

## Chapter 807

### As Many as We Can Get

Rick gestured to the illusionary map floating over the table like a hologram. It showed the bottom fragment of a circle, divided into territories.

“This is everything we know about the layout of the transformation zone,” he said. “We can make some guesses based on this, but what you’re seeing here is what we’ve confirmed.”

He gestured again and five territories the bottom edge lit up green and joined together.

“This is Jason’s unified territory,” he continued. “As you can see, it’s quite close to the edge of the transformation zone. We bumped into that edge when we first set out and ended up skirting around. It slowed down our penetration of the wider zone but did give us some sense of scope. A lot of our estimations are based on this.”

“What kind of estimations?” Arabelle asked.

“The overall size of the transformation zone,” Rick explained. “Assuming the zone continues the roughly circular shape we’ve observed, it contains dozens of territories. Potentially hundreds. Of course, if the rest of the zone does not conform to the proportions we’ve observed, the estimations will be way out.”

Another gesture filled in the guesswork boundary for the entire transformation zone. It was a rough circle, with the top two-thirds greyed out.

“Each territory we saw was a hundred kilometres across at a minimum, some quite a bit more. Depending on how accurate we are about the overall shape of the transformation zone, that puts its size somewhere between a continent and a planet. A flat planet, given there seems to be no curvature.”

“Those sizes are extremely vague,” Miriam pointed out. “A continent is a terrible unit of measurement.”

“Yes,” Rick said, “but the information I have is the information I have. Until we do more scouting, vague is what we’ve got.”

He gestured once more and the bottom third of the map lit up in different colours. He walked the group through what they represented.

“We have five green zones. Each one is a unified territory cluster that respectively belonged to Lord Pensinata, Gabriel Remore, Councilwoman Lorenn and our cultist representative. Sorry, I didn’t get your name.”

"I know," the cultist said. Rick waited for more from the cultist but got only a return stare.

"Uh, alright then," Rick said. "If our choice is between not knowing your name and you going on a bloody rampage of betrayal, I'm comfortable with the way you decided to go on that one. Anyway, those four territories have been handed over to the owner of our fifth green map section, Jason Asano. For the other colours, we'll start with red, representing confirmed hostile territories."

"You saw messengers claiming territories?" asked Jali, the messenger at Jason's right hand.

"Yes," Marek Nior Vargas said. The messenger had accompanied Rick and was currently seated just down from him at the table.

"I recognised some of those messengers," Marek continued. "These were messengers sent down to turn the natural array into a soul forge, only to be corrupted. It seems that this transformation zone has purged their corruption and they are working to take it over."

"We have to assume that they have the magic to effectively claim territories, much as I do with my Spiritual Domain power," Jason said. "They would be a greater threat than the Undeath priests if not for the avatar."

"Which we say no sign of," Rick said. "We did see priests, but no avatar. Moving onto grey spaces on the map, these are either unexplored or unclaimed, as of when we were there. Light grey for unclaimed, dark grey for unexplored. That only leaves the territories marked in white. You'll note that these territories form mostly direct chains that link the green ones."

"Which I assume is the point," Jason said. "I do spot a few detours, most of which look to be avoiding red zones. Not all, though."

"Some territories will be harder to clear than others," Rick said. "Some have strange environmental challenges that may become controllable once dealt with, but that would be a slow process. The white territories represent the ones we can turn green the fastest."

"Is speed that important?" Phoebe asked. "Shouldn't we go slow and steady to unify the territories?"

"No, for several reasons," Jason said.

"Yes," Lorenn agreed, the brightheart leader leaning forward in her chair. "Those of us who have held territories understand the rules instinctively. When you challenge another for a territory they have claimed, they have a certain amount of time to defend it. If no one is there to do that when the time runs out, the territory is taken without effort."

“How short a time do defenders have to arrive?” Arabelle asked.

“One hundred and seventeen minutes,” Jason said. “Just under two hours.”

“Reaching a challenged area in that time is possible,” Arabelle said. “Gold rankers can go hundreds of kilometres in that time if they aren’t too slowed down by enemies and obstacles.”

“The other key reason for a less consolidated approach,” Jason said, “is that we have travel options. I’ve already tested portalling to other territories and my connection to them is enough to make a portal work sight unseen. I’m silver-rank, so I can send through other silver-rankers, but not gold.”

“Can’t you let gold-rankers into your soul realm, portal yourself and then let them out on the other side?” Arabelle asked.

“Maybe,” Jason said. “I’ve found that using my soul realm portal too often has a destabilising effect, both on the portal and the area around it. It makes the magic wonky and shuts down portals, storage spaces and dimensional bags. It also takes a while before it settles and I can use the portal again safely, even if I go somewhere else. I’ve been using something in my soul to influence this space more than other people claiming territories and keeping a soul portal open all the time makes the process more effective. It’s interrupting that flow that causes problems. Keeping it open is fine; it’s opening and closing the portal that causes trouble.”

