered their forces to do so if possible and safe, out of respect for Jason's sensibilities. The potentially allied messenger forces, led by Boris Ket Lundi, had been trying to take them alive from the beginning.

Most of Gordon's butterflies had been absorbed into the avatar, although it and the few remaining undead were shedding more. Gordon sent them high into the sky before detonating them in a chain of blue lights. They flashed like fireworks signalling victory, but victory could not be claimed until the avatar of Undeath finally fell. Riddled with a literally flesh-melting number of afflictions, it countered with a regenerative strength that only divine power could manage. Under the cycle of liquefaction, it looked like a befouled water elemental.

Jason and Miriam watched Gary and the avatar clash from afar. At this stage, the giant lion man, wreathed in golden fire, was beating down the avatar in a one-sided affair. Even so, the abomination rose over and over, putting up enough resistance that Gary had to maintain at least a little caution.

Scattered across the red desert, the allied forces looked on as well, at something of a loss. Few still had enemies to hunt down; they had ostensibly won and yet the battle was not over. It couldn't end until the avatar fell and Jason claimed the territories it held.

"Sanction," Miriam said. She was echoing what Jason had told her they needed to do to the avatar to finish it.

"That's right," Jason said.

"Isn't sanction some unusual affliction? It impedes healing, right? But it's holy when that sort of thing is usually a curse, wounding or unholy power."

"You're quite knowledgeable for such a niche power outside of your own power set."

"Lady Allayeth trained us well. There are times when knowledge makes a better weapon than sword or spell."

Jason nodded, acknowledging the point.

“You’re right about the sanction affliction,” he told her. “What I’m talking about is a different kind of sanctioning. It’s how entities like gods and great astral beings punish their own kind.”

“We aren’t gods. How are we meant to do what gods do to one another?”

“I have a familiar,” Jason said. “The incantation to summon him is more than a little chuuni, and I never really thought about it that much.”

“Chuuni?”

“Don’t worry about that. The point is, there’s a part of that incantation that I never paid much attention to. I don’t even need it anymore, since I can just call him back up when his vessel is destroyed now. But given the kind of thing I get up to these days, maybe it’s time I took another look.”

“I think you’d better just tell me the incantation so I have an idea of what you’re talking about.”

Jason nodded as a cloud of nebulous blue and orange light shot across the battlefield. It arrived next to them and manifested into Jason’s familiar.

“This is Gordon,” Jason introduced. “You’ll have seen each other roaming about, but I might as well give you a formal introduction. Gordon, this is Tactical Commander Miriam Vance, gold-rank leader of team Moon’s Edge. Miriam, this is Gordon, avatar of doom. Also, avatar of me, but let’s not get caught up on the details. What do you say, Gordon? Want to hear the old summoning incantation?”

The orbs floating around Gordon turned blue.

“That means yes,” Jason explained. “Okay, here we go with the incantation: ‘*When worlds end, you are the arbiter. When gods fall, you are the instrument. Herald of annihilation, come forth and be my harbinger. I have doom to bring.*’”

“*That’s* the incantation you used to summon a familiar?”

“Awesome right?”

“Awesome? It sounds like you’re trying to destroy the world.”

“Ironic, I know. Given that saving the world is kind of my thing. And he isn’t even my apocalypse beast familiar.”

“What?”

“Getting back to the incantation—“

“Apocalypse beast?”

“Don’t worry about that.”

“The messengers have been using apocalypse beasts as weapons and you’re walking around with one?”

“See, this is why I asked the Adventure Society to redact that bit from my file. I knew people would get worked up.”

“Worked up? You have a worm swarm apocalypse beast, exactly like the one that just wiped out entire towns.”

The joviality fell from Jason’s face as he and his aura became unreadable. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and forcibly measured.

“You should be careful with your accusations, Tactical Commander. My familiar is not like those things, and was responsible for annihilating no small number of them.”

“You were there? In the towns?”

“My team was included on the scouting expedition. I was the first into one of the villages. I saw the dead being marched around like puppets. I found the growth chamber and the messenger operating it. She died. Her worms died and then the queen producing them died. All at the hands of my familiar. Before you choose to question the integrity of my familiar, Tactical Commander, you should choose your words carefully.”

Miriam looked at Jason. She’d always had trouble knowing what to make of the man and his mix of strange power and stranger behaviour. So often he was overly casual and distractingly absurd. At other times he showed a terrifying and unhesitant aptitude for violence. Here she’d scratched the surface and found something new, something she suspected to be very dangerous.

Suddenly, the moment passed as it had never been and he flashed her a grin, the façade back in place.

“His name is Colin, by the way. Worm swarm apocalypse beast is bit of a mouthful, and not quite accurate. He’s more of a leech-lamprey hybrid. Look, I’ll introduce you.”

Miriam watched as Jason held out his hand and blood seeped from his skin, coating his palm red. A moment later, the thin coating of blood on his palm became a torrent spilling out, coagulating in the air as it formed a pile of creatures on the ground.

Miriam didn’t watch it, her eyes staying on Jason’s face. How much of his behaviour was a mask? It seemed like she’d scratched the surface and seen the reality beneath, but was his seeming struggle for control another layer of artifice?

While she contemplated Asano, his familiar was turning from a pile of creatures into a blood clone, melding together to copy Asano’s shape. The clone went from slick, glossy red to matching the colours and textures of Asano. After a moment, only the eyes were different, the clone’s not changing from glistening red orbs.

“I don’t want to eat any of these dead things,” the familiar said. “Can I eat some of those messengers real quick?”

"No," Jason said.

"Just a couple."

"No."

"What if I promise not to devour every living thing in this pocket universe?"

"You are not helping my situation right now."

"You mean the god?" Colin asked, looking over at Gary clashing with Undeath's beleaguered avatar in the distance. "I'm definitely not going to eat that. Next time you should fight the god of blood or flesh. I'll tuck right in there."

"That's not what I was talking about. And you probably shouldn't go trying to eat gods."

Colin took on a childish, sullen expression, kicking at the red desert dirt.

"I bet if we fought the god of sandwiches you'd eat it," he grumbled under his breath.

"Colin..."

"What?" the familiar asked, lifting his head with a challenging glare. "What did I do wrong? I haven't eaten any babies, even though they're really easy to catch."

Jason sighed.

"I'm sorry, Colin. I know you're always a good boy."

Colin looked mollified and Jason reached out to touch his arm. Colin dissolved back into blood and was drawn back into Jason's hand in a single moment, like water sucked into the vacuum of space.

"Well," Jason said. "That didn't go how I hoped. Anyway, we were talking about the summoning incantation for Gordon, my other familiar."

"What's the summoning ritual for the blood monster like?"

"Probably best I don't say. And I told you to call him Colin. He really is a good boy."

"You realise most people don't need to point out that they don't eat babies."

"Well, in fairness, he didn't say he *doesn't* eat babies. He said he hasn't eaten any babies."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"Not exactly. It's like me never having gone to Vitesse. It's not that I'm a person who doesn't go to Vitesse, just that I haven't gone to Vitesse. Yet."

