

Chapter 797

Yellow Bell

The three-headed dog hadn't been hard to take down with the gold-rankers Clive's group had on hand. The creature dissolved into rainbow smoke almost immediately, leaving behind a basketball-sized crystal orb. Inside, motes of blue and orange light swirled through inky darkness. Clive was the one who examined it.

Item: [Stable Genesis Core] (unranked, common)

A refined vessel of transformative potential energy (consumable, magic core).

- Effect: Use to set up or expand spiritual domains.
- You lack the ability to establish a spirit domain. You may use this core to establish or expand territory within a genesis space but additional requirements must be met to establish a spirit domain.

"What are we looking at?" Constance asked.

"It says you can establish a spirit domain," Clive said. "Like the sanctified ground within a temple. There's some requirement I don't meet, but I can still use this thing to claim the territory. Are you sure it shouldn't be a gold-ranker doing this?"

"Jason is on your team," Emir said. "Since the territories will all need to be handed over to him eventually, it's best if we let the person most loyal to him claim them. I don't think there would be a problem, but we should still do our best to avoid one."

"I guess I'll just use it, then?" Clive said, his voice not hiding his uncertainty.

"If you're not going to use it then give it to me," said Beaufort.

"Uh, no," Clive said to the Builder cult leader. "I'll use it."

The two gold-rank messengers had finished preparing the ritual that would let them not just claim a territory but establish the basis for a spirit domain. The orb they had taken from the final anomaly sat in the middle of a ritual circle drawn in messenger blood. Rather than spread out the duty of supplying blood and feathers, they used Cas Vin Baral for all of it due to his 'complaining in a fashion unbecoming of the most advanced species in the cosmos.'

The reason they had yet to conduct the ritual was the question of who would be the one to use the orb. The two gold-rankers had to decide between them and the discussion did not go well.

"I am the senior," Galis Jay Vahal said.

"Age is an irrelevant factor," Kol Kelis Vel shot back. "I was the expedition leader's direct subordinate, so I should be leader in her absence."

Belinda stood with the silver-rank messengers, still disguised as one of them. They watched in silence, all knowing better than to interject. She certainly wasn't going to bring up any of the things she'd off-handedly mentioned to the individual gold-rankers in private. As it turned out, prodding the ambitions of high-ranking messengers was startlingly easy.

Jason, Farrah and Sophie were eating ice creams as they watched messengers fly around in the air over the mountain fortress.

"I think you're trusting her too easily," Farrah said, not for the first time.

"I've literally walked through her soul," Jason said. "It's nowhere near as sketchy as mine."

"She's a messenger," Farrah pointed out. "Whether you've traipsed through her soul or not, it's a risk."

"Sometimes you just take a risk on someone," Sophie said, glancing at Jason. "Even if they don't make it easy on you. You never know what helping someone just because they need it might lead to."

"But sometimes you don't have time for that," Farrah said. "You're making this harder on yourself than you have to, Jason."

"Yep," Jason agreed. "I don't know if you've noticed, but making things harder than I have to is kind of my thing. Sophie's right. Helping people isn't about getting benefits, but it does seem to have a lot of them. I had no idea that I would need Jali's help keeping a bunch of confused messengers calm after setting them free, yet here we are."

Jason finished his ice cream, happily crunching through the waffle cone. He then pulled the glowing orb from his inventory.

"Every transformation zone is a little different," he said. "Time to see what consolidating territory looks like this time."

"When are you going to start?" Emir asked.

"I've already done it," Clive said, nodding at the orb in his hands. "Look."

The orb dissolved, slowly at first but sped up quickly. The dark energy, speckled with blue and orange, seeped into Clive's body. The others looked around for any change but saw nothing different.

"That's it?" asked Marla, the gold-rank brightheart commander.

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- You have claimed a territory.
 - You may initiate territorial conflict in order to annex hostile territory.
 - Another territory holder may annex your territory should you surrender it to them or if you are killed while in territorial conflict.
 - You may voluntarily allow another territory holder to annex your territory without conflict.