“When we were preparing for the underground expedition,” Miriam said, “the idea of using your soul realm to shuttle gold-rankers through silver-rank portals was brought up. You claimed that doing so would interfere with the functionality of your regular portal. That it would treat you as if you were the rank of the people in your soul.”

“That was a restriction that I once had,” Jason said. “I continue to claim it exists to avoid people trying to exploit what I can do. This situation is more important than keeping the secret, however, which is why Arabelle brought it up.”

“So, transporting a group of gold-rankers is a viable option?” Miriam asked.

“Yes,” Jason said, “but one to be held in reserve until absolutely needed. The portal is open right now and the feedback I’m getting from it tells me that pushing too hard would be a very bad idea. That being said, I believe it will work. So long as we don’t use it more than every couple of days at most, moving gold-rankers through my soul realm should work.”

“Then we have an emergency response option,” Miriam said. “That alleviates the immediate pressure, but it seems that unifying the territories will put us in a better position in the long term.”

“Yes,” Lorenn said. “If it’s all one territory, defending it will be easier.”

“Not to mention a better base from which to find the rest of our respective groups,” Rick added.

“We need to decide what order to tackle them in,” Miriam Vance said. “As we’ve already established, the priorities are the two territories where unconscious messengers that were left behind. If we have the power to portal people, I suggest jumping silver-rank teams into both areas. Using those areas as a base, the teams start moving towards each other and meeting in the middle, claiming white territories as they go.”

She looked at Jason.

“You will need to stay on the move, Operations Commander, claiming each territory as it’s cleared. While the silver-rankers link those two territories to each other, the gold-rankers can link this territory to them. They need to go the long way anyway, so we should split them into two groups as well. One moves slowly, clearing territories for you to claim. The other moves fast, joining the silver-rankers in the least amount of time.”

“Aside from how much running around I’ll have to do claiming territories,” Jason said, “that seems efficient. We start by connecting this territory with those where the confused messengers have just woken up. Then we move on to the remaining two territory clusters.”

“The territories originally unified by Councilwoman Lorenn should be the next priority,” Miriam said.

“Why is that?” Jason asked.

“Operations Commander, you’ve stated that the welfare of the messengers released in these regions is paramount.”

“Yes,” Jason confirmed.

“I happen to agree,” Miriam said, “although I will admit my concerns are more practical than ethical. The messengers are an asset. Even if we don’t use them ourselves, we cannot expect our enemies to have the same restraint.”

“And until the territories are a contiguous whole,” Jason added, “they can’t be defended as one. Outsiders can come along and take areas piecemeal.”

“Precisely,” Miriam said. “We prioritise the areas with freshly-woken messengers to keep them from the hands of the Undeath priests or someone else. If they can pluck these zones from your hands with minimal fight, they gain a lot of messenger slaves with minimal effort. We need to secure these isolated territories as a unified whole.”

“And then we can defend them accordingly,” Jason agreed. “I’m still unclear why that means prioritising the Councilwoman’s former territory, though. She already released the messengers from the territories she unified and brought them here. They are the elemental ones.”

“My understanding,” Miriam said, “is that they are still linked to the territories the councilwoman claimed. You gained control of the messengers when Councilwoman Lorenn handed those territories over, did you not?”

“I did,” Jason said, realisation dawning on his expression. “I’ve set them free, so maybe they’re clear of the territory’s influence now. But maybe not. That was a cluster of four territories before she unified them, meaning four territories worth of elemental messengers. They’re amongst us now, so the idea of someone flipping a switch and turning them into enemies is a problem. I’d been thinking only Gabriel and Amos left exposed territories. but there’s a third.”

Jason cast his eyes over the map.

“Miriam, what you just describes makes the councilwoman’s territory cluster as much or more of a priority than the others. Yet, the plan you laid out doesn’t involve taking that territory in the first stage.”

“We don’t have the forces,” Miriam said. “It’s the most distant and the most isolated of the four territories. Until the gold-rankers going the long way rejoin the silvers we portal ahead, we would have to spread ourselves too thin. In the meantime, I recommend reserving your ability to shuttle gold-rankers through your soul space. If that zone is targeted before we are ready, we can respond accordingly.”

“The elemental messengers aren’t the only ones of concern in this plan,” Jali pointed out. Attention moved back to the messenger at Jason’s right hand. She hesitated for just a moment under a full table of unfriendly looks.

“The territory clusters unified by Lord Pensinata and Gabriel Remore,” she continued, “each have messengers outnumbering the elemental ones. And these are the territories we’ll be portalling the silver-rank teams into first. The messengers in both places have just woken up, now that Jason controls those territory clusters. The messengers won’t know who they are, where they are or what’s happening to them. If we have a group of warriors appear from a portal without warning, we could end up fighting before we have a chance to talk.”