"You're saying he's going to eat a baby."

"No, I don't think he's going to eat a baby. Once he starts, he'll probably be eating them in job lots."

"Now I'm going to need you to tell me what's in that summoning incantation."

“I don’t even remember it properly. I don’t use summoning rituals for my familiars anymore. I have these magic archways in my soul that...”

He sighed again as he looked at Miriam’s expression. She clearly wasn’t going to let it go and allow him to move on.

“Fine,” he grumbled, sounding a lot like his familiar had earlier. “It’s along the lines of ‘*something something, all-devouring power of the final threshold, something something, avatar of life’s annihilation.*’”

She wanted to say something but she remembered his warning about disparaging his familiar. However much his mannerisms might be layers of performance, she had believed that threat.

“Alright,” she said. “Tell me about your other familiar. Why is its incantation relevant?”

“You heard the second line, right?”

“I did, but we’ve been rather side-tracked.”

“The second line of Gordon’s incantation was ‘*when gods fall, you are the instrument.*’”

“You think your familiar can kill the avatar?”

“Not alone. I have the beginnings of an ill-advised plan.”

Clive and Farrah approached Jason and Miriam, still watching Gary fight the avatar to a goopy standstill.

“Thank you for coming,” Miriam said to Clive and Farrah.

“Even if it’s completely unnecessary,” Jason muttered.

“What exactly is the issue?” Clive asked.

“Jason was explaining—”

“Ah,” Clive and Farrah both said, nodding their heads.

“I’m not that bad at explaining things,” Jason said defensively.

“Let me guess,” Farrah said. “He starts not entirely on-topic, heading in the rough direction of a point as he tries to give context. But in the middle, he offhandedly mentions something ridiculous like getting into a knife fight with the Builder—”

“I was the only one with a knife,” Jason interrupted.

“...or killing blood cultists by making them argue about gender roles in the workplace,” Farrah continued, ignoring him.

“I don’t know what that means,” Miriam said, “but that does sound like the pattern I was encountering. Did you both know he has an apocalypse beast?”

"Colin?" Farrah asked. "Yeah, he's a good boy. You can't let Jason distract you with that stuff. He's way too excitable over running down every conversational tangent. And he loves talking about himself."

"I do not," Jason said.

"Jason," Farrah said. "How many times have you died now?"

"That's actually an increasingly tricky topic. I was talking with the goddess of Death recently, and I—"

"Also, he likes to name-drop," Clive said. "What was he trying to explain in the first place?"

Jason called a cloud chair out of the shrunken cloud flask hanging on his necklace and dropped into it with a sulky expression.

"He was trying to tell me his plan to deal with the avatar," Miriam said. "It had to do with his familiar — not the apocalypse beast one — and something called sanctioning."

Farrah looked to Clive, raising her eyebrows inquisitively. Clive frowned in thought for a moment before his eyes went slightly wide.

"You think you can do that?" he asked Jason.

"Yeah," Jason said. "It's all about will, and the god of Undeath's will is locked out of this place. The avatar is just power and the echo of intent. No active will to contend with."

"There's more to it than will, Jason."

"Yeah, but that's what would shut it down. The rest I have covered."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure enough that I'll try. You have an alternative?"

Clive looked once more at the avatar.

"No," he said. "When it comes to the practicalities of handling transcendent enemies, you're the closest thing we have to an expert since everyone that tries it dies. You just have that habit of coming back."

"Would someone care to explain?" Farrah asked. "And by someone, I mean Clive."

Clive looked at Miriam.

"Alright, I'll try and give the quick and simple version. Be aware that much of what we're discussing here is a mix of Jason's personal experience, my studies into cosmically sourced astral magic theory and no small amount of hypothesis. Essentially, guesswork. Confident guesswork, but I'm not willing to make a definitive—"

"We get it, Clive," Farrah said. "Just start, please."

"Right," he said. "Entities like gods and other cosmic beings are essentially made up of magic. This is something you've heard of?"

“Yes,” Miriam said. “I won’t claim to understand it, but I’ve heard people say that.”

“Well,” Clive continued, “the highest order of magic is called authority. This is the magic gods use to perform miracles and great astral beings use to regulate the mechanics of the cosmos. Birthing universes, governing the rules of life and death. You’ll remember that resurrection magic became more difficult a few years ago but healing magic got stronger. This was a large working of authority that would have involved the Reaper, the Celestial Book, the gods of healing and death and probably a few others.”

“Some of us also occasionally use it for home renovation,” Jason chipped in.

“Quiet, you,” Farrah scolded.

“In short,” Clive resumed, “authority is the magic of the gods. And god-adjacent entities. We believe it is called authority because it is, in effect, the power with the highest authority. It has the power to remake everything that is, from the nature of reality to the laws of life and death. The only thing it can’t do is interfere with a soul.”

“Wouldn’t that make it not the highest authority?” Miriam asked.

“I don’t know,” Clive said. “I suspect that a soul is, in itself, a form of authority. One that’s sealed or frozen somehow. Whether through essences or some other magic, we ascend in rank by learning to thaw out or unseal that power.”

“And diamond-rank is when we tap into it fully?” Miriam asked.

“Not even close,” Jason said. “I won’t go into specifics of what I’ve seen and experienced...”

He paused to give Farrah a put-upon look.

“...but diamond-rank is the point where you can truly start to unlock what the soul is capable of.”

Miriam turned her gaze to the avatar again.

“This authority you’re describing. You’re saying that this monstrosity is made of it?”

“Yes,” Clive said.

“The thing about authority,” Jason said, is that the most powerful beings who wield it do so as naturally as a human breathes. They can do so in a deliberate way if they think about it, but mostly it just happens. They direct through their will. For most people, will is just a metaphor for determination, mental fortitude and the like. For gods and great astral beings, will is an actual force. But you understand that, don’t you, Miriam?”

Clive and Farrah looked confused but Miriam nodded.

“It’s something gold-rankers develop as part of aura training,” she explained to Clive and Farrah. “It’s not something shared with lower-rankers because it’s possible to awaken at lower ranks through spiritual trauma.”

Clive and Farrah looked at Jason but he remained unreadable in both expression and aura.

"I didn't realise that mortals could develop will as an active force," Clive said. "I barely understand the concept."

"It gets easier once you start tapping into it," Miriam said. "To understand, anyway. Using it effectively is difficult. It's a strange thing. It feels like you can impose your will on the world around you, but you can't. It's like there's something missing. You can only really affect other people and their auras, and even that much is tricky. It's possible to make spiritual attacks if you train it enough, but it's hard to learn and I've heard it feels... wrong."

"It does," Jason said matter-of-factly.

Farrah turned an accusing gaze on Jason.

"How long have you been able to use will like that?" she asked him.

"You know since when."

"You didn't tell us," Clive said. "You didn't tell me, in all the discussions we've had about intrinsic-mandate magic."

Jason stood up from his chair like a king rising from his throne. The air around them turned still and silent as Jason's aura froze it in place.

"No, Clive," Jason said, his voice soft and dangerous. "I didn't tell you. Some things are not for you to research."