 - You have the right to imprint upon the inhabitants of this territory kept in stasis. You lack any inherent power that would allow you to imprint on the inhabitants held in stasis. They will be removed from stasis but will remain in a comatose state until imprinted or they die. Remaining in this state will eventually lead to their deaths.
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The gold-rankers looked to the sky.

“Those messengers just became a lot easier to sense,” Emir said. “They came out of stasis. What’s going on?”

“We need to catch them,” Clive said. “They’re all comatose.”

“Comatose?” Emir asked. “We could let them hit the ground, and then make sure they’re dead.”

“You’re the one who said I should claim this place,” Clive told him. “I say we keep them alive.”

“I’m with Bahadir,” Marla said. “The only messenger I would come close to trusting is the one I’m certain is dead.”

“Jason already has a messenger collection,” Emir said. “He doesn’t need anymore.”

“I don’t think that’s how he’d see it,” Clive said.

“Why do we care about what someone who isn’t here thinks?” Marla asked.

“Because,” Clive said, “all of these territories ultimately have to be handed over to him, at which point he’ll do some rewriting of reality. Jason can be rather extreme when he feels like something has gone the way it shouldn’t, and this process is going to be unreliable as is. I think it’s best if we don’t prompt him to do something even more outlandish than necessary.”

“I’m not sure this sounds like someone we want rewriting reality,” Martha said.

“Then you shouldn’t have let me claim this territory,” Clive said. “I trust him over every person here.”

“Clive is right to trust Jason,” Emir said. “He has experience with what’s going on here that none of us share. I shouldn’t have suggested killing the messengers. The fall is unlikely to kill silver-rankers, but we should make sure.”

“No need,” Clive said curtly. “I’ll deal with it, but please refrain from interfering.”

Clive pointed upwards and started drawing with his finger. A few meters above him, golden lines started appearing where he pointed as he drew a massive ritual circle. When he had finished drawing out the lines and sigils of the ritual circle he opened his storage space, a small circle of runes ringing a portal.

He pulled objects from the portal one by one, tossing them into the air. Instead of falling back down, they floated up to different areas in the ritual diagram. There were several fistfuls of spirit coins, feathers of different colours and a blob of pale blue slime in a glass jar. Once they reached their designated position, they hovered in place.

Clive had worked swiftly and with confidence, the entire process taking less than half a minute. Even so, the messengers had almost reached the end of their monumental fall from well over a dozen kilometres in the air.

As the unconscious messengers reached the final half kilometre, they slowed slightly as their trajectories curved towards the ritual circle. The first messenger was still plummeting when it reached just a few metres from the ritual circle and struck a sheet of magic that became visible on impact.

The sheet reacted to the impact like a trampoline made of fly paper. The magical sheet flexed down as the messenger hammered into it before springing back, but the messenger wasn't bounced off. She adhered to the sheet like glue as it shook back and forth several times. The second messenger hit the sheet and the first was suddenly loose, drifting slowly down. She passed through the ritual diagram without impacting it and came to rest in the long grass.

More messengers fell like rain, although none crashed into one another on the magical sheet. While that was happening, Clive pulled out a notebook and started scrawling in it with a pencil.

"You didn't pull out any notes before drawing out the magic diagram," Emir observed.

"No," Clive confirmed.

"It's a rather niche ritual to have memorised."

"I didn't have it memorised," Clive told him. "I just made it up."

"You just invented a complex ritual off the top of your head?"

Clive snorted a laugh.

"Sure, complex."

"Clive, I'd try and poach you for my treasure-hunting operation again, but I'm not sure I can afford to pay you what you're worth."

The shadowy veil between Jason's territory and the one he had expanded his influence into was barely visible after dealing with the living anomalies. After the bone feasters had been dealt with, a massive monstrosity had come lumbering through. It had some physiological similarities to the bone feasters, being bone exoskeleton over leathery flesh, but that was the extent of it. Where they were human-sized, the final anomaly was the size of a cottage and looked like a cross between a beetle and a mantis, walking on six legs but with two arms sporting serrated bone blades.

The boss anomaly had been relatively easy to deal with, too big to share the agility of the bone feasters. Jason had loaded it with afflictions and let it stomp around the blackened remains of the bushland until it dropped. He knew it would be the easiest fight he experienced in the transformation zone.