“A valid concern,” Miriam said. “What do you suggest?”

“Jason and I should go first,” Jali said. “I am a messenger, like them, and Jason rules their territories, even if he no longer rules them. He gave them their freedom and they will recognise that.”

“I see no problem with this approach,” Miriam said. “We want the silver-rank teams in those zones and active as soon as possible.”

“I don’t like this plan,” Lorenn said. “It splits our forces. Not only does it divide the silver and gold-rankers, but it further divides the ranks themselves. Refusing to use the messengers as an army means we’re already outnumbered. This just makes it worse.”

“I’m open to different ideas,” Jason said. “What alternative do you propose, Councilwoman?”

“I know you want to spare the messengers we command, Asano, so spare the ones you have freed. The elemental messengers I commanded have already been blooded in combat. You wouldn’t be putting them through anything they haven’t already seen. Your arguments against their numbers being unwieldy is true, but your portal tricks could solve many of the problems of deploying such a large force.”

“We’ve been over this, Councilwoman,” Jason said, the tone of his voice a warning.

“As I’ve said before,” Miriam said, “my perspective in devising this approach is based in practicality, not ethics. Like it or not, Operations Commander, using the messengers may well prove unavoidable in the long run. There may be no other way. But from a tactical perspective, I would prefer to keep our forces agile at this stage. Lord Geller showed us the distances we have to cover and portalling that many people isn’t practical. We could use the Operation Commander’s soul realm to do it, but that would leave us without the ability to rapidly deploy our gold-rankers. If we can’t do that, those same elemental messengers could go from asset to enemy without our having a chance to respond.”

Lorenn’s nod was reluctant but definite.

“That’s settled then,” Jason said. “Let’s nail down the specific disposition of forces and we’ll get going.”

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Clive was indelicate as he ran the knife along the Undeath priest’s back. The crude ritual diagram he had sliced from the priest’s skin was not healing, despite a gold-rank recovery attribute. Clive tossed the knife aside and slapped a hand to the priest’s back, ignoring the blood soaking over his fingers. He chanted the ritual’s incantation and the diagram lit up dark red for a moment before fading to nothing. He then removed his hand and tipped some crystal wash over it.

“It’s done,” he said roughly. “It won’t stop his powers outright, but they’ll be diminished and his blood will burn.”

The Adventure Society largely overlooked the propagation of iron and bronze suppression collars, but at least paid lip service to controlling the silver ones. The golds

were truly restricted, however, and no one present had one. As far as Clive was aware, the only gold collars they had was the ones Jason and Lord Amos used for aura training.

The ritual Clive used instead was cruel, not actually restricted but certainly iffy. Normally he wouldn't use such a ritual but he was not in his right mind. He could feel the power of his territories stoking his rage and ambition. His imperfect control over them was making him paranoid as well, his thoughts questioning people he should have trusted.

Clive was self-analytical enough to recognise these effects. Recognising them did not mean his judgement was unaffected, though, which he fully recognised. It had been easy to keep an objective mind at first, compartmentalising useless thoughts the way he always had. But it grew harder with each new territory, more and more gunk accumulating in the cogs of his clockwork mind.

The rest of the leadership group had watched him perform the ritual, Clive ignoring their wary expressions as he moved to join them.

"We have to stop claiming territories," he growled. "If I take a sixth, I'm certain my judgement will be dangerously compromised. A seventh would probably have me lose control altogether."

"I agree that we should stop," Emir said, looking at his wife with concern. Constance had also been claiming territories and was currently sitting alone, looking off into the distance with a thousand-yard stare.

Having Constance claim territories had been Clive's idea. Once he realised the territories were compromising his mind, he had suggested spreading the load.

"Could we just have another person start taking territories?" asked Marla, the brightheart commander.

"We've already claimed a lot," Emir said. "It's time to find Jason and hand it all over. We should switch to moving fast through territories instead of clearing them out. We move fast and only fight as much as we need to."

"Alright," Marla said. "Does that mean we leave the prisoners behind?"

Emir turned to look at the freshly-sealed Undeath priest being led off to join the others. The cultist leader, Beaufort, had taken charge of him. Thus far they had eleven silver-rank priests alive, or at least animate. They all wore suppression collars, with only the new gold-rank addition being different.

"We take them with us," Clive said. "We won't have time to come back if we need them."

"I never realised how many priests they had," Marla said. "We've taken this many alive, killed others and that's just us. How many are out there?"

“Undeath hoards his forces and then uses them all at once,” Emir said. “Hundred-thousand-strong undead armies don’t come from nowhere. It took a lot of hands to set that up.”

“Good,” Clive growled. “We’re going to need as many as we can get.”