"He's right," Miriam said. "The Adventure Society has shut down wildly unethical experiments exploring it. That's why the information is restricted."

The air started moving again, the sounds of Gary and the avatar's battle once more reaching them. Jason's expression softened as he turned to Miriam.

"Will is critical to the use of authority," he explained. "Overcoming someone else's will to interfere with their authority is extremely difficult, but unlike interfering with a soul, not impossible. It's why gods have to team up on one of their number to punish them. Same for great astral beings. It takes an overwhelming amount of will to overcome someone else's sufficiently to use their own authority against them. It can be done, though, and when their authority is used against them, it's called sanctioning."

"And you want to sanction the avatar?" Miriam asked.

"Yes," Jason confirmed. "As I said earlier, it's all about will. I might be able to use will, probably better than you can, but using it against Undeath would be like trying to snuff out the sun with a glass of water. Not only would it be painfully inadequate but I'd be dead long before I'd made any real attempt."

"But the god isn't here," Clive said. "His will is locked out of this place."

"There is a remnant of his will, though," Jason said. "An echo that drives the avatar's basic intentions. Just fighting that echo will not be an easy thing."

"Before we got to that, though," Clive said, "there is the question of how we even set that fight in motion. That's your part, Jason, because I have only the most basic idea of how it works."

"What do you mean?" Miriam asked.

"We talked about authority being driven by will," Clive said. "That's fine if you're a god, but we aren't. Jason, with his domains, is closer than the rest of us, but not close enough."

"He's *what*?" Miriam asked.

"Ignore that," Farrah said.

"Sorry," Clive said. "The point is, using authority, even if we have any, is hard for us. We can't just manipulate it using will."

Miriam noticed Jason's eyes narrow as if he were about to disagree, but his expression went blank again and he said nothing.

"We have to use a special form of magic," Clive continued. "It's called intrinsic-mandate magic and Jason can access it through his familiar, Gordon. We aren't sure how, but that doesn't matter right now. The point is that he can do it."

"I can," Jason confirmed. "I've had Gordon working with an avatar in my soul realm for months to try and understand this kind of magic better. It's still very early days, but I believe I can do this with Gordon executing the actual magic. My job will be employing will to guide the authority."

"There's more to it than just using a special ritual though," Clive said.

"Yes," Jason agreed. "Authority has affinities. Authority is flavoured by the nature of the one that holds it. The Builder's, for example, is about remaking reality, while that of the World-Phoenix is about dimensional forces."

"Why does that matter?" Farrah asked. "Isn't the point of this sanctioning that the authority changes?"

"We can only change it so much," Jason said. "When I stole some of the Builder's authority, I used it to modify the cloud flask and create my astral throne, which is all about modifying reality. The authority I stole from the World-Phoenix I turned into the astral gate, which is about using dimensional and cosmic forces. I think. I'm still getting a handle on it, if I'm being completely honest."

Miriam was looking at Jason wide-eyed.

“What do we do with the avatar’s power then?” Farrah asked. “I’m guessing that Undeath’s authority is quite specific and unpleasant.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I do have a solution for that.”

“Which is?” Clive asked.

“Well, I was talking with the goddess of death recently, and...”

Chapter 824

He Isn't Always Evil and He is Not Always Wrong

Jason floated in the scorching desert air, standing on a small cloud platform. In his hand was his cloud flask, spewing out fog that was adding to the half-complete sky fortress forming in the air. It was all thin lines and sharp angles, more decorative than practical. As sections were completed, the white material turned the dark shade of a storm cloud.

He turned his gaze to the ground far below where Gary continued to beat on the avatar. It mounted token resistance but was well past the point of having any real defence beyond a refusal to be destroyed. Farrah rose to meet Jason, bright wings of fire driving her ascent. He shuffled aside on his small platform, making room for her to join him and she let her wings vanish on landing. She looked at him and he looked back with sad eyes.

"You know what I'm going to ask," she said.

"I can guess. I try to avoid reading people's emotions if I don't need to, but your aura isn't exactly hiding them."

"It's not possible, then?"

"No," he said, his voice tired. "It is."

"Then why don't you sound hopeful?"

He plucked an oval object from his inventory, holding it in his hand.

"Hero gave me this before the transformation zone took us. To save Gary."

"What is it?"

"Sort of like a skill book for intrinsic-mandate magic."

"God stuff."

"God stuff," Jason confirmed, returning the item to his inventory. "It shows me how to work with extremely higher-tier magic, like authority. To tweak it in specific ways, like taking something that is fuelled by one high-tier magic and switching that source with a different high-tier magic."

"Like swapping out Hero's authority, which will go back to Hero once we're out of here, for the authority in that avatar."

Jason nodded.

"We'd still need to refine Undeath's authority into something else first," he explained. "Otherwise, that authority would do the same thing as Hero's and return to the god the moment we're out of this place."

"Then, why don't we do that?"

“Refining authority into something else isn’t a simple matter, Farrah. You need something to refine it, to work with the affinity it already has. Meeting those conditions is hard and the affinity can only be changed so much. Given that I have almost no idea what I’m doing, the fact that I have the right combination of knowledge and tools is a miracle.”

“You’re saying we got lucky.”

“No, I’m saying it’s a miracle. I think Death knew what was coming when I brokered a deal with her and made sure I’d have the right tools for the job. Telling me in advance would have been nice. I have to stop hanging out with gods.”

Farrah gave him one of her signature flat looks and he chuckled. Then his expression saddened again.

“I’m sorry, Farrah. Swapping out Hero’s authority for Undeath’s would have the same result in the end. Worse, because we’d be turning Gary into some manner of undead demigod for however long we remain here.”

“What about giving him the refined power?”

“It’ll be too different. Right now, Gary and the avatar are mostly clumps of raw authority. Something too processed won’t work. What I’m going to refine Undeath’s authority into isn’t something we could use to keep Gary alive.”

“Is there some way we can stop the power from leaving Gary? Prevent it from going back to Hero?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “If he stayed in my soul realm forever, I could keep the power trapped. But that would only delay Gary’s death. He would still die.”

“Why?”

“Gary was silver-rank, and now he’s got divine energy flowing through him. Transcendent-rank. Not contained and manageable, like my astral gate and astral throne. This is the raw stuff, blazing with power. It’s slowly killing him from the inside out.”

“But it changed him. Altered his body to contain it.”

“Yes. He’s now a gold-ranker, filled with not just diamond-rank but transcendent-rank power. Beyond anything a mortal body is meant to hold. His body was modified on the premise that he would only need to hold that power for hours. Luckily, it did the work above spec and Gary’s been fine, but it won’t last. We’ve been here what, two months?”

“How long does he have?”

“My experience and senses make me better than most at gauging what that kind of power does to a body. Best guess, I’d say he has another four to eight months before it starts turning his body into a worn rag. How long before it finally gives out, I don’t know. It could be fast once the degradation begins or he could hang on.”

“It doesn’t matter, though,” Farrah said. “We’ll be out of this place before then.”

“Most likely. Many territories are yet to be claimed, maybe a third of the total, and they’re going to get more dangerous with time. By the end, Gary may be the only one strong enough to fight the anomalies.”

