

Chapter 773

Control the Pot

Jason watched the brightheart population migrate towards the ground level in preparation for moving through his portal. The base of the chamber was little more than rock carved flat for the most part, aside from the roads moving between the pillars and the growth chambers. They, at least, were flagstone paved and lined with garden beds, although the plants had long since died. Outside of the growth chambers, the lack of good air and people to care for them had left the moss, vines and fungus withered and brown.

Illumination for the tight-packed lines of brighthearts was provided by glow stones. The local variety had a yellow tinge, being crystals charged with fire energy. They were being carried by brightheart officials, forming chains as they guided their people down. Jason couldn't see into the pillars, although he could sense the mass of people through their auras. He felt their fear and confusion, along with an undercurrent of despair born of too much misery and too many deaths. Hope was in disastrously short supply.

There hadn't been time to hold massive meetings and explain everything to the brightheart population. That left most with a tenuous grasp of why they were being moved, leading to uncertainty and unease that spread like a virus. There were systems in place to disseminate information, but anything beyond the practical basic was counterproductive. Too many details would just lead to confusion as large groups did not handle context and complex ideas very well. Any information given out would be distorted as it spread in a game of telephone thousands of links long.

What made the process of moving everyone work was the trust the brighthearts had in their leadership. This led to minimal pushback against the officials working to get and keep everyone moving.

The residents of the upper pillars that linked the citadel to the ceiling had to be ferried around the outside of the citadel as part of their descent. Elevating platforms were in constant motion, but they could only move a fraction of the required number. Spiralling ramps had been stone-shaped around the outside, hastily enough that the structural integrity of the slapdash design was a concern. Not only would a collapse slow the process and get people killed but it would make the population wary of the process entirely.

Gary had joined the brighthearts in establishing the ramps. During Jason's time back on Earth, Gary spent a couple of years helping small towns with their defensive infrastructure, in readiness for the monster surge. That time building walls and reinforcing structures to withstand monster attacks left him with experience that was paying off again.

Expertise in shoring up swiftly built structures against significant strain was exactly what the brighthearts needed. They also had their own experts, as well as some deep earth metals that got the smith in him excited.

Miriam flew from the upper levels of the citadel on a flying motorcycle that was mostly black with a few embellishments in dark grey. She pulled up next to Jason's floating cloud chair as he observed proceedings from on high.

"This vehicle type is very convenient," she commented.

"Yeah, vehicle design in Pallimustus is pretty bad," Jason said. "A private jet that's a giant construct eagle is awesome, don't get me wrong, but a plane is just more practical. That being said, most motorcycles don't fly. I think the police in Dubai might have them? Dubai is a city in the world I come from that's pretty much the capital of doing weird stuff because they have too much money."

"I don't know the vehicles you're describing. Except the bird one. How did it go with Councilwoman Lorenn?"

"There's a reason I'm not the leader of my team," Jason said. "I think I did acceptably, but my mediocrity when it comes to maintaining a diplomatic demeanour is well documented. It's not a field in which my instincts lead me in the right direction. How goes the tactical planning?"

"I've been consulting with Marla and Beaufort. They're the local equivalents of my role as tactical commander. Their knowledge of the local terrain, conditions and enemy disposition has been valuable in plotting out the next stage of the mission. Standish has been working with us to set the objectives and we've been figuring out how to make that work."

"We have a plan of action?"

"We do. Objective one is the astral space chamber and we've plotted out an approach that we think will meet with the least amount of resistance. We're not sure if the messengers will attack us once we claim the chamber or if they're as wary of it as their tree is. Either way, we have plans in place to hold the chamber while the ritualists learn whatever it is they need to learn from it."

"And then it's on to the natural array chamber and the tree itself," Jason said. "I assume that will be the hard part."

"A safe assumption. Moving to objective two requires that Standish is confident in activating the device effectively after what he learns studying the astral space chamber, however. We have contingencies involving a retreat to the citadel chamber or into the

astral space if Standish thinks we need to revise our approach. That will be for you and him to decide in the field.”

“But the hope is that we move onto the natural array chamber,” Jason said.

