

Chapter 838

The Price

Jason looked from Gary, across the table from him, to Farrah and Rufus on either side. He could feel the tremulation in their auras at being so close to the divine power coursing through Gary. The demigod couldn't contain the power as well as Jason could his own in his soul realm. The power didn't belong to him and his body was an imperfect vessel anyway. The power was slowly but surely eating him from the inside out.

Neither Rufus nor Farrah showed any discomfort on their faces. They would support their friend if it meant pretending they weren't on fire, let alone just being near a powerful aura. Given Jason and the company he kept, it was something they'd long gotten used to.

"Do you want them to stay?" Jason asked Gary.

"Yes," Gary said after only a short hesitation.

"We'll need to explain some things then," Jason said. "They'll have questions. We'll have to tell them why certain things won't work."

Gary nodded.

"Well," Jason said, "Let's get the big things out of the way first. Yes, there is a way to potentially keep Gary alive. And yes, there are problems with it. Hero gave me something."

"Like Healer gave you something?" Rufus asked. "The thing that allowed you to create a new intelligent species?"

"The same sort of item, yes," Jason said. "They're like skill books for gods. Or made by gods for people like me, really. The gods already know what they're doing. But soul engineering is what they teach. Soul engineering isn't exclusive to gods, but they have a natural aptitude for it. Unlike astral kings, which is why Vesta Carmis Zell keeps bugging things up."

"Focus, Jason," Farrah said. "You don't get to ramble off on tangents. Not today."

"Sorry," he said. "The point is, the divine gifts Healer and Hero gave me show me how to do things and make sure I get it right the first time I try. That's how I managed to create Nik without him going horribly wrong, and why trying again probably would. It's also how I know that, if I try to save Gary's life, that won't go wrong either."

"What do you mean 'if?'" Rufus asked, leaning forward in his chair. "There's no 'if' here, Jason. If you can—"

"Rufus," Gary said, cutting his friend off.

"I know you're sad and worried," Jason said. "I know that anger makes you feel like you can do something about that, but we both know it's lying to you. Stop for a moment."

Take a breath. Remember that every person in this room loves Gary. No one here wants him to die.”

Rufus picked up his drink and leaned back in his chair.

“You sound like my mother,” he grumbled.

“And you sound like Humphrey,” Farrah teased and they all laughed. For a moment they were just four friends sitting around a table, but the reason they were there settled over them again, dampening the mood.

“What Hero gave me isn’t for creating life,” Jason said. “It’s about taking one source of external power within a soul and replacing it with another. Right now, Hero’s power is inside of Gary. It can’t reach for its god but the moment we’re out of this transformation zone, it will. Gary can hold onto that power for maybe a few hours but then it will be gone. And it’s the thing keeping him alive.”

“What about your soul realm?” Rufus asked. “Hero can’t get in there, right?”

“No, he can’t,” Jason said. “And if Gary was willing to stay there for the next few months, maybe as much as a year, then he could keep the power.”

“A year?” Rufus asked.

“That’s how long the power would take to kill me,” Gary said. “My body was enhanced to endure the power, but not for a lifetime. The power keeping me alive right now will eventually and inevitably kill me.”

“That’s why Hero gave me the gift,” Jason said. “When the transformation zone is reintegrated into reality, I’ll be claiming it as a domain. Reshaping to my will. Not unconsciously, as when it first formed when my influence was scattered the dividing territories. This will be deliberate. Unified. I’ve done it twice before and I didn’t have anything like the tools I have now.”

“And you believe that you can reshape Gary as well?” Farrah asked.

“If he lets me. If he trusts me.”

“I do,” Gary said and Jason gave him a warm smile.

“I know. I’ll have the soul forge then, and Hero’s gift to guide me. If Gary wants me to, I can strip the divine power out of him and put something else in its place. Something with the power to keep him alive without being so powerful it also burns him out.”

“Are you talking about your power?” Farrah asked. “Making him a Voice of the Will?”

“No,” Jason said. “He’d need to mainline the power I draw straight from the astral. The infinite magic hose that allows me to control my soul realm like a god.”

“It’s god-level power?” Farrah asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “Transcendent power, like the divine power flowing through him right now.”

“Meaning it would still kill me,” Gary said.

“Yeah,” Jason said.

“Then what?” Rufus asked. “The authority you took from Undeath?”

“I’ve already used that,” Jason said. “I used it to reforge the ghost fire that Death showed me how to make.”

“And it was also from a god,” Farrah said. “I imagine the same problem about too much power applies.”

“Why does it apply?” Rufus asked, his voice rising again. “Jason, why can you seemingly suck up any cosmic power floating around while the first taste of it is killing Gary?”

Jason sighed.

“Because I’m on the cusp of half-transcendent,” he said. “I’ve been moving towards that, step by step, probably since my first soul scar. Some of it by happenstance and some through guidance and effort, but I’ve been moving towards a certain end. Even then, what was left of the avatar, which was less divine power than Gary has coursing through him, damn-near turned me inside out.”

“I didn’t take any of those steps,” Gary said. “I wasn’t prepared. I don’t have a hardened soul and experience wielding vast cosmic power. I was grabbed and stuffed full of divine power that did its best to change me in a way that wouldn’t make me explode on the spot. But I will explode, sooner or later, if the power stays inside me.”

“Then what is it?” Farrah asked. “What power do you want to put into Gary?”

“It’s not a matter of want,” Jason said. “It’s about having a chance, and an exceptionally rare one at that. Do you know how many people have survived drinking from Hero’s cup?”

“None,” Rufus said.

“No, there have been some,” Jason said. “Hero told me as much. I think he doesn’t tell people because he doesn’t want them to hope.”

“That’s bleak,” Farrah said.

“No,” Gary said. “It’s fair. If people drank from the cup thinking there was a way to survive, it’s a choice built on deception. Even if it’s self-deception.”

“But some have survived,” Jason said. “Very few, and only under extremely specific circumstances. And even then, I don’t think they come out the other side the same way they went in.”

"That's the price," Gary said. "That kind of power always comes with a price."

"Yeah," Jason said.

They sat in contemplative silence for a moment. Farrah was the first one to speak.

"Enough dodging the question, Jason. What's the power?"

"The natural array," Jason said.

"The natural array that corrupted everything and started all this mess?" Rufus asked.

"The natural array that is so unstable that we went to prevent it blowing up, wiping out Yaresh and casting the whole region into perpetual darkness as the sky fills with ash?"

"Yes," Jason said. "Once this is over, I'll be remaking everything. Using my ghost fire to purge the taint of undeath energy. Extracting and repairing the soul forge. Re-establishing the natural array in a stable state. Rebuilding a home for the surviving brighthearts. Some other things, including swapping out the power inside Gary, if that's what he chooses."