“And then we leave and he dies.”

“Yes,” Jason said. “We leave and he dies.”

“If stealing Undeath’s power isn’t the reason Hero gave you that oval thing, why did he? How did he expect you to save Gary? Or did he leave that for you to figure it out?”

“He did. And I have.”

“You still don’t sound hopeful.”

“Gary has a choice to make, once we’re done with this place.”

“What is it?”

Jason looked down at Gary bringing his hammer down on the avatar again, gooey flesh spattering across the red sand.

“Gary should hear it first,” he said. “If he wants help making that choice, he can ask us.”

After being completed, Jason's cloud palace looked like a monstrous spider, dangling on an invisible thread as it eyed-off the unsuspecting prey below. There were too many legs and too much chitin, armour panels of dark glossy red covering sections of the stormy cloud structure. At the base was a gaping maw filled with dark mist, like a mouth waiting to devour. Inside the mist, blue and orange light flashed rapidly, leaving behind a glow that grew brighter over time.

Watching from below was a group comprised of most of the leadership from the expedition, the adventuring teams that made it up, and their allies. Conspicuously absent was Jason, along with Boris Ket Lundi. Jason was somewhere up in his fortress while the messenger was keeping his forces well clear of the spell-happy adventurers.

The messengers might have fought on their side, but that didn't make them allies. Given that the Builder cult had managed to become allies, it spoke volumes of the trust any in the group had for the messengers.

“I’m surprised the avatar isn’t getting out from under that thing,” Humphrey said. “I know it belongs to Jason and even I don’t want to stand there.”

“Knowing it belongs to Jason is *why* I don’t want to stand there,” Rick told him. Humphrey snorted a laugh at his cousin’s comment.

When they saw Boris fly in that direction alone, the group stirred.

“Don’t worry,” Farrah said. “If that guy makes trouble in Jason’s cloud palace, he’s not coming back out.”

Miriam glanced at her, uncertain, but saw nothing but ease and confidence in her expression. Taking a rude peak at her aura she saw the emotion was genuine. The underscore of worry in her aura was directed at Gary, not Jason.

Inside what the observers below had dubbed the ‘smoky maw’ of his cloud palace, Jason stood at the side, on a platform jutting from the wall. The open-bottomed chamber was the size of a large house, filled with dark mist. Inside the mist, Gordon was filling the space with an elaborate ritual diagram in three dimensions. The dark mist did not obscure Jason’s vision as it was all a part of his domain; a part of Jason himself.

He sensed the approach of the gold-rank messenger, moving alone. Boris rose into the space, pausing as he crossed into the area of Jason’s domain. He floated at the entrance to the maw, wings gently undulating as their magic held him in place.

“Interesting,” he said. “I knew from Earth that you’d learned to imprint on physical space. Being able to carry around and reshape that space is unexpected. I’ll bet the gods started quietly attempting to replicate it the moment you showed back up in this world.”

“They don’t have mobile temples?” Jason asked.

“They do, but they’re massive temple boats and sky fortresses. Slow. Cumbersome. Certainly nothing you can carry around in a jar. Cloud flasks are hard to make, and modifying one to the extent that it can do this would be quite the feat. How did you?”

“The same way I do most things: it just happened when I was busy trying to save the world without dying in the process.”

“It seems to work for you.”

“It half works. I’ve gotten pretty good at saving the world. It’s the not dying part that has always been the trick.”

Boris flew up to hover in front of Jason on his platform.

“Once you’re done with this place, dying won’t be a concern anymore.”

“No,” Jason said. “It won’t. Did you come up here for anything other than implying you have vast knowledge you’d be willing to share if maybe I’m more open-minded about you and your people?”

“No. I do have a lot of knowledge, though, and there are things I need.”

“You’ve dropped the quirky Earth mannerisms.”

“They served their purpose. I’ll pick them up again. It’s the version of myself I like being the most. I’ve seen your personas, Jason. I know you understand playing to the

mask until you're not quite sure what's underneath anymore. If even the parts of ourselves we hide away are real. People like you and I might take it further than most, but everyone wears different masks. Like in that Billy Joel song."

"I love that song."

"Me too."

"Right now, I'm looking at you and thinking of the line about getting kicked right between the eyes. You and I are going to have a nice long talk sometime soon, but I'm kind of in the middle of something here."

"Yes," Boris said, turning to look at the growing blue and orange glow in the dark cloud. As he turned, he tucked his wing to avoid hitting Jason. Jason looked at his back.

"The implication was that you should leave," Jason said.

"I'm curious why you're taking this approach," Boris said, ignoring his statement as he continued to watch the glowing cloud. "Intrinsic-mandate magic is tricky at the best of times, and you can't be very good at it yet. We both know you have the power to breach transformation zones. It's how you claimed your first domain on Earth. Surely it would be easier to crack a hole in this one and toss the avatar out."

"Unreliable. Too much to go wrong."

"As opposed to using god magic you aren't even close to ready for?"

"Using power I'm not ready for is kind of my thing."

Boris let out a laugh.

"I can't argue with that," he said. "Still, I can't help but wonder."

"If we kicked the avatar out, I don't know how much control it would retain over the territories it claimed. Maybe it retains control and we'd have to go bring it back so we can destroy it properly. Even if kicking it out severed its connection to its territory, that territory would likely become unclaimed space. Maybe even divide back into separate territories, meaning weeks or even months to claim them all ourselves. Worst case, removing that much power, tied to so much of the transformation zone, could have some unintended side effects. Maybe disrupt the zone and cause it to collapse."

"All valid points," Boris said. "Did Farrah remember you could breach the zone, forcing you to explain why you shouldn't when you were explaining the plan?"

"Yes."

"So. The real reason is that you want the authority."

Jason didn't answer.

"I get it," Boris said. "You've been behind the power curve from the moment you learned there was one. Now you're on the road to playing with the big boys and you need

to stop falling short. I can respect that. I've been thinking that it might be time to rank-up myself, with what's coming."

"And what's that?"

"A fight that isn't yours. I can't help but think you'll involve yourself sooner or later, though. That destiny magic really does drop you into one hole after another, doesn't it?"

"Yep."

"You know there are a lot of forces paying attention to you, right? The World-Phoenix set something in motion by nudging you onto a certain path. Now the Reaper, the Keeper of the Sands, even the All-Devouring Eye. You're a popular piece in a game that's coming to a head."

"I'm a pawn."

"Yes, but pawns can be promoted. Once we're done with this little misadventure, you might just find yourself reaching the other side of the board."

"What does that mean?"

"That once you're done here, there are already people waiting to reward you. And you know the reward for a job well done."

"Another job."

Boris glanced back with an amused smile before returning his gaze to the cloud.

"You said the All-Devouring Eye," Jason said. "I've heard of that great astral being, but I don't know its area of influence."

"No one does," Boris said. "Not for certain. The prevailing theory is that it's the end of all things, somehow. Or some cosmic, magical force of entropy, which amounts to the same thing. But your familiar, there, is a genuine avatar of doom."