“Yes. We’ll need to operate under the assumption that the messengers will spare nothing in defending the tree. We’ve established a series of different scenarios for going in, securing the area around the tree and performing the ritual.”

“One of those scenarios being to kill all the messengers?”

“Yes. The last scenario because it’s the least viable. Even with the addition of the brighthearts and the cult to our forces, we would most likely exhaust ourselves and fall before their numbers were expended. But assuming we can secure the site and activate the device, that’s where things get uncertain. I do not like uncertain, Operations Commander.”

“We work with what we have, not what we want.”

“I know. But turning on the magic device given to us by our enemies and then waiting for those same enemies to sabotage us and hope we can work around them is as bad a plan as I’ve ever been involved in. That’s assuming that only the regular messengers interfere and not the god of destruction.”

“It is very bad,” Jason agreed. “But it can be done, trust me. Saving civilisations from destructive cosmic forces is kind of my thing. I’ve had to deal with transcendent-level enemies and the fact is, they’re incredibly restricted when working within physical reality. If Destruction had the power to wipe us all out, he would. If he was as confident as he put himself across, he wouldn’t have been talking to us; he’d have just been doing what he wanted. Take it from someone who’s been on both sides of the confident bluster when world-level stakes are in play: that guy is not as confident as he seems.”

“Are you as confident as you seem?”

He chuckled.

“I’ve briefed you on transformation zone events, which Knowledge thinks is the key, and I can see why. Whatever the sabotage ends up being, it’s going to involve dimensional magic. Probably trying to lift the soul forge out through the side of the universe, the same way the Builder steals astral spaces. Given that the device itself is already playing with the dimensional membrane, I may not need to push the transformation zone into forming. The messengers do not care about dimensional integrity.”

“But you can push it over the edge if they don’t?” Miriam asked. “You have the power to do that?”

"It's not about power as much as the right tool for the job. I have something called an astral gate that allows me to manipulate dimensional forces. Think of it like a normal ranker who can't push a nail into a board, but give them a hammer and it's easy."

"So long as they don't hit their thumb."

"Very true," Jason said with a laugh. "I was warned not to use the astral gate until I'm diamond-rank at least."

"At least?"

"Yeah. I disregarded that advice almost immediately, of course, and brought the hammer down on my thumb pretty damn hard. I imagine you heard about it."

"The incident in Rimaros where you spent months in recovery?"

"That's the one. Spiritual damage is a real prick, let me tell you."

"*At least* diamond-rank?" Miriam repeated.

"Yep."

"Since I started working with you, Asano, it's felt like I'm swimming over very deep water. I'm not used to that as a gold-ranker."

Jason burst out laughing.

"Try dealing with great astral beings at iron or bronze."

"I would point out, Operations Commander, that my question is about confidence. You strike me as a man who starts giving context until he forgets what he was talking about in the first place."

Jason laughed again.

"You figured me out pretty quick. Okay, the point I'm slowly meandering towards is that a transformation zone is exactly what we need. The good thing about a transformation zone is that it's all-encompassing. It'll take everything that's going on and throw it into a big pot. All this uncertainty, all these factions and whatever weird magic is going around, all into the pot. That means we aren't dealing with all these unknowns anymore; we just have to control the pot. If we do that, we win."

"And you think we can do that?"

"I've done it before, and more than once. There are differences this time, I'll admit. You've set up a meeting for me to brief everyone on how transformation zones work?"

"Yes."

"Good. Long story short, a transformation zone is a bunch of territories. We claim enough territories and I can remake reality."

"It's that easy?" Miriam asked sceptically.

“No, it’s that simple. And it does start easy. Taking territory means eliminating anomalies, which are rather weak in the beginning. The more territories get claimed, though, the more dangerous the unclaimed ones become. But our people are solid, so I’m more worried about challenges I didn’t have to deal with on Earth. There, I was the only one with the power to properly claim territories.”

“Because of your ability that will let you trigger the zone?”

“Uh, no. It’s a different power, one of my outworlder racial gifts. It was a somewhat related power that was forcibly put through a secondary gift evolution the first time I was in a transformation zone.”

“Operations Commander, talking to you makes me feel like I’ve led a boring life, and I once discovered an underwater dome city on the back of a giant turtle.”