"And you think this will work?" Rufus asked.

"Yes," Jason said. "The gods knew what was coming better than any of us mortals, which is why they made the choices they did. Undeath tried to seize control of events directly. Destruction cajoled and manipulated those depraved enough to work with him. Healer, Hero and Death understood that if Undeath and Destruction didn't get their way, it would not be a god that decides the ultimate outcome of events."

"They knew it would be you," Farrah realised.

"Yes," Jason said. "Healer wanted the home of the brighthearts healed and his gift set me on the path to participate. Death wanted the power of Undeath purged and showed me how. Hero wants one of his champions to live, and knew that I could do that if he gave me the right tool."

"Then what's wrong with doing it that way?" Rufus asked. "Our options here are Gary lives and Gary dies. Why are you acting like that isn't the easiest choice in the world? Why is using the natural array to keep him alive bad?"

"It's a specific and limited power," Jason said. "That's partly why it works. Like all of us, Gary shaped his soul with essences. Iron and fire. These match this natural array very well, making him compatible with it. But the divine power inside him changed those powers and I don't know how compatible the natural array will be with what's been done. Maybe he'd be almost as strong as he is now. Maybe he'd lose all his essence abilities. Maybe his iron and fire powers would change, becoming something new."

"I thought you said you were sure you could do this right," Rufus said. "This sounds more like you're going to butcher his soul."

Farrah put her hands on the table and leaned forward, about to retort to Rufus' accusatory tone. Jason quietly gestured for her to back off. She gave him a querying look from under raised eyebrows and he nodded confirmation. Her expression was sceptical but she sat back in her, clearly unhappy.

"Rufus," Jason said. "You know the task ahead of us. We're talking about reshaping a section of reality that was ripped out of the universe, chopped into bits and now we're putting those bits back together. Once we've done that, I have to blend the whole thing into sludge, take that sludge and make something new out of it. Something I can fit back into the hole we tore in the universe when we took it out in the first place. And somewhere in there, I have to take Gary, who drank from the cup of 'you're definitely going to die because the gods say so' and make him not die."

Jason rubbed his hands over his tired face.

"There's a reason I'm not skipping down the street in delight that I can keep Gary alive," he continued. "You're correct in that what I'm talking about doesn't sound like things going right. If Gary wants this, what I do to his soul will be ugly. He won't come out of it the way he was, or even the way he is now. 'Going right' means that any of this is possible at all. We need more than a miracle, Rufus. A miracle is what's killing him. We have to undo a miracle."

Jason slumped in his chair as if his words had taken all his energy with them. Rufus looked at him, unsure of what to say, so Farrah filled the gap.

"Do you remember what Jason said at the start of this conversation?" She asked Rufus. "That he'd need to tell us why some things wouldn't work. He was blunt in answering you, but do you think Gary doesn't know this? You think he doesn't feel what's happening inside him?"

Rufus turned to look at Gary who continued to sit impassively in his throne-like chair.

"He might not have known exactly what Jason was going to say," Farrah continued, "but he knew enough. He understands what's happening to him. He knows better than any of us that he made a sacrifice and there's no getting around that. Even if he doesn't die, there's a price he paid for the power we did and still do need. He knows it. He's accepted it. He's just been sitting there, barely speaking, because he's waiting for us to accept it too."

"Well, I don't!" Rufus yelled.

"Too bad," Gary said. "Jason had you bring me here so he could give me a choice, not you. All three of you are right. Farrah's right that I understood what I was doing the moment I chose to put that cup to my lips. Jason is right that this is something I have to

face. And you, Rufus, are right that this is awful and unfair. But that doesn't make it go away."

Rufus chair fell over as he got up and threw his arms around the leonid. Gary was still taller, even sitting down. He put a big arm around a weeping Rufus.

"Your tears are making my fur wet," Gary teased.

"Shut up," Rufus said with a laughing sob.

The four friends sat around the table that had accumulated more empty bottles.

"Where did you get something that would make a demigod drunk?" Rufus asked.

"I am not drunk," Gary said. "Maybe a little tipsy."

"It's for diamond-rankers," Jason said. "There was some left after I made dinner for... it doesn't matter where it came from."

"I'm sorry, Jason," Rufus said as he absently rubbed his head with a cloth. "I never should have gone off on you like that."

No one at the table had managed to fully hold onto sobriety, but Rufus was more in his cups than the others and had a noticeable slur to his words.

"You don't have to be sorry to me," Jason said. "I know you don't expect me to do what I can't. The anger needs to go somewhere, and you should be angry. We all should. We just don't get to do anything about it."

"No," Rufus insisted. "It isn't fair."

"There is no fair here," Jason said. "I keep coming back, every time, but Gary gets caught up in one miracle and..."

He drew a ragged breath and let it out in sobs before draining his glass.

"Tell me what it'll be like," Gary said. "If I let you stick this natural array up my bum or whatever."

"It'll suck," Jason said. "I don't know what'll happen to your powers. Or your mind. I know you won't get any stronger. However strong you are is how strong you'll stay. You won't die, which is good. Like, ever. Not as long as the array is there. I can probably come back and move it when the planet dies. Shade, remind me to come back and move the natural array in five billion years or whatever."

"Of course, Mr Asano," Shade said from Jason's shadow. Jason failed to notice the headshake practically audible in his familiar's tone.

"The thing is," Jason continued, "you'll be completely reliant on the array. If anything happens to it, you die. And you can't leave it. You have to stay within its influence. You can live forever — terms and conditions apply — but you'll live your whole life in the

brightheart city. So we should try to make sure that cultists and messengers and undead don't invade it again."

"I can't go anywhere?" Gary asked.

"Nope," Jason said. "Sorry. It's a pretty bad deal."

"You can't die, Gary," Rufus said.

"You don't have to choose now," Jason said.

"He doesn't?" Rufus asked. "Then why did you have us bring him here."

"So he gets time to choose," Farrah said. "That's super obvious. I think your head wax is making your brain go runny."

"I don't wax my head," Rufus insisted.

"You're waxing your head right now," she told him.

Rufus looked confused and brought the hand holding the cloth he was rubbing his head with down in front of his face. He looked at it as if he'd never seen it before, despite it being monogrammed with his initials.

"How did that get there?"

Chapter 839

Guaranteed to Become Enemies

Jason had a measure of connection to his claimed territory, although it was not as strong as that to his spirit domains. As the territory expanded to continental size, it took increasing amounts of concentration and effort to get a sense of what was happening in distant reaches. Standing in the control room of the lightning mesa, his eyes were closed as he extended his senses to a distant location. Neil, Nik and Belinda were observing and waiting.

“When we were being sold on the adventuring life,” Belinda said, “no one mentioned the parts about standing around watching some guy concentrate quietly.”