"As opposed to a knock-off one I bought from a shady guy at a street market?"

"Not exactly. Avatars of doom are the exclusive domain of the All-Devouring Eye. I have never heard of the eye ever employing his reality assassins for any task. Instead, they were loaned to the Sundered Throne. Why, and what relationship the eye has with the throne, I don't know. Some say they are representations of order and chaos, not oppositional but symbiotic."

"Do you believe that?"

"It's clean, simple explanation."

"So, no."

"No," Boris confirmed. "It has been my experience that most things involve far more nuance than I am aware of. I don't trust clean, simple explanations. The cosmos is a

messy place, whether you're dealing with mortals on a planet with almost no magic or contending with great astral beings."

"So, who is selling these fake avatars of doom in a side alley?"

"It's not quite like that. It's the avatars themselves. There are a few that have remained attached to the throne since the sundering. The real avatars bolster their numbers by creating constructs that are, to almost every test, identical to the genuine article. There is only one practical difference."

"Which is?" Jason asked.

Boris lifted an arm to point at the glowing cloud.

"Only the real ones can do that."

Jason let out a groan.

"Bloody hell," he muttered.

"I've got you intrigued about the chance to ask me a lot more questions, haven't I?"

Boris asked.

"Yeah," Jason admitted.

"Well, there's a price. I have an astral king's brand in my soul. I needed it to fool Vesta Carmis Zell, and while the astral king is a friendly, I still want it gone."

"I get that. You know what that means in terms of trusting one another."

"I have to trust you because I'm giving you access to the most vulnerable parts of myself. What do you need to trust?"

"That you aren't some kind of living, soul-engineered trap."

Boris turned to stare at Jason.

"Wow," he said. "That's actually a kind of brilliant idea. I wish I'd thought of it. I mean, setting the whole thing up would be a massively elaborate pain in the ass, but yeah, that would be a great way to deal with you. I'm kind of disappointed that I'm not trying to kill you now. That would have totally worked."

"Except that I was the one suspicious of that being what you're doing," Jason pointed out. "I'm also suspicious of your reaction being a disarming way to convince me that you're not some kind of living trap."

"You're a suspicious guy. You know that messenger plans usually come down to deciding they're the best and throwing power at things until they break, right?"

"I met an outworlder who turned out to be a naga genesis egg that was transformed through soul engineering and sent to Pallimustus twenty years before the messenger invasion began."

"Really?"

“Yeah.”

“I may have been on Earth too long. These messengers are getting sneaky.”

Both men turned to look at the cloud that was now pulsing with blue and orange light.

“Time to go, Boris,” Jason said. “We can pick this up when I don’t have a god to kill.”

“I know that’s technically inaccurate on a number of levels,” Boris said, “but that is a great line. Which I kind of ruined by talking about it instead of just leaving, I guess. I’m just going to go.”

Chapter 825

New Power and a Freshly Cooked Batch of Smugness

Jason plunged from his cloud palace head first. His cloak trailed behind him, a black scar against the clear blue sky. His cloak was not a graceful tool of flight, but he had learned from the messengers how to compensate. They flew using the magic of their wings, enhanced by their ability to use physical force with their auras. Jason did the same, descending in a spiral to approach the ground with poise.

Close to Gary, currently four times his height, Jason floated in the air, producing a cloud disc to stand on. His cloak stopped mimicking wings and was whipped wildly as if by a gale, despite the hot still air. The forces Jason was mustering far above were causing ripples in the unstable fabric of the transformation zone.

Gary was continuing his endless but one-sided beating of the avatar. With Jason's arrival, he kicked the avatar in the chest, sending it tumbling away across the ground. Every bounce left a wet stain in the sand; the same dark, thick oil now coated Gary's armoured boot. He frowned at it standing on one leg and the golden flames wreathing his body flared. The black and purple goo was burned away and he set his foot down with satisfaction.

"This isn't the place to be, Jason," he said, not taking his gaze from the avatar as it finally rolled to a stop.

"This is the place I need the avatar to be. I need you to stop it from running."

"Easily done," Gary said, pointing with his hammer. The avatar was rushing at him and he pulled back his hammer arm. The avatar accelerated into a blur that Jason couldn't follow, Gary moving just as fast. From Gary's pose a moment later and the avatar sailing through the air, Jason deduced that an upward swing from Gary had sent it flying.

"I'm beating it like steel on an anvil," Gary said, "but it comes back every time. It won't run."

"It will."

"It hasn't run from me and I'm a demigod right now, Jason. Your project up there is hardly subtle but the avatar hasn't given it a second glance."

The avatar charged it again. Gary and the avatar became a blur of motion and the avatar was knocked away once more.

"The avatar isn't smart enough to understand what I'm doing up there," Jason explained. "It's little more than power and instinct; it doesn't recognise the threat. It doesn't run from you because it knows you can't destroy it. Once it realises I can, that will change."

“If you say so. It’s not like anything I’m doing works. But you know that I’m flooded with divine power right now?”

“You’re enormous and covered in gold fire, Gary. As reminders go, it’s a pretty good one.”

“And your giant sky spider fortress is designed to destroy the avatar, which is a big lump of divine power.”

“Yep.”

“Should I be worried about standing under that thing?”

“Nah, you’re good,” Jason assured him. “Until I get my hands on a soul forge, I can’t do much to Hero’s power. You and I need to have a conversation about that later, but right now I’ve only got the tools to mess this thing up. I couldn’t put a dent in you if I tried.”

“Why do you need a soul forge for me and not the avatar?”

“It doesn’t have a soul. There’s no one home to say no when I ask the power it’s made of to change into something else.”

“Jason, exactly how well do you understand what you’re doing?”

“Well, no time to hang around here,” Jason said. “You just make sure it stays put, yeah? I need you to keep it as directly underneath the cloud palace as you can.”

Gary conjured a golden harpoon and threw it at the avatar and it moved in a golden streak. Until it stopped, impaled in the avatar, Jason didn’t even see the golden chain attached to it. Gary was already hauling on it, pulling the avatar closer.

“You do what you have to do, Jason.”

Jason pushed the hood of his cloak back to reveal his smiling face.

“Always reliable, Gary,” he said, and then ascended into the air.

Essence users had excellent control of their perception, able to isolate specific smells and sounds, or dampen their senses against horrifying stench or blinding light. The adventurers observing from the ground deadened their hearing to avoid the alien howl coming from Jason’s spider palace, but it didn’t work. Miriam quickly realised there was a spiritual component, piercing through mundane senses to affect the magical ones.

Amos Pensinata was a step ahead of her, telling the group through voice chat to restrain their aura senses as much as possible. Miriam looked to their allies who didn’t share the precision control of the senses that essence users had. She could see that the brighthearts and Builder cultists were suffering, their hands clamped over their ears and their faces twisted in anguish, especially the silver-rankers.

Miriam next turned her gaze to the messengers in the distance. Most had landed on the ground, something they were loathe to do. Sitting or resting on their knees, they were sweating as they all looked up at the palace. Miriam hadn't even known they could do that. Their expressions were not of pain but worry, anger and fear. Their auras, normally so controlled, were barely masking their emotions.

