

Chapter 850

Heroes Cheat All the Time

A massive shaft led from the surface of Pallimustus to what had once been the home of the brighthearts. The Adventure Society expedition had fought their way down through elemental messengers and monsters adapted to the extreme depths. Months after the transformation zone had been put in place, the dangers of the shaft had been tamed, for a certain definition of tame. The messengers were gone and most of the monsters had learned to avoid the place. Those that remained, though, were not something a lone silver-rank wanted to run into.

The elemental forces that had made the lower portions of the descent difficult were no longer a factor. With the natural array subsumed into the transformation zone, the ambient magic had returned to normal. The lessening of interference with personal and commercial flight devices granted access to people and infrastructure that previously wouldn't have survived the journey down the shaft. Even so, anyone short of a silver-ranker would find the environment hostile. Such subterranean depths were not hospitable to humans and their ilk.

Despite a few lingering threats, an outpost had been established at the bottom of the shaft where the impenetrable transformation zone cut it off. It had been carved from the walls of the shaft, with rooms and tunnels dug deep into the stone. It was almost a town, complete with ambitious merchants, shopkeepers and taverns. The deeper sections were where the less influential were relegated; Magic Society researchers and merchant delegations that inevitably cropped up when high-rankers gathered. The glass-fronted chambers abutting the shaft were the domains of the powerful.

The shaft-side chambers of the outpost all had huge windows of magically reinforced glass. From within, the most powerful of the outpost's occupants waited for the rainbow barrier of the transformation zone to drop. These were the people with real power, including gold and even a few diamond-rankers.

One of these rooms was a multi-storey tavern. Its exterior wall, spanning three levels, was a single pane of glass, the largest window in the outpost. It was spacious in a place where space was precious, and well-decorated for a chamber carved out of the rock. Every booth and table had a privacy screen, and the wood panelling could have been pried up and traded for a moderately-sized airship. The window was further enchanted to keep out the rainbow light from the transformation zone below. Many observation rooms did not have this feature and were constantly painted in bright, shifting hues.

It was one of the most exclusive venues in Pallimustus, by location, patronage and cost. Not just any silver-ranker could spend time there; they needed the backing and reputation for at least some of the gold-rank patrons to recognise and accept them. They also needed to afford the food and drink on offer. The silver and gold-rank libations being served had been brought down at exorbitant cost and cheapskate lingerers were not tolerated.

The clientele was impressive, and Jason would have recognised quite a few faces. The Sapphire Crown guild of Rimaros had been present since the early days of the outpost. Although Zara was only a former princess and had left the royal family for political reasons, the Storm King did not stop caring for his daughter. The royal guild had a full contingent in place, led by Trenchant Moore.

Danielle Geller had gotten used to being one of the most powerful people in any given room, but that was very much not the case in this room. Some of the auras she couldn't sense would belong to stealth specialists, but she had no doubt there were a few diamond-rankers on hand as well.

Danielle had sought out Allayeth on arriving in Yaresh, having heard she was close to Humphrey and his team. The diamond-ranker had expressed a desire to wait at the outpost, but she was far too busy. Not only was Yaresh still in dire need of rebuilding, but the messengers had renewed attacks after the transformation zone had appeared. None of them would even have known what a transformation zone was if not for the Church of Knowledge.

There was one pair that Danielle was most wary of. She had seen them rebuff the social approach of another diamond-ranker, letting a brief glimpse of their auras show. These two were beyond the likes of Soramir Rimaros or Roland Remore. Danielle's money was on them being from beyond Pallimustus, contemporaries of Dawn. Her companion disagreed, betting them to be ancient diamond-rankers, perhaps unseen for millennia.

That same companion now entered the privacy screen around Danielle's table. A priest of Hero, he had skin of dark chocolate and a thornbush of curly hair. He set a fresh drink in front of Danielle and another in front of himself before sprawling into a chair. After patting his pockets for a moment, he fished out a pack of cards and waved them questioningly. Danielle nodded and he started dealing.

"How are they?" Danielle asked.

"Well, they're bronze-rankers being kept in an underground chamber so far below the ground they need the room enchanted just so they can breathe. They've been dragged

across the world to wait for a son who will probably die right in front of them, so... not well.”

Danielle looked out at the transformation zone barrier and frowned.

“This needs to end.”

“It’s not like you to be impatient.”

“I knew strange days were coming,” she said. “The movements of the church of Knowledge. The ever-extending time between monster surges. I raised my children to be ready for a world where being just an adventurer wasn’t enough anymore.”

“There you go,” Gwydion said. “You prepared Humphrey for this.”