“I’d usually agree,” Neil said, “but I think I’ve had quite enough living on the edge of life and death for a while. I’d be quite happy giving up excitement for a real sky, a reclining chair and a fruit platter.”

“It doesn’t have to be life and death,” Belinda said. “Maybe just a nice heist where the worst case is having to beat up some rich prick’s private guards as we make a break for it.”

“You realise that we’re all extremely rich ourselves, right?”

“We are?” Nik asked. Neil looked at him, then back at Belinda.

“You realise that you and I are both extremely rich, right? Neil amended.

“Oh,” Nik said, hanging his head.

Jason opened his eyes.

“It should be any moment now,” he said. “They’re just about to complete the ritual linking the other node to this one.”

They all looked at Nik expectantly.

“Okay,” the rabbit man said. “Now I’m getting performance anxiety.”

“Don’t worry,” Jason assured him. “You shouldn’t need to do anything; it’ll just happen. It’s like healing magic: it doesn’t take any skill.”

Neil turned his head to give Jason a look that was almost a special attack. Jason failed to keep a straight face, smothering a laugh.

“Nik,” Neil said sweetly. “Do remind me to tell Rufus’ mum what Jason just—”

“Hey hey hey!” Jason said urgently. “What happens in the lightning mesa stays in the lightning mesa.”

“Yeah, sorry, Jason,” Belinda said, “but that’s not how blackmail works.”

“I think it’s happening,” Nik said and all eyes turned to him. “Yeah, I can feel it. I can feel it. I feel... is that it? Wow, that’s anticlimactic.”

“But you’re connected?” Jason asked.

“Yeah,” Nik confirmed, “but it’s like expecting a biscuit and only getting a crumb. We need to connect a lot more if you want this to be anything.”

“I suspect,” Belinda said, “that Clive won’t be disappointed to hear that.”

“How is it going?” Miriam asked Jason. They were catching up in his office in the mountain fortress. Jason was in his throne-like chair, the lava waterfall spilling down behind him.

“Over the last month, we’ve linked almost all the nodes we have access to. It’s looking like we’ll need to connect most, if not all before Nik can do anything effective with them. He can control the others remotely, but can’t get the nodes to work together or function beyond their localised areas.”

“But he will when the node network is complete?”

“He says yes. He compared it to trying to run a half-built machine. We need access to the rest of the nodes.”

“Clearing the remaining territories is getting slower,” Miriam said. “I’ve started restricting even most of the gold-rankers. At this stage, Lord Pensinata, Mrs Remore and Boris Ket Lundi are the only ones I’m confident will return safely. If we didn’t have Gareth, we’d have to take larger risks. But since we’ve got the power of a demigod on side, we may as well play it safe. He works slower when almost alone, but he remains unstoppable.”

“So long as we don’t go so slow that the zone starts breaking down, I agree with your approach, Tactical Commander.”

“Do you have any idea how long it will be until the zone destabilises?”

“No. I’m not seeing signs of it, so I think we still have a goodly amount of time. Even so, we shouldn’t waste it on anything not worthwhile.”

“I was hoping that we could try something that might accelerate the process,” Miriam said. “Something that would require you to do more than just show up at the end to claim the cleared territory.”

“Please,” Jason said. “I’ve been feeling useless watching everyone else work. My magical knowledge is too specialised in astral magic to help set up the nodes and I’m too weak to clear territories. All I can do is swan in to claim them after everyone else does the work.”

“I think you’ve made contributions enough, Operations Commander. You were the one to finally eliminate the avatar.”

“Yeah, but that’s weird cosmic power stuff. I haven’t done much as an adventurer, or even as a commander. We both know that you’re the one doing most of the work on that front. Which is not me trying to horn in, by the way. You’re doing a great job.”

“As an adventurer, Operations Commander, you’re a silver-ranker. Do you think all the others without the expertise to help link the nodes feel any different?”

“I suppose not.”

“Then, might I make a suggestion?”

“Please.”

“Perhaps you should show some solidarity with those idle silver-rankers, and perhaps our brightheart allies. Build morale.”

Jason slapped himself on the head.

“Of course,” he said. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of that. What is wrong with me? I need to throw a barbecue.”

“That’s not exactly what I—”

“I have to go,” Jason said, standing up.

“Operations Commander.”

“There’s a barbecue and outdoor supply shop in town I can raid for supplies.”

“Operations Commander.”

“I don’t think the butcher will have anything edible left. I’ll have to check the supplies we brought from the surface. No, that was all spirit coins and ritual materials. Maybe I can—”

“OPERATIONS COMMANDER!”

Jason was pulled out of his thoughts, looking at her distractedly.

“Hmm, what?”

“You may recall, Operations Commander, that this tangent began when I said there was something else I was hoping you could do.”

“You didn’t just mean the barbecue?”

“No.”

“Because I have this whole barbecue to organise now.”

“Mr Asano...”

“The barbecue was your idea in the first place, is what I’m saying. It seems odd that you’d be the one to—”

Miriam’s aura rose angrily and Jason chuckled.

“You seem tense, Tactical Commander. We all are. We’ve all been in here for months. Breaking bread with our worst enemies. Facing power we can’t match and fighting

battles we don't understand. We need a tension breaker. A little bit of normalcy, as much as we can manage here."

"That... is not an invalid point. But there is something else I'd like you to do."

"You want me to see if the ghost fire I enhanced by eating the avatar can help clear undead territories."

It was a statement, not a question, but Miriam wasn't surprised. She knew that while Jason might seem hands-off, leaving everything to her, he was always watching. Often by means she didn't understand.

"None of this is easy," Jason said. "You and I have the greatest responsibility here and I'm the one with all the answers. All the secrets. The power to interact with the strange forces that govern this place. You're doing amazingly Miriam, under extreme circumstances. When you want me to try with the undead, let me know. In the meantime, I have to try and find some viable meat."

Gary, Arabelle and Amos protected Jason as he delivered his afflictions. The ghost fire was applied alongside each other affliction in Jason's repertoire, although it did take time to be effective. The quality of the flames had massively improved since fuelling them with refined divine authority, but the source was still Jason and Jason was still silver-rank.

As was the nature of afflictions, application plus time would inevitably reap results. While Gary disassembled individual undead at a pace that made Jason seem harmless, the territories poisoned by undeath energy teemed with unliving anomalies. The escalating power of Gordon's butterflies spreading Jason's afflictions could clear an undead territory faster than the demigod.

Many of the unclaimed territories were marked by undeath. It was a reflection of the zone being made from the subterranean realm of the brighthearts that was deeply tainted by undeath energy. One territory was like an Earth city that felt like a zombie movie. Another was a forest the size of a large nation, the trees leafless and dead as snow covered the ground. Ghoulish unliving elves stalked through the trees attacking in bursts of savage speed.