Only the trio of gold-rankers remained floating in the air. They too looked like the desert air had finally gotten to them, their skin slick with sweat. Boris Ket Lundi turned to meet her gaze. He smirked to himself and cast his eyes back upward.

There was another inhuman shrieking, but this one was pure sound and easy enough to block out. It came from the avatar as it clawed at the rocky, sandy ground, trying to scramble free of the golden chains binding it. It ignored Gary as he brought his hammer down on one limb after another, rendering them useless for only a brief time before they snapped back into shape.

A column of faint light had come down from the palace maw to shine on the avatar and the demigod. This was what the avatar scrambled to escape, unable to get free of Gary and his chains. The light had been barely perceptible at first but grew stronger by the moment. Colours could be made out now, the signature gold, silver and blue of transcendent power.

The light eventually grew strong enough to affect the avatar. Black and purple flakes started rising from it like ashes from a fire. It was slow at first but more flakes broke loose of the avatar as the light grew brighter. With each passing moment, more of them drifted up toward the palace. They rose through the light, bursting into white flame as they neared the gaping maw of the palace, filled with dark smoke and flashing orange and blue light.

Miriam focused her attention on the flakes as they burned on approach to the palace. She had seen such fire before, ghost flames burning off the undead like dry scrub. The flames were weak when the flakes first combusted, like those of Jason's ghost fire. They grew brighter as they approached the maw, blazing like Death's miracle by the time they vanished into the smoke.

All of this was accompanied by an oppressive aura washing over the landscape from the cloud palace. It was Jason's aura at its most unyielding and merciless. His cloud palace and whatever strange magic his familiar wielded made it far stronger than anything Jason could accomplish alone. His aura brooked no challenge, but there was a benevolence to it as well, with the protectiveness and condescension of an adult to a child.

The aura seemed utterly unassailable, so Miriam was startled to sense it falter. It was only a brief moment; the silver-rankers were unlikely to have sensed it. But it told Miriam

that whatever fight Jason was fighting, it was not the one-sided affair of Gary and the avatar.

Jason wasn't truly conscious inside the cloud palace. As his body reclined in a cloud chair, his soul was clashing with Undeath's power in a kaleidoscopic mindscape. It had no true form, paying against his senses as a maelstrom of colour and power. It was strange but Jason knew what to do, pitting his will against the echo of the absent god.

It was a battlefield Jason had experienced before when the Builder had tried to force him into accepting a star seed. He had no true memories of the conflict, just echoes marked on his soul in scars like hieroglyphs on a tomb.

As Jason fought the amorphous will of the god in the mindscape, his body reflected the battle. It was a battle of the soul and Jason's body and soul were the same thing. Lying in the cloud chair, his body thrashed and flailed like someone caught in a night terror. His skin crawled and undulated as if Colin were trying to dig his way out. Light blasted from his eyes, sometimes blue and orange, other times the transcendent mix of silver, blue and gold. Occasionally they would flash purple.

The dead remnant of Undeath was a paltry thing compared to the active will of the Builder Jason has fought in the past, but Jason lacked his singular advantage from that battle. Against the Builder, he had the shelter of his soul; an impregnable fortress that could only be breached if he opened it himself. This time, Jason's soul was already open. It was a necessary part of the process, something he had told no one. They would have tried to stop him.

Jason's cloud palace was also his spiritual domain. It was a physical expression of Jason's power, like the sanctum of a god's temple. Jason had shaped the entire thing into a platform for Gordon's massive working of intrinsic-mandate magic, linking it to Jason. That was the first tool he needed to sanction the avatar's authority.

The other tool he needed was something that could work with the authority's affinity of undeath. A forge to reshape it into something Jason could claim for himself. Authority could only be altered so much, but death and undeath were all but identical; pure or corrupted versions of the same power. Jason did not have any divine power, but he had something close.

The goddess of Death had shown Jason how to make fire in his soul, lacking in divinity but still shaped in the way that gods used power. And now some divinity had conveniently turned up. Jason was using the ghost fire to reforge the god's authority,

turning the corrupt power of undeath into the clean power of death. Jason was then spending that authority to fuel his ghost fire, turning it from a pale echo to a divine weapon.

The shape came from Death and the power from Undeath, but the result belonged to Jason alone. It was no mortal weapon of sharpness and steel; it was a flame that would annihilate any undead power, second only to the goddess of Death herself.

Forging a divine weapon was no small undertaking, and Jason was not done. He was stealing from a god, and even the echo of it threatened to crush Jason before his work was complete. The danger was existential as he'd opened his soul to take in the authority. If he failed to eliminate the corruption of undeath, that corruption would claim him, undeath taking root in his soul. If his will fell short, Jason would become Undeath's new agent, as Gary was to Hero.

Jason's plan wouldn't have been possible if Undeath had even the meagrest sliver of active will in the fight. Jason could no more have taken the god's power than he could have swallowed a mountain, be it in the shape of his own head or not. Even just the leftover touch of the god, driving the avatar's simple instincts, threatened to crush Jason's will.

The battle of wills was something Jason had anticipated and believed himself ready for. His soul had his body scraped off it as it was cast through the depths of the astral. It had felt the touch of gods and the all-out assault of a great astral being. He had thought himself strong, ready to face the challenge. He had been naïve, once again failing to grasp the magnitude of the forces using him as a pawn in their games.

All he'd done, all he'd endured, was barely enough to get him into the arena alive. Without those experiences, just his first brush with the echo of the god's will would have annihilated his mind. In the wild mindscape, he was a tiny man with a knife, fighting a giant in a hurricane. Jason steeled himself and gathered his resolve; he was going to fuck that giant up.

The fight was imaginary; a clash in Jason's mind that played out on his body very differently. As he absorbed and reforged the power of undeath into death, the corruption flowed out of his body. Viscous oil, like raw crude, ran from his eyes, nose and mouth. As more and more poured out, Jason's skin started to crack, more oil oozing out.

Inside Jason's body, Colin worked to keep Jason alive through the process, preventing his body from giving out before his will did. Countless leeches fell from Jason's flesh dead, coated in the purged filth of corruption.

Inside the mindscape, Jason fought on. The will of the god was absent, yet Jason was caught up in the aftermath of its presence. Like a man caught in the wake of a ship

that had already sailed on, he was constantly on the verge of drowning. He scrambled to keep his head above water, desperately swimming through the ocean of power trying to inundate him.

Jason took it all and remade it, turning it into power for himself. But he could not use it until he was done, unwilling to risk breaking the magic that Gordon had forged. The power of undeath kept coming, as indefatigable as the avatar he was stealing it from. It seemed limitless, while Jason himself was not. He fought on, the spirit willing as his resolve never wavered, but his body and mind were beginning to flag.

The observers watched as Jason's cloud palace started to break down. Sections fell away from the whole before dissolving into smoke. The ashes of Undeath's power grew closer and closer to the palace before burning up in white flame and Jason's aura faltered, pulsing like an unsteady heartbeat. The piercing noise was not gone but had been reduced to the point of background noise, to the relief of everyone.