“Okay, that is awesome and you’re totally telling me that story, but later, when there’s booze. What was I talking about?”

“Challenges you didn’t have on your home planet.”

“Right. In the second transformation zone I was in, others were competing for territories. They weren’t real competitors, though. They had no idea what they were doing and no way to reshape a giant mass of reality in a state of flux. I have to assume that the messenger saboteurs have at least one astral magic expert with them, meaning that they may be able to figure it out. And then there’s the messenger tree. It may not have a mind, but I bet it has a will. I’m betting it will try and take over the transformation zone the way it’s been taking over this underground domain. Whether it can do something with it or not doesn’t matter. It’ll be a disaster either way.”

“What kind of disaster? What will happen if either of them wins over us?” Miriam asked.

“Some variety of bad. Maybe they get what they want, be it a soul forge to take away or a base from which to spread arboreal doom. Or maybe they screw up and the whole place blows up the way we came here to stop in the first place. The transformation zone is the thing we need but it won’t let us just win and it won’t solve all our problems. It solves one problem: the uncertainty you were talking about.”

“By throwing everything into a pot.”

“Exactly. It takes everything coming for us, whether we know it or not, and puts it in front of us where we can fight it. And a fight is something I know you can handle.”

Miriam nodded.

“Alright,” she said. “That makes things feel more manageable. I think you did instill me with some confidence. Thank you, Operations Commander.”

“I’d say it’s what I’m here for, but really I’m here to discuss different ways to trick Mr. T onto planes while you have no idea what I’m talking about.”

“Then congratulations because I do have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Mission accomplished.”

Miriam sighed, rolling her shoulders as if she’d just shrugged off a weight.

“I finally feel like there’s a path forward I can actually make out. Thank you, Jason. Everything should go fine and we just have to hope nothing unexpected prevents the transformation zone from forming.”

Jason’s jaw dropped.

“Why would you say that?”

Farrah met Jason outside the room that contained the echo array. They both had guides to help them navigate the citadel.

“How is it going?” Jason asked as Farrah came out into a hallway that didn’t run quite straight.

“Is that a friend question or an Operations Commander question?”

“Operations Commander.”

“Well. I’ll be ready to brief you and Miriam before you’re scheduled to open the portal.”

“That’s good. Should I have asked how you’re doing as a friend question?”

“No, I’m fine,” Farrah told him. “You look like something’s weighing on you, though.”

“Uh, yeah. We’ve got this thing where we’re trying to stop two different sets of evil angels and a god from doing some super-evil stuff. And some lunatic put me in charge.”

“No, that’s not it. This stuff is old hat for you.”

“Old hat? How much time did you spend with my grandmother?”

“Stop trying to derail the conversation, Jason. What’s going on?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“Just tell me.”

“Okay, fine,” Jason said. “It’s about taking all these people into my portal.”

“And?”

“And it’s been a while since I had people in my soul realm for extended periods. Back when my family were in there, my spirit realm was more spirit and less realm. But now I’ve got the astral throne and it’s much more of a physical reality.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Mostly, sure. But when Emi was living in there, she was kind of frozen. I mean, she could walk around in there or whatever, but she was in kind of a stasis, biologically. She didn’t get hungry, I don’t think she was aging. And she didn’t... you know. What if that isn’t the case anymore?”

Farrah let out an exasperated groan.

“The poop thing again?”

“Yes, the poop thing, again,” Jason said.

“We’ve got a lot more to worry about than that, Jason.”

“Says the woman not about to have ten thousand people start taking dumps inside her soul.”

“They’re mostly iron rank, except for the children.”

“They aren’t essence users, Farrah. They don’t eat spirit coins and they still have those biological functions.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, I’m very sure. I spend hours learning all about their growth chambers so I could replicate them. Guess where they get their fertilizer?”

“Well there you go, then,” Farrah said.

“What do you mean, there I go?”

“Think about it,” Farrah said. “You’re trying to effectively replicate the growth chambers in your soul, right? Which means you’ll need their fertilizer. You need them to poop in your soul. And if they can’t, because your soul still stops people from needing to, then you’ll have to use your power to replicate all that poo yourself.”

Jason’s eyes went wide in horror.