Territory after territory was claimed. They reached the boundary of the territory containing the massive tree, but it was impenetrable. Unlike the shadowy veils bordering normal territories, it was surrounded by impermeable darkness. They continued unifying the territories around it, adding any environmental nodes they uncovered to the growing network.

While territories were being claimed, the uneasy group of allies was increasingly idle. Some of the adventurers participated in linking the nodes, surrounding the control centres in massive ritual circles of carved stone or other resilient materials. But with the claiming of new territories slowing down, they soon caught up to all available nodes. After that, linking each new one as it was found became a leisurely affair.

Miriam and Jason's main task became preventing cabin fever. Their large and disparate alliance included former and potentially future foes, along with outright enemies. Even members of the same group could end up clashing if left with nothing to do. Adventurers, especially elite ones, were not known for their accommodating humility.

One of the ways they sought to keep the peace was by separating the groups. The largest group by far were the three factions of messengers. The smallest faction were Jason's prisoners, led by Marek Nior Vargas. They had quickly subordinated themselves to Boris, however, treating him like the Unorthodoxy messiah. They proved more enthusiastic than the people Boris had Shanghaied into obedience.

Most of the messengers were those liberated from stasis as their territories were claimed. All were free now, courtesy of Jason, but discontent still simmered within many of them. No small number had been used as cannon fodder slaves, including by members of the alliance.

Given their numbers, the messenger groups were given the residential sections of Jason's town. The Builder cultists took over the nicer motels, of which there were many in the tourist town. The adventurers occupied the pleasure yachts at the marina or the mountain lair, whichever was their preference. The brighthearts all stayed in the mountain. The enclosed stone construction and lava waterfall were comforts to the subterranean people, as close as they could find to the home the transformation zone had annihilated.

The final group were the young messengers, released from stasis and with little idea of who or even what they were. Jali Corrik Fen took it upon herself to shield them from any influence or manipulation by the other groups. She was aided by Tera Jun Casta, the messenger Jason had forcibly freed. As well as Jali being her only friend, she was antagonistic to Marek and Boris both, loudly and repeatedly calling them traitors.

More than hatred, however, Tera felt a kinship with the young and unindoctrinated messengers. She shared their lack of purpose, not knowing what to do or even who they were. Some of these messengers grew experimental, exploring the town and trying to decipher the artefacts of Earth.

Jali had been unsure how to handle this but Jason told her to leave them to their curiosity. More than once she found Jason amongst them showing off different bouncing

devices. One was a springy pole that appeared to be a wildly inefficient vehicle. Another was an inflatable room that held no discernible purpose at all.

Jason held his barbecue. While the messengers were allowed to attend, few did. Boris and one of his gold-rankers showed up, the offsider getting along well with Jali Corrik Fen who attended with some of the more curious young messengers. Marek Nior Vargas and his people didn't join in other than an adventurous woman named Mari Go Rand. Boris found her name hilarious and she challenged him to a fight, despite his higher rank. She didn't seem to take the subsequent beating to heart.

Only the Builder cult was excluded, being the only ones guaranteed to become enemies again once the transformation zone had been escaped. They also didn't eat regular food, all being bizarre magical cyborgs.

The social gathering did help alleviate some of the tensions in the groups, but Jason and Miriam had no illusions of it being anything but a band-aid solution. They had been trapped for months in this strange place, facing lethal danger that claimed friends and allies. Now they were left idle, with little to do beyond think about what they had been through and what they had lost.

This was especially true of the brighthearts. They had been fighting longer and lost more than anyone else. Now they found themselves the safest they had been in a long time, which did not speak well of the previous circumstances. Most of their populace was dead and their home had been destroyed, yanked into a pocket dimension they didn't understand.

Jason found the brightheart resiliency to be inspiring. All they had lost yet they were probably the most stable of the groups in the alliance. He had discussed this with Lorenn, their leader, hoping to find something that would help the others. She told him that before the arrival of the expedition from the surface they'd been hiding with nowhere left to run. Waiting for the last of their people to die. They had lost almost everything, but now they had hope. Although it was hard and strange, there was a path forward.

Jason wasn't sure if that was something he could use to keep the rest of the alliance from going full *Lord of the Flies* but it certainly made him feel better.

Gary eventually became the only one clearing territories. Partly this was because of the danger, and partly because the last gold-rankers he had been working with were occupied. Jason also stopped as Gary was uncertain of being able to protect him alone.

Boris became increasingly involved in managing the other messengers. Left alone, Marek Nior Vargas kept trying to recruit the new messengers. Boris knew that if that behaviour kept up, Jason would hold Boris responsible and it would hurt the burgeoning trust between the two men.

Arabelle had turned to her primary profession, tending to the mental health of the group as a whole. Miriam and Jason were grateful as their expertise stopped at discipline and barbecues respectively.

Amos Pensinata had become distracted, the famously stoic man uncharacteristically troubled. Jason one day noticed him in a metal dinghy, far out into the water. He flew out and joined him, sitting down but saying nothing. They sat there for hours before Amos started talking.

"I failed my nephew," he said finally. "I pushed him and his team into this. Now his friends are dead or broken. I don't know if any of them will be adventurers ever again."

Jason was unsure what to say. From his arrival on Pallimustus, he'd been startled about the cultural acceptance of throwing children into violence. It was a violent world and they had to learn to survive but it still seemed brutal and savage.

The consequences had seemed obvious to Jason but Amos seemed surprised. Jason wasn't sure how to respond, as Amos wasn't factually wrong. The now fallen team Storm Shredder had chosen their path, but it was Amos who had laid it out for them. Who wouldn't trust such a well-known hero's intentions for his own nephew? Jason himself had trusted the man as well.

Even if he'd been inclined to moralise, Jason knew he had no high ground to stand on. He'd thrown himself and his friends into everything team Storm Shredder had faced and worse. He wasn't Arabelle and didn't know the right thing to say without making things worse, so he didn't say anything. Instead, he took out a six-pack of beer stubbies and handed one to Amos.

"I didn't think you liked beer," Amos said.

"I don't, much," Jason said. "But I'm Australian, and one thing Australians know is that, for some things, only beer will do."

"That seems like an unhealthy attitude," Amos said.

"Oh, definitely," Jason said. "Our culture massively overlooks alcohol abuse."

Chapter 840

Assuming We Win

Jason couldn't hear Rufus, but the anger in his body language was easy to read. Jason watched Rufus and Gary from the observation room in his mountain fortress, set behind one of the eyes in the head-shaped edifice. His friends were in the town, standing in front of the ice cream store. If not for his silver-rank perception, he wouldn't be able to see them clearly at this distance.