Boris Ket Lundi flew away from his own people, the adventurers and their allies wary as he approached them alone. He moved directly to Miriam who moved out to meet him. On arrival, he looked back up at the palace before he spoke.

"We need to be ready if Asano fails," he said. "If he does, he will become something like the lion demigod."

"Will he have the same power?"

"No. Asano has turned much of Undeath's power from undeath to death. Those two forces will be conflicting inside him. You must use your demigod to contain him until those powers destroy him."

"How do we save him?"

"You don't. Once he dies, the territories he and the avatar control will become unclaimed and we will have a lot of work ahead of us. Even more, for me, once we're out. Without Asano to save his world, I will have to do it myself. An ugly necessity that will have unpleasant consequences for the Earth."

Boris looked past Miriam as Jason's team and other companions approached.

"Jason won't fail," Humphrey said.

"Your confidence in your friend is admirable," he said, then turned his gaze on Sophie.

"Hey, girl. Ever been with a winged man in a booth?"

"Really?" Miriam asked. "Now, and in this situation, you're acting like that?"

Boris grinned and turned to look at the cloud palace once more.

"I think," he said, "I might have some confidence in your friend as well."

"I hope you've got confidence in yourself," Sophie told him. "Once I get to gold-rank, I'm going to kick you square in the balls."

He turned to look at her again.

"What happened to a good old slap to the face?"

Humphrey's hand slapped him in the face with a sound like thunder cracking. Boris rubbed his jaw while letting out a groan.

"I guess I had that one coming. Are you really silver-rank? Might essence?"

"You'd best watch your mouth," Humphrey said, "or at gold-rank, you'll find me standing in line behind the lady."

"You know messengers are some kind of fruit or something, right?" Belinda asked. "I'm not sure he has the equipment for either of you to kick."

"This is not the time," Miriam said in the incredulous voice of the only sane person in a world of madmen. "We need to be ready if Asano fails."

"He's not going to fail," Neil said, sounding bored. "He's going to almost kill himself and come back with some stupid new power and a freshly cooked batch of smugness. I always tell people and they never listen. Nothing's going to happen to Jason."

As Neil finished speaking, the cloud palace exploded.

"I'm sure it's fine," Neil said.

-
- Party leader [Jason Asano] has been compromised and is unable to maintain his abilities. Party has been disbanded and party interface has been revoked.
-

"Uh... that might not be great," Neil said.

Chapter 826

Instinctively Protected

Clan Asano had two domains. One was in Saint-Etienne, France, covering most of the city. The other was close to Nitra, Slovakia, on formerly agricultural land. Both contained astral spaces rich in magic, producing far more magical manifestations than on Earth. This meant essences, awakening stones and quintessence, although far more than any of those, it meant monsters.

There were geographical restrictions on the manifestations that cities on Pallimustus would have waged wars to learn the secrets of. Within the city walls, manifestations rarely happened, as infrequent or even more so than on Earth. When they did, however, it was always treasure and never a monster. In the wild territory outside the walls, things were very different. The rich magic was given free rein, spawning hordes of teeming monsters.

Close to the walls, the magic was thick but not very strong. This produced the iron-rank monsters that the clan used to train their fledgling essence users. The further one moved away from the walls, the stronger the magic became, affecting both the landscape and the monsters.

The clan's essence users delved deeper into the wilds as they grew in strength, but it was still early days. The clan had raised an impressive contingent of bronze-rankers using the stockpile of magical items, training materials, essences and awakening stones left behind by Jason and Farrah. Those stockpiles had diminished at first but were now being restocked from finds in the astral spaces.

The clan only had a few silver-rankers, mostly core-users taken in from the Network as it fractured into factions. They had reported seeing gold-rank monsters in the outer reaches of the territory where the astral spaces grew unstable. What little they knew of those zones came from very distant observation. Not only were the monsters too strong for their current forces but the landscape itself was dangerous, shifting and changing.

Going that far out was strictly forbidden by the clan matriarch, Yumi Asano. She was Jason's paternal grandmother, although she looked a third of her actual age. Her flesh-shaping powers not only made her appear younger but offered true physical revitalisation. Wielders of body-morphing essence combinations were often looked at as creepy on Pallimustus, and they weren't known for their power. Neither fact hampered the popularity of such combinations when they offered a lifespan lengthy even by essence user standards.

Yumi stood at the window of a zeppelin flying over the Nitra astral space city. Within the high walls, the city could be mistaken for the life's work of a mad steampunk elf. Looming towers looked like skyscrapers built by industrial-age furnace makers, all rough, dark metal. The defensive walls looked much the same, only thicker and without windows.

The towers rose from a city that otherwise did not match them at all, full of pleasant cloud buildings and sweeping expanses of green. It was a sprawling metropolis in size, but not at all built for cars. Instead of street grids and freeways weaving like veins, it was a space built around walking and public transport.

Walkways passed through parks and tramways wove through gardens. Monorails ran along the ground or up and over trees. There were also zeppelins docked at the massive metal towers, or smaller towers made of cloud stuff. The central hub for the zeppelins was the centre of the city and its one truly unique building. A massive pagoda, taller than any of the metal towers, was topped by an ominous blue and orange eye, floating in the air. This was the administrative and travel hub for the city, including the portal aperture leading in and out of the astral space.

The city's transport infrastructure was all steampunk in design. Overelaborate reflections of a period on Earth that never existed, they blended Victorian and modern technology with magic. The steam engines were driven by a mix of fire and water quintessence; there was no coal. There weren't a lot of accurate physics, either, several scientists and engineers had assured Yumi.

It was not hard to get people interested in the chance to examine the city's infrastructure. There was an arms race going on, both in magic and the combination of magic and technology. The astral space cities both offered access to examples unlike anything on Earth, which had helped Yumi's recruitment efforts. Researchers were high on her list of recruitment priorities.

Magitech was the next arm's race, at least until more essence users reached greater heights of power. There was also the matter of the Engineers of Ascension and their vault, left to Jason by the enigmatic Mr North. Jason had directed her to seek out ethical ways to continue EoA's terrible experiments.

From the zeppelin, Yumi could see people moving through the city below. The vast city was mostly empty, most of it a restricted zone. There wasn't any danger, just a lack of people to fully populate the vast city. Even the waves of refugees were unable to fill up all the space.

The residents were an eclectic group, fewer of them human than not. It had taken an amount of political wrangling, but almost every country affected by transformation zones

had allowed those transformed into non-humans by the zones to emigrate to Asano territory. Getting the other nations to acknowledge clan land as sovereign was a whole other thing, but vampires holding most of mainland Europe had led to smoother relations. Desperate for friendly territory, Yumi had bled them for concessions before allowing their forces access to Asano territory.

The clan's territorial defences attacked those of ill intent, driving away many soldiers and even some of the refugees. This had been a major point of contention, but Yumi wouldn't have compromised the protective magic even if she could. She had enough to deal with already, without adding spies and vampire attacks to her slate.