“For *this*?” she said, gesturing out the window. Rainbow light from the impenetrable barrier painted the walls of the shaft. Treatment on the observation window kept it out of the tavern.

“You think I’m not worried?” Gwydion asked. “My whole family is down there. Little Roo is going to be a mess over Gary. I’m just glad Mum is in there with him. Dad will probably be less help.”

Danielle snorted a laugh. She looked at her cards and dismissively tossed them onto the table.

“A priest of Hero shouldn’t cheat.”

“Heroes cheat all the time. Tales are full of such deeds.”

Danielle acknowledged the point with a nod as Gwydion dealt a fresh hand.

“I worry I made a mistake in pushing Humphrey and Jason together. I knew he would be caught up in things — that’s the nature of outworlders — but I didn’t expect...”

Her gaze wandered over who she believed to be the most powerful pair in the room.

“...attention of quite this level.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting this Asano,” Gwydion said. “I’m not sure anything could live up to the rumours, now. My brother is very taken with him, according to Mum. They aren’t...?”

“No,” Danielle said. “Not as far as I know. My sources tell me that Jason’s tastes drift towards women. Of the extremely powerful variety.”

“Your sources being your son diligently calling his mother?”

“I would never use my son as a source.”

“There are at least some lines you won’t cross, then?”

“What? No, he’d just be a terrible source of information. Far too biased for me to take his word uncritically.”

Gwydion chuckled and laid down his cards with a smirk that vanished when Danielle did the same. He stared at her cards disbelievingly.

“How did...?”

“Heroes cheat all the time,” she told him. “I’m reliably informed that tales are full of such deeds.”

He grumbled as he swept up the cards, only to stop and look at the window. Danielle did the same, both sensing the change before rainbow light flared up the shaft. It pushed past the magical treatment on the window to wash through the tavern before rapidly fading.

Danielle and Gwydion got to their feet and were not alone in doing so. Silver, gold and even diamond rankers moved to crowd the window. Only one pair remained where they were, images blurred under their privacy screen. Danielle noted the two most dangerous people in the room not moving but then turned her attention to the window with everyone else. She watched the rainbow light recede down the shaft that was no longer blocked by the transformation zone barrier.

Jason woke up, face down, on a coarse wooden floor. His head was pounding and he could feel a sharp tug at his soul. He rolled into a sitting position and opened his eyes, but it was his supernatural senses that told him what he needed to know.

He was in his soul realm, in some kind of treehouse. Outside was not one mountain-sized tree but a sweeping forest, the trees sized like ancient redwoods. The treehouse felt like wood, but Jason knew it to be cloud-stuff mimicking it. He could sense the building and others like it spreading through the forest, reaching metropolitan proportions.

He reached out for the soul of the tree, permeating the entire forest. The response he got was a wave of confusion and grogginess that dwarfed his own but, also like him, felt healthy and intact. Jason detected no trace of the natural array, which had been pushed out of the soul realm entirely. The soul forge was elsewhere within Jason’s realm and he would go see it soon. For now, it was enough to know that the tree — or forest, as it now was — was free of the influences that had corrupted it.

Jason tried to dig out his memory of reshaping the transformation zone, but it was little more than a blur. He had entered a very different state to make that possible, and the memories of that time were incompatible with his mind as it was now. He managed to tease out enough to be confident that everything had gone well and get a basic sense of what had happened.

Despite his fears, extracting the soul forge and the natural array from the tree had proven quite straightforward. Once their states were in flux, it was easy to guide them each to their true natures, which included being separate from one another. This allowed him to put each in its proper place and integrate the soul of the tree into his own soul realm.

Incorporating another soul into his own was, unsurprisingly, the trickiest and most intricate part of the entire process. It involved tapping into his new soul forge, healing the tree after it was separated from the forge and the natural array. After finding a state where the tree could exist free of their influence, Jason had to connect it to himself in a way that left them linked but still autonomous.

How well Jason had done with this was still an open question. He imagined that time would reveal all, and there was nothing he could do in the meantime. As they were both rapidly recovering, things seemed to have gone well. There were already some interesting results that would have a major impact on his plans for the very near future.

With the tree successfully integrated, Jason had moved on to separating the rest of his soul from the transformation zone. There was no way to completely separate them and Jason would forever be connected, but he had successfully reforged the physical reality. His goal hadn't been to get everything perfectly right. The objective had been to avoid any critical mistakes in the details that truly mattered. Extracting the undeath energy, separating the soul forge and natural array from the tree. Building a viable home for the brighthearts. Those seemed to have gone well, so anything else he could live with.

The final touch was to repatriate the people in his soul realm and the transformation zone into normal reality. Some he retained in his soul realm while the rest were placed outside, into his new spirit domain. He hoped he had made a new home for the brighthearts that they would find acceptable. Jason's power infused throughout it was something they would have to live with unless they abandoned the area entirely.