Although he couldn't hear them, there was no doubt in Jason's mind about what Rufus was yelling. It was the same thing he had been for weeks. Gary refused to make a definitive decision while Rufus insisted there was no decision to be made. Farrah emerged from the ice cream shop looking disgruntled and once again went to work playing peacemaker.

Jason sighed. He understood Rufus who had already lost Farrah and himself. By miracles of circumstance he'd gotten them back, but he'd mourned them both. And they all knew that if Gary died, there would be no coming back. Jason feared that Rufus would end up regretting how he spent the last days with his best friend in the world, should Gary decide to let go.

Jason had spoken to both Farrah and Arabelle on what to do. Did he step up as a friend? Try to help Rufus see the precious time he was squandering? Or would that backfire and only fuel his anger? Arabelle had suggested giving her son space, so Jason had.

Arabelle had pointed out that Rufus might suggest Jason keep Gary alive, regardless of what the man chose. That wasn't how it worked, and even Rufus understood that, but he was far from thinking clearly. The danger wasn't that he would blame Jason for not doing it. The danger would come after, whatever Gary chose. Rufus and his inflated sense of responsibility would eat himself alive over having asked that of Jason. Of trying to take away his friend's choice.

Accordingly, Jason had been avoiding Rufus, not that the man was seeking him out. His anger extended to Jason, despite knowing that neither Jason nor Gary deserved that anger. Rage cared little for logic.

Jason sighed, unhappy that the best he could offer his friend was his absence. There was no shortage of things to distract him, though, so he opened a shadow portal and stepped through. He arrived inside the control room of the lightning mesa.

Nik was standing on a floating platform, moving between control panels. Neil and Dustin Kettering were on the same side of a metal table fixed to the floor. They were playing a game that involved stacking colourful wooden poles and cardboard platforms to make a tower. None of them noticed Jason appearing.

“...because it’s a weather machine, not a bloody satellite weapon,” Nik said angrily.

“What’s a satellite weapon?” Dustin asked.

“I don’t know!”

“How do you not know?” Neil asked.

“Because I’m six months old. Most of what I know is random nonsense put in my head by a man *far* too invested in TV theme songs.”

“What’s a TV theme song?” Dustin asked.

“Yeah, that must be awful,” Neil said. “Want a sandwich?”

“Yes please,” Nik said. “And some carrot juice — not because I’m a rabbit!”

“You’re allowed to like what you like,” Neil said with a chuckle. He got up and turned around which was when he saw Jason, his body jerking in startlement.

“Why are you creeping around?” Neil asked, prompting the others to turn as well.

“How long have you been there?”

“Long enough to realise that Nik doesn’t properly appreciate a shadowy flight into the world of a man who does not exist.”

“What does that mea—” Dustin started to ask before Neil cut him off with a hand gesture.

“No,” Neil said in the firm tone of a dog trainer. “Do not ask.”

“You’re no fun,” Jason said with a chuckle. “How goes the testing?”

“It’s easy enough to control,” Nik said. “I’m getting coverage across the entire unified territory, so that’s all good. The issues are lead-in time before anything happens and imprecision when it does, because—”

“...it’s a weather machine, not a satellite weapon,” Jason finished. “That’s where I came in.”

“We’ve got the Magic Society guys doing direct observation in the areas we’re testing it,” Neil said. “Clive, Lindy and Ramona are running herd on them.”

“Sounds like it’s well in hand,” Jason said. “When will you be ready to give Miriam a tactical feasibility report?”

“That’s on Clive,” Neil said. “You know what he’s like, chasing down every little variable. With how rushed this whole thing has been, he’s getting real fastidious now we’ve got it working.”

“That will have to change,” Jason said. “We’ve united all the territories but the tree, but we’re running out of time.”

“You’re seeing signs of zone collapse?” Neil asked. “How long?”

“Not sure,” Jason said. “That’s my next stop. Tell Clive to finish up.”

“Okay, but I don’t know how quick he’ll be about it.”

“Tell him to come see me when he has a chance. Actually, leave out the bit about when he has a chance. In fact, don’t tell him to come see me; tell him to report to the Operations Commander. No, forget all that. Where’s Clive now?”

“You don’t know?” Dustin asked. “I thought you could see everything going on in the territory.”

“I can,” Jason said. “If I look. This isn’t my soul realm, so it takes a little more active attention to do things. It’s possible I’ve been exaggerating my capabilities to keep a lid on internal discord.”

Clive and Jason stepped out of a portal in one of the outlying areas of the territories. Clive was immediately taken aback by the border of the transformation zone; a hazy wall spanning up into the sky. It resembled the blurry image of a distant landscape viewed through a malfunctioning recording crystal. It was also throwing off a cloud of ultrafine dust.

“What is this?” he asked, moving forward.

“Don’t get too close,” Sophie warned him.

Clive dragged his attention from the wall to look around. They were atop a rise in a temperate climate; late spring or early autumn from the pleasant weather. he could see the land around them, including a river spilling out to sea. The wall crossed the land and over the body of water, extending to the horizon. Sophie and Miriam Vance had been waiting for their arrival.

“Come on,” Sophie said and led them downslope, moving parallel to the wall. Reaching flat ground, a series of thin wooden poles had been laid out on the ground, end-to-end. They started at the wall and extended directly away from it. Clive noticed markings on the pole and saw they were units of measure.

“A measuring device,” Clive said.

He examined the pole closest to the wall without getting too close. The pole was half-length, the ragged end looking like the wall had eaten the rest. Looking at the numbers, it looked like the measurements had started past the wall, but it had cut off around a pole and a half.

"You're measuring distance," he said. "The wall is moving in?"

"Welcome to the end of the universe," Jason said. "Unfortunately, the universe is getting smaller."

"I was assigned to watch the boundaries," Sophie told Clive. "Around the time you started working on the magic linky thing."

"The environmental control node network?"

"Sure," she said.

"Almost no one was informed of Miss Wexler's assignment," Miriam said. "Myself, the Operations Commander, Miss Wexler, Lord Geller and now you."

"Humphrey would have wondered why she kept running off instead of sticking around for sexy time," Jason said.

"*Commander*," Miriam scolded.

"No, he's right," Sophie said. "Have you not seen Humphrey? The man's a caramel biscuit."

"Biscuit?" asked a moustachioed mouse after poking its head out from a pouch at Sophie's waist.

"Not that kind of biscuit," she said with an amused smile. The disgruntled mouse ducked back into his pouch.

"I found the zone breaking down at the edges," Sophie continued. "Didn't realise it was moving inward at first, but Jason told me to check, so I marked up these sticks as big rulers. And, sure enough, it was moving. Slow at first; just a centimetre the day I first measured. It's moving faster every day, though."

"We're standing in what was, pre-unification, a territory at the outer limit of the transformation zone," Miriam said. "What you're seeing here is happening in every outer territory. The zone is breaking down."