Through what was now the nearly translucent veil to the next zone, what they could see was a massive gorge running through a mountain range. Mist shrouded the space below, giving them no sense of how high up it was, although it would have been deep underground in Jason's territory. The border between the territories was both extreme and abrupt.

Natural stone spires jutted up all along the gorge, intermingled with islands that floated in the air through some magical effect. The mountains framing the gorge were a mixture of sheer stone cliffs and terraced areas large enough for trees and grass to grow. They even sported the occasional wooden building in what Jason found reminiscent of a traditional Japanese style. The floating islands and a couple of the spires with flattened tops had the same greenery.

They could see multiple waterfalls, mostly from the mountains to the side. One spilled out from the top of a natural spire while another spilled from the edge of a floating island, despite no apparent source.

There was a path running a meandering passage through the gorge. It was comprised of rope bridges between the spires, the islands and the mountainsides, switching back and forth more than it moved forward. Some parts of the path passed by the greenery and the buildings. Other sections went up or down stairs hewn into the mountains or around the circumference of the spires. Natural trails were mingled with carved ones, all of them precarious.

Jason, Farrah and Sophie looked out, through the veil. Jason's eyes panned up and down, the upper and lower reaches of the territory reaching much further than his own.

"That is picturesque," Jason said.

"This is what adventuring is meant to be like," Farrah said.

“It does look like we’re going to fall off ledges a lot though,” Jason said.

“We can all fly,” Sophie pointed out.

“Oh yeah,” Jason said. “Why couldn’t I see those mountains before? They’re definitely taller than the veil, and I can see the magic tree that’s much further away.”

“We started on the other side and couldn’t see your giant head mountain,” Sophie said. “The veil must block all vision other than the big tree in the middle.”

“At least until you push your influence through the veil and take out all the anomalies that come out to object,” Jason said.

He held the orb out in front of him.

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- You have expanded your influence into an adjacent territory and expunged all anomalies. You may use a [Stable Genesis Core] to finalise the expansion and unify the two territories into one.
 - Will you consume the [Stable Genesis Core]?
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“This all feels too easy,” Jason said. “The genesis core is already stable, and it looks like we just need the one per territory, from the boss drop. Well-defined territories mean expansion is only on one front. We know where the anomalies will come from instead of having them stream in from every direction.”

“Are you complaining because things are good?” Sophie asked. “Are you an idiot?”

“I’m hoping all this is because I was able to shape this transformation zone as it formed,” Jason explained. “Since my last transformation zone, I’ve picked up an astral throne and an astral gate. I’ve picked up a lot of experience dealing with quasi-real dimensional spaces. Plus, I’ve also built up a tolerance for dimensional forces.”

“There you go, then,” Farrah said. “You’ve just countered your own concern.”

“But what if I’m wrong? What if it all goes to—”

“What if you’re wrong?” Farrah cut him off. “Then we do what we always do and figure it out. You’ll come up with some lunatic idea and save the damn day. It’ll probably annoy Neil and be so ridiculous that Rufus tries to talk you out of it. Maybe you’ll convince Clive to turn Gary into a giant hairy arrow or something, I don’t know. Then you’ll get a weird power and make a king or someone angry in the process. You know how this goes and yet, after all we’ve been through, not only are you whinging about it, but you’re doing so because it’s too easy?”

She ran her fingers through her hair in frustration before continuing her rant.

“I’ve been putting up with this staring into the middle-distance sad boy routine for a long while now because yeah, some crappy stuff happened. But now it’s time to put on

your big girl pants, fight the bad guy and save the day. There's even a princess out there to rescue, so get off your butt, make some reference we don't understand and get moving."

"Um...?" Jason voiced hesitantly.

"What?" Farrah snarled.

"I'm not on my butt?"

Farrah's eyes went maniac wide and Jason flinched.

"Right, uh, obscure pop culture reference. Did you ever see *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*?"

"I did," Farrah said impatiently. "And Ferris Bueller was a little prick. You can't do better than that?"

"Uh... everybody Wang Chung tonight?"

"It'll do," Farrah said. "Now, shut up and go fight some evil."