Jason's friends and companions he retained in his soul realm and he could feel them scattered through the forest city. They were rousing just as he had, moments earlier. There were others in his soul realm as well; Sophie's mother and the growing collection of messengers.

The Builder cultists and remaining adventurers he placed in his spirit domain. This included not just the brightheart warriors who had fought alongside them but all the brightheart survivors. This area was outside of the transformation zone and outside of Jason's soul realm. It might have been infused with Jason's power, but they were back in their normal universe.

The bulk of the brightheart people had been carried inside Jason's soul throughout his time in the transformation zone. He hoped that the events his soul had gone through, including the battle with Undeath's avatar, hadn't traumatised them too much.

Jason finished casting his senses over his soul realm and pulled up the system window that had been blinking at the edge of his perception.

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- You have established a new spirit domain.
 - Exigent circumstances have allowed you to establish an additional domain despite existing domains exceeding the normal maximum territory.
 - Due to low rank, links between spirit domains separated by dimensional boundaries are impeded.

 - Your current spirit domain exceeds your maximum total domain size available by 1,743,621%. Increase your rank to increase available domain size.
 - You have integrated another soul into your soul realm. Some effects that impact your soul realm will not affect the territory of the second soul.
 - The avatar of this soul realm is now connected to you as a nascent Voice of the Will.
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Jason nodded to himself as he closed the window. Everything seemed to have gone as well as he could have hoped, although how the soul inside his own would go was an open question. His memory might have been patchy on the exact process of how it all took place, but he doubted he was forgetting anything important.

Yumi Asano snapped out orders, trying to stave off panic. The naked apparitions of her grandson wandering around like an oblivious tourist were gone, but now the central administrative buildings of the two domains had turned into trees. That had not been great for maintaining public order, especially after things had finally calmed down after the undead incident.

She resolved that Jason, once he finally made his way back, he was getting a very stern talking to.

The brightheart leader, Lorenn, wasn't sure when she lost consciousness. She'd been waiting in the cloud palace, attached to the abominable tree, for the transformation zone to be changed. She'd been dwelling on the hope of a new future for her people, and the dread of that hope being snatched away. Even now, with the danger ostensibly over, she didn't trust good fortune. It had been too long, and her people had lost too much.

She came to on a bed of moss. Pushing through a sopor that threatened to drag her back into slumber, she got to her feet and took in her surroundings. She was in what looked like a growth chamber from the old brightheart city. Only one had survived to be consumed by the transformation zone and this wasn't it.

It seemed like she was in a jungle of lush growth crowding in on her. The plants were a vibrant green, heavy with bright flowers and colourful fruit. Light filtered through from above, illuminating the space more than it should have, given the dense canopy. The air was thick, humid and heavy, with just enough breeze to brush against her skin and softly rustle the leaves. She could hear insects, birds, and small animals scurrying through the underbrush.

Overhead, she realised the canopy was partly artificial, with vines and plants dangling from stone walkways. She shook off the fog still clouding her mind and extended her magical senses.

She was in an underground chamber, hundreds of metres across and something like a kilometre high. It superficially resembled the growth chambers of the old brightheart city, but with some obvious differences. It was as if someone had tried to recreate one without brightheart sensibilities to draw on, which is exactly what had happened. It worked, but there was an unfamiliarity to it; an uncanny alienness.

"Asano," she whispered to herself.

He'd done it. Maybe. At least in part, he'd recreated their home. He hadn't gotten it right, because how could he? It wasn't his home and he wasn't one of them. But he'd promised to try and an excited part of Lorenn was ready to find out to what degree he'd succeeded.

She extended her senses again, pushing them harder. The aura of the chamber was vibrant with life, and she could feel the natural array. It was tamped down at the floor level, where she was, but felt much stronger up above. She suspected it was the source of the light that allowed her to see.

Lorenn grinned as she explored the natural array with her senses. This was not the warped and twisted thing that it had become, leading to the downfall of her city and her people. This was the power she had grown up with, warm and comforting.

The only part she found discomforting was a hidden undercurrent in the aura. She had to push hard to sense it, but once she latched onto it, she realised it was everywhere. Everything else existed within it, like islands in the sea. It was the aura of Jason Asano.

She put that revelation aside for the moment, choosing to focus on the most important thing. In pushing her senses through the chamber she had sensed some of her

people scattered around it. There were perhaps a few hundred, their auras filled with tiredness and confusion. Looking around for a path through the thick foliage, Lorenn spotted some stone stairs hidden behind ferns and under moss. She set out to collect her people together.