"How fast?" Clive asked.

"At the current rate of acceleration," Miriam said, "the outer territories will be gone in a week."

"The territorial consumption will only get faster," Jason said. "And the more of the zone that gets consumed, the worse things will go for us. The zone will destabilise and eventually collapse. Even if we finish before then, the worse things have gotten, the harder it will be to reintegrate the zone back into normal reality. Back on Earth, these zones left patches of janky reality sitting around in places they just don't fit. This, I have to imagine, will have more drastic results."

"You're saying that we have to move fast," Clive said.

“Yeah,” Jason told him. “No more painstaking tests of the weather machine.”

“The plan is to brief everyone this afternoon,” Miriam said. “Tomorrow we make final preparations and the day after, we go. The Operations Commander will expand his territorial influence over the last territory and we shall see what manner of fight awaits us.”

Not knowing what form the final conflict would take, a simple and adaptable plan was put in place. What little information they had was built around guesswork, assumptions and Jason ‘just having a feeling’ — a standard of evidence that made Clive twitch every time Jason said it.

They were guessing that they would face elemental messengers. That was what the tree had produced in the brightheart realm and it was the closest to actual information they had to go on. The elemental messengers could be like the ones held in stasis in the other territories, living anomaly replicas or a mix of both. Or it could be something else entirely that they had no way to plan for at all. Every time that came up, Tactical Commander Miriam started twitching like Clive.

Beyond that limited information, they were largely relying on Jason’s gut feelings. Being in control of everything but the final territory, Jason claimed a sense of what they would be dealing with. He openly admitted those feelings were vague and a rather sketchy basis for a battle plan.

Jason’s feelings suggested that, at least initially, they would not be faced with the same level of power Gary had been while claiming the final territories. Jason believed that the battle would start at the same level as the transformation zone had before escalating over the fight. He had no clear sense of how or why, which Miriam did not care for.

As they had very little idea of what they would face, the plan was kept simple and mostly came down to facing whatever came out and hoping they could win. The nuance came down to whether or not Jason was right about power escalation and they planned for both outcomes. The gold-rank forces would be the frontline, with the silver-rankers well back. If Jason was right, the silver-rankers could move in and join the battle. If not, they would evacuate.

Evacuation plans were put in place, with various transport powers and vehicles ready to go. Even if Jason was right and the silver-rankers joined the fight, the preparations were necessary. Once the power level of the enemy escalated, the silvers would need to make a swift withdrawal. Whatever the outcome, Jason was the only silver-ranker who would stay for the entire battle.

Along with final plans for the battle, individual plans were set in place. Death letters were written to next of kin, amongst other war movie death flags. Jason resisted the urge to institute an alliance-wide ban against showing people images of loved ones from home.

Allowing Marek Nior Vargas to mingle with Boris' messengers had brought an unexpected result. Boris' messengers were still under the mark of Vesta Carmis Zell, while Marek and the others had been freed. After weeks of interaction, Boris' people were ready to let Jason free them as well. As a result, Jason spent much of the final preparation day helping messengers form an inner realm and forge their own mark, purging that of their astral king.

In the free time he did have, Jason managed to catch Gary in a brief moment of solitude. It was in an open plain that had been a territory two over from the mountain fortress. Tall yellow grass spanned across the flatlands, occasionally interrupted by patches of woodland.

"It reminds me of home," Gary said from the shade of a tree as Jason stepped out of a shadow behind him. "I'm never going to see it again."

Jason could hide his presence even from the gold-rankers now, but not from Gary's divine senses. He stepped up beside his friend, Jason's head not clearing the leonid's shoulder. He bumped his head against Gary's arm but didn't say anything.

"I haven't—"

"You don't have to," Jason said. "Not yet. Assuming we win, I still have to initiate the process. I won't stall it for long because the place is falling apart, but there'll be time to make a final choice."

"Then what are you doing all the way out here?"

"Same as you, I imagine; taking the chance while Rufus is bailed up by his mum. Has he gotten any better?"

"He's still telling me there's only one choice. But he's starting to accept that things will change, whichever way I go. That the time we have now is important."

"I'm sorry I haven't had more time to give you these last few days. Bloody messengers. Should have left them to their fate."

"No, you shouldn't. But you already know that."

"I thought you hated all the messengers."

"In my situation, I don't see much point to hatred anymore."

Jason bumped his head against Gary's arm again.

"You really are the best of us. I'm sorry I couldn't wrangle better circumstances for you. You deserve better."

“Since when did deserve ever matter? I don’t want to hear any self-recrimination, Jason. You don’t get to take my sacrifice and turn it into your failure. If it weren’t for you, I’d have died in a hole years ago and no one would have known. You gave me these years and they’ve been pretty damn good ones. However this ends up going, always remember that.”

Jason wiped the moisture gathering in his eyes.

“I love you, you big hairy sod.”

“Of course you do. I’m amazing.”

Jason burst out laughing.

Chapter 841

Don't Throw Our Dead Friend's Stuff Out of a Tortoise

The final unclaimed territory of the transformation zone was the smallest of them all at roughly eight kilometres across. It was situated in the middle of the zone and was close to perfectly round. Unlike the permeable shadow boundaries of the other territories, the one containing the tree was pitch black and impenetrable, at least at ground level. At higher altitudes it became opaque and eventually entirely transparent, allowing the tree inside to be visible from across the zone.

The permeability of the barrier had been tested before. It remained impenetrable at all levels, even when completely invisible, with certain environmental exceptions. Clouds and wind could pass through normally, yet not when produced by magic or even the weather machine.

As the alliance prepared to make the final push and completely unify the transformation zone, it was tested again. The tests were carried out from within Onslow's ever-useful flying shell. Jason, Taika, Belinda and Clive were there, along with Emir and Gabriel to see if any gold-rank powers could make a dent.

They had conducted a variety of tests, ranging from Belinda and Clive casting complex ritual magic to Belinda and Taika throwing random stuff at it. The invisible barrier was less invisible when coated in scorched ritual markings and smashed pumpkin oozing down the dome with fake paper money stuck to it.

"I can't believe you threw a board game at it," Jason said.

"Bro, Monopoly sucks," Taika said. "You know Monopoly sucks and you still have like five more versions of it. Are you really going to miss the Bass Fishing Edition?"

"No, Monopoly's terrible, but I inherited those from Greg."

"Why? He hated Monopoly more than any of us. He had what? Eight different t-shirts ragging on it?"

"You know what he was like with games. He just kept getting more and never got rid of the old ones, even if he didn't like them. I have about a thousand games of his and he died without playing at least a hundred of them."

"We can afford to lose a few then."

"I'm just saying that maybe we don't throw our dead friend's stuff out of a tortoise."