Now there was a new problem. There had been incidents in the past she was certain led back to Jason; thunderstorms out of nowhere or the sky turning red. One day, without warning, the sky within Asano land turned to night while it remained day outside. Another time, the domain had been covered in a dome of bricks for several minutes, after which the landscape of the territories and astral spaces heavily reconfigured themselves.

This latest incident was worse than what had come before. It had the potential to bring everything down, and for the first time, Yumi was genuinely worried. There was sudden and rapid degradation in city infrastructure, most notably the walls. It had only been a matter of minutes yet the city was on the way to looking post-apocalyptic. The growing state of alarm was visible even from this height. The people on the ground were moving with swift agitation, like ants whose nest had just been kicked.

Yumi turned her gaze to the largest problem, which was the walls and the territory beyond it. The walls of the astral space city had built-in defences against the outside, made even stronger when the city had been reconstructed. In the Nitra city, this was embodied in automated Gatling gun turrets atop the walls, each emplacement the size of a delivery truck.

Normally, the defences were unnecessary. Monsters rarely took a run at the walls, the guns mostly dealing with the occasional flyer. But the degradation of the city was matched by a degradation in the monsters. The living monsters were turning undead. In the short time it had taken Yumi to enter the astral space and board a zeppelin, a horde of unliving monstrosities had come shambling to besiege the city walls. Worse, bronze-rank monsters that usually avoided the city were starting to arrive.

If silver and gold-rank monsters started arriving, things would get markedly worse. The wall turrets radiated gold-rank power, but even if they were enough, how long would that remain true? Like all the other city infrastructure, there were signs of the wall and its turrets starting to break down.

The remains of Jason's cloud palace spread across the desert sky, streamers of dark cloud combusting explosively in the air, trailing fire as they burned up. On the ground, Jason's companions all watched in worry, aside from Gary. He was looking down at the avatar, now a shrivelled husk, motionless inside the gold chains binding it to the ground. He gave it an experimental kick and the body crumbled like charcoal, throwing up black dust as it fell apart. Shrinking down to normal size, still head and shoulders above everyone but the messengers, Gary moved next to the others in a blur.

"What's happening?" he asked as he joined the rest in looking up. "That system message about Jason didn't sound good but the avatar is finally dead. Did we win?"

"No," Boris said. "Asano failed to refine all of the god's authority before it entered his soul. The battleground has shifted to inside Asano himself."

"Isn't that good?" Belinda asked. "He's all-powerful in his soul realm, right?"

"He has god-like power in there, it's true," Boris said. "But he allowed an actual god's power in there as well. By inviting that power in, he gave it a certain purchase within his spiritual realm."

"Why would inviting it in matter?" Sophie asked.

"Gods have their own rules," Clive said. "What is impossible to us is easy to them while the reverse is sometimes also true. Jason is fighting by their rules now."

"He's right," Boris said. "Like my kind, Asano exists on the border between the physical and the cosmic, between mortal and immortal. We messengers fall mostly on the physical side of that line, moving further towards the cosmic as we grow closer to becoming astral kings. Jason is growing ever closer to that line, and in this battle has one foot on each side. As this person said..."

He gestured at Clive.

"...sorry, I didn't catch your name. But as he said, Asano is fighting by their rules now."

Sophie glanced at Humphrey standing beside her, his face a storm of anger.

"We need practical solutions," Miriam said. "What do we do? Where even is he? In that exploding cloud?"

The cloud was still a maelstrom of darkness from which burning trails of smoke shot out like fireworks.

"We might be alright," Boris said. "I believe that Asano converted more of the power than got into his soul unchanged. Those forces will be at war within him right now, and he may win. If not, it will be obvious when he comes out of there as an undead monster."

“How do we help him?” Neil asked.

“Short of going into Asano’s soul and joining the fight, I don’t think we can,” Boris said.

“That’s as good an entrance line as I could asked for,” Nik said. “Thanks, two-piece feed.”

They all turned to see the Rabbit man and Shade standing in front of Jason’s soul portal.

“Two Piece Feed?” Boris asked. “Are you talking about me?”

“That’s right, you chicken-wing motherfu—”

“Alacrity is our watchword, Master Nik,” Shade pointed out.

“Right, yeah,” Nik said, then jerked a thumb at the portal with one hand while pointing out Jason’s team one by one with the other.

“You lot, you’re plan B. Get in there.”

“Only silver-rankers?” Miriam asked.

“Two Piece Feed can come too,” Nik said. “And the therapy lady.”

“Mr Asano’s soul realm is rather unstable right now,” Shade explained. “Those he implicitly trusts and relies on will be instinctively protected, but others will be in danger. Messengers are able to endure exotic dimensional forces, so they can also bring aid.”

“Then I will bring all my people,” Boris said.

“Hold on, chicken wings,” Nik said. “There’s no way you nuggets of shi—”

“Please bring them all,” Shade said. “And do so with—”

Colin staggered out of the portal in his blood clone state, but significantly worse for wear. Parts of him looked identical to Jason and others were glossy red. There were large wounds all over his body and dead, purple-stained leeches dropped from rotting flesh.

“Faster,” Colin growled in Jason’s voice, then staggered back through the portal.

Ketevan Arziani stood next to Yumi, likewise surveying the city. After the Network factional conflict in Australia had broken up the branch she had been director of in Australia, Yumi had snapped her up. Her combination of administrative expertise and familiarity with magic had proven a boon to the Asano clan during their rapid initial expansion.

“This seems worse than previous incidents you’ve described,” Ketevan said.

“Yes,” Yumi confirmed. “The combination of the walls being compromised and a wave of undead monsters attacking them is something I don’t have a solution to. The cities in

the astral spaces are our fallback position if anything happens with the territory on Earth. If the cities fall, we lose everything.”

“Then, what do we do?”

“This is beyond us. Literally. This can only be something happening with Jason. All we can do is get people away from the walls and hope that whatever this is, Jason deals with it before we start losing people.”

“What is happening to him that this is going on?” Ketevan asked. “If the undead overtake this place, it will turn into another Makassar.”

“I don’t know what’s happening to him,” Yumi said. “I’m not sure he told us everything he went through here, let alone in a world full of magic.”

“So, we just wait?”

“No,” Yumi said. “We wait and trust. If we’d done that a little more when he was here, he might not have left so angry.”

Ketevan didn’t respond, knowing it would do her no good. While she didn’t strictly disagree with her new boss, she had her own views on how Jason had conducted himself. His anger and refusal to explain what he was doing in the wake of his brother’s death was understandable, but also counterproductive.

Perhaps it was because Jason wasn’t family to her, but Ketevan found herself struggling to have the faith in him that Yumi did. She looked at the massive metal wall rusting right in front of her and felt fear. Leaving her fate in the hands of someone else, unable to affect the outcome, was unsettling. He was so far out of reach, in circumstances she would likely never learn. I felt like being trapped in the hand of some capricious god.

Both women’s attention was drawn to the top of the wall. The turrets, even the ones that had been broken and stopped working, were blazing with white-silver light. They spat out lines of light like tracer rounds, savaging the undead below.

“See?” Yumi said. “The boy is dealing with it.”

Ketevan didn’t say anything. One change did not mean the situation was resolved.