"Bro, I didn't know Greg as long as you, but I know one thing for certain: he would absolutely love to throw copies of Monopoly out of a magic flying tortoise."

"He would love that, wouldn't he?" Jason said with a laugh before his expression grew sad. "He'd love all of this."

Taika rested a hand on Jason's shoulder and changed the subject.

"This is a huge tree, bro. That trunk has to be a mile across."

"A mile?" Emir asked.

"Sorry," Taika said. "A bit over a kilometre and a half. It's weird that an alternate reality has the metric system and the Americans still can't figure it out."

"It's the link between worlds," Jason said. "It creates echoes. That's why even though Earth doesn't have elves, our folklore is full of them."

"We probably shouldn't tell the real elves about rule thirty-four," Taika said. "I'm pretty sure they feature heavily."

"You're pretty sure, are you?" Jason teased.

"I'm not ashamed," Taika said. "I'd say I like sexy elf cosplay as much as the next bloke, but the next bloke is Travis and that guy is anime-body-pillow lonely. Good thing he's still in Rimaros because he's bad enough around celestines. If he went to an elf city like Yaresh I think he'd stroke out."

Jason looked at Taika from under raised eyebrows.

"Not like that," Taika said. "Okay, probably like that, but it's not what I meant."

They looked out at the tree which towered over them even a half-dozen kilometres in the air. The trunk was around a kilometre and a half thick, as Taika said, and thinned little as it rose into the air. The tree topped out at roughly twelve kilometres high.

"Bro, this tree is a mountain. It's way bigger than the one in the shape of your head."

"Forget mine," Jason said. "This thing is taller than Everest."

"Probably a lot less poo, though. Not much of a tourist attraction when there's an impenetrable force field over it."

"Okay, I'm going to stop that conversation there," Belinda said. "I think we can safely say that no one is getting in until you make the attempt to claim it, Jason."

"How are the preparations going?" Gabriel asked.

"We've collected a lot of things from the zones that might help," Jason said.

"Weapons like those you'd see in my world, but gold-rank. Various magical tools. Some we know how to use, others we're figuring out."

"I saw the hover-tank, bro. It looked a bit rusty, though."

"Yeah, it was some post-apocalyptic sci-fi territory," Jason said.

"Too bad there wasn't a mech," Taika lamented.

“There was,” Jason said sadly. “Unfortunately, Farrah hit it with her lava cannon when we were clearing that zone.”

“That’s a shame,” Taika said. “Does anyone know how to drive the tank?”

“I do,” Belinda said.

“She’s the one we’ve got figuring all this stuff out,” Jason said.

The adventurers and their allies massed on one side of the tree's territory rather than trying to surround it. They were spread out enough to avoid all but the largest of area attacks, but sufficiently close that they could focus their efforts and support one another as necessary. The front line consisted of gold-rankers with the adventurers, brighthearts, Builder cultists and messengers all represented. After them were the array of weapon emplacements and armed vehicles scavenged from the various territories.

Only a few of the scavenged assets were what Jason would categorise as ‘sci-fi guns’, although many didn’t fit the Pallimustus magical paradigm. There were steampunk belt-fed Gatling guns akin to weapons Jason had used in other transformation zones. There was what looked like a giant school-fair volcano project on the back of a wagon. It was able to conjure objects of sculpted light that looked and acted like gun drones armed with lasers. They contrasted starkly with the wooden wagon the device was mounted on.

Belinda was managing this section of the allied forces but was unable to operate the devices herself. The gold-rank requirements forced her to use proxies for each, taken from the brighthearts. The brightheart gold-rankers were mostly conscripted civilians, not trained warriors. The near-genocide of their people had been a harsh teacher, but they were still not the match of trained adventurers, brutal cultists and messengers born with the knowledge of war. This made them good candidates to operate the relatively simple weapons, even if it meant leaving a vehicle stationary and just using its guns.

Behind all of that were the silver rankers, ready to charge or flee as circumstances dictated. They had resources for their evacuation ready to go, including some scavenged vehicles not built for war.

The sole exception to that ordering was Jason, stationed with the gold-rankers. This was not another territory where he could saunter up at the end and use a magic orb to claim it. He instinctively understood that this fight required him to participate. Miriam had assigned him a protection detail comprised of Rufus’ parents, Emir and his wife, Constance.

Jason stood with Miriam at the rear of the gold-rankers. With them were the other factional leaders, Lorenn of the brighthearts, Beaufort of the cultists and Boris of the

messengers. They stood behind Jason and Miriam, ready to issue orders to their people once the battle began.

Jason and Miriam shared a look before casting their gazes to the sky. The tree was tall enough that it poked through dark cloud cover thick enough to turn day into twilight. Silver-rankers had a good sense of time but Jason took out a watch, wanting to be precise.

"We're on schedule," he said. "Is there anything else, Tactical Commander? Do I need to send a delay code to the network hub?"

"No, Operations Commander. There's nothing else."

"Then we go as scheduled. Four minutes."

The impenetrable barrier was not hard to remove. All it took was Jason wanting it gone. It vanished like it had never been and the transformation zone was unified. Jason felt it become one and immediately understood that the battle was for who would control it; him or an unstable, corrupted giant tree. He was confident it would be bad if it was the tree.

There were three or four kilometres of open ground between the trunk and where the barrier had been. The land was nothing but rocky dirt and protruding roots. Floating in the air just off the ground, packed wing to wing, were elemental messengers. They immediately flooded out to attack.

There was a skyquake as twilight turned into blinding brightness as thousands of bolts of lightning struck down at once. With the barrier gone, the weather machine could do its work, turning the space around the tree into a realm of electricity. Lightning poured down in a constant onslaught, too imprecise to be used once the forces clashed, but devastating when striking the elemental messengers alone. The sound of it was like nothing Jason had ever heard; a cacophony of thunder that rattled the air.

The allies were untouched but the elemental messengers were all but annihilated. The lightning finally stopped, the brightness fading and the clouds breaking up as if they had no more to give. Everything had been poured out on the messengers. Daylight broke through the thinning coverage, illuminating what had been, moments ago, a massive army. Now, all but a scattered few lay dead on the ground. The earth was scorched but the roots of the great tree were untouched, despite the cataclysm of gold-rank lightning that had rained down upon them.

"You were right," Miriam said. "Those were gold-rank auras but weak, like the anomalies when we first arrived."

"And I think I know how we escalate things," Jason said. "Boris, what do you make of that tree trunk now we can see it clearly?"

The leaders all cast their eyes at the tree, no longer obscured by the barrier. Set into the bark were hundreds, if not thousands, of crystals. Some were round like awakening stones, others square like essences. Most were rough and unshaped, like quintessence. Whatever form they took, however, they were all far too large to be the genuine version of what they appeared to be. All were in fiery or earthy colours.

"The lightning did nothing to those roots," Boris said. "I suspect the wood of the tree is extremely resistant, if not outright immune to attack. But those things set into it look as much like target points in a boss fight as you could ask for. The question is whether the raid has phases as we take them out."

"What does that mean?" Miriam asked sharply. "We don't have time to waste on explaining references to your world, Operations Commander."

"What he's saying," Jason said, "is that we need to destroy the crystals set into the tree. But the more we break, the more powerful the elemental messengers will become. He's also worried about thresholds at which the tree might display new abilities."

"The enemy are destroyed," Lorenn said. "We should strike now."

"Yes, but with caution," Miriam said. "Destruction of the crystals may lead to further messengers being produced."

"Respawns," Jason said. "New and stronger enemies; it makes sense. That's the general pattern of transformation zones. Let's test the water and see what we learn."

Miriam directed her own team, Moon's Edge, to move up and destroy a crystal. They were not the strongest of the gold-rankers but they were the fastest. When something inevitably went wrong, they had the best chance of pulling out safely. Miriam had them attack a round crystal, larger than the shards and smaller than the cubes. The hope was that this was important enough to provoke a reaction, but not an overwhelming one.

They got their reaction, the auras of the few remnant elemental messengers growing a little stronger. More messengers appeared as well, moving through the bark of the tree trunk like they were stepping through a waterfall. A waterfall with a clown car behind it, based on the numbers pouring out.

"Well, at least we know where we stand," Miriam said. "Let's just hope there aren't any more surprises."

"There are definitely more surprises," Jason said.

"I know," she told him. "I'm still going to hope there aren't."

Chapter 842

Beware of Chicken

The first wave of elemental messengers were wiped out by the powerful but barely controlled lightning storm created by the weather machine. The clouds it had erupted from quickly dispersed, ending the artificial twilight as sunlight shone directly onto the battlefield. Fresh clouds started converging on the tree in a massive spiral but it would take time before the weather machine was ready to act again.

The crystals embedded in the tree proved resilient against attack, but team Moon's Edge were gold-rankers and it did not last long against their assault. Fresh messengers immediately emerged from the tree, passing through the bark as if it were a sheet of water.

The only member of the team not to deploy was the leader, Miriam, commanding the forces of the alliance. She did not set the rest of the gold-rankers to engage, instead calling for the silver-rankers to move up and for their scavenged assets to engage, testing their effectiveness against the enemy.

Belinda managed the slapped-together contingent from the hover tank. She couldn't drive it without facing feedback from the higher-ranked item, but she could sit inside and yell at people through voice chat. The hyper-kinetic rounds fired from its magnetic rail cannon were fast enough to hit even gold-rankers.

The other eclectic weapons proved a mixed bag. The miniature drone-spitting volcano on a wagon seemed excellent at first, its hard-light constructs proving highly effective. They were short-lived, however, as was the volcano itself. Its detonation sent the brightheart manning it limping for the healers.

One that seemed innocuous was a thick iron pole, propped up at an angle by a smaller pole. At the end of the main shaft were eight small white balls, slowly orbiting the end of the pole. When activated, it fired eight spheres of electricity that moved slowly but sought out targets, blasting anyone who came near with arcs of lightning. After a few false starts where allies had to be shielded from the spheres, the brightheart using it learned to direct the spheres more or less at the enemy. Most of them ended up orbiting the tree, blasting at any messengers that emerged from it until the ball lightning's power was spent.

The elemental messengers kept emerging from the trunk of the tree, a full kilometre and a half in circumference. They streamed around it from all sides to attack the adventurers and their allies. While their numbers were vast, they were still weak and fell rapidly to area attacks, especially Gordon's butterflies. The gold-rank adventurers held back, letting the silvers do the work for now.

Miriam directed their forces to further attack the crystals embedded in the tree trunk. With each shattered crystal, the elemental messengers grew a little stronger. Their auras marked them as gold rank, but their level of power was still in the silver range, at least for the moment. Miriam called off the attacks on the crystals when the elemental messengers showed a strength close to the peak of silver-rank.

“Our silver-rank forces won’t be able to handle much more than this,” she said.

“These elemental messengers can’t fight worth a damn but power is power. The adventurers will still hold, but we need to start pulling back our allies. Adventurers, too, once the enemy starts touching on gold-rank strength.”

Jason had long since joined the fray so he responded through the voice chat’s command channel.

“It’s good training for the adventurers,” he said. “We’ve seen some real cracks in the silver-rank wall in the last few months, but we have other priorities today. Are you worried that something will change when the enemy messengers hit a gold-rank power level?”

“It’s a consideration, but I’m more concerned about transitioning our forces out of the fighting without losing people. The adventurers can handle the current strength and numbers but the silver-rank brighthearts, cultists and our messengers are struggling. We need to pull the non-adventurers back and bring the golds forward before escalating further. I’ll get the gold-rankers organised and move in with my team. You’re out there, so assess the silvers and signal them to start withdrawing, prioritising need and safety.”

“I might have to stop slacking off and do some actual commanding,” Jason said. “I’ll organise — HOLY CRAP!”

“Jason?”

“This messenger just exploded into fire and ash, then the ash reformed back into a messenger. Did you see that?”

“This whole battlefield is magical explosions. Are you alright?”

“No worries; I’m super-good at fighting. That was crazy awesome, though. Is anyone recording this battle? Shade, grab a recording crystal and—”

“I believe you were saying something about being a responsible commander,” she said pointedly, cutting him off.

“Responsible was your word. I never said that and you can’t hold me to it. But yeah, I’ll direct our adventurer forces to cover the withdrawal of the others. You want to crack some more of those crystals once we’re done?”

“Once we’ve settled after the force transition, yes.”

Clive's tortoise familiar had expanded to full size, akin to a large cottage. His shell was being used as a mobile recovery point while Clive stood atop it, acting as the gun to Onslow's tank. Rather than the usual open sides, Onslow had his shell more secure. The hole where his head would poke out was sealed over with only the holes for his legs serving as entrances.

The spaces were open as Onslow himself was in his adorable, child-sized humanoid form. Inside the shell he was running around, making himself useful to the healers and resting or injured combatants. He delivered medical supplies like alchemically treated bandages and tins of healing unguent. He handed out oversized mana and stamina potions, the larger-than-normal bottles looking enormous in his tiny hands. He even gave out drinks of water and collected empty glasses.

While there were healers out in the field, there were also some inside Onslow's shell, led by Healer high priestess Hana Shavar. Farrah was taking swigs from a large mana potion as the high priestess reattached Rufus' arm which was held in place with magic. They all occupied the simple wooden chairs Clive had set up inside the shell, along with a few tables and standing shelves to hold supplies. Simple rituals held the furniture in place against the occasional shake as powerful attacks struck the shell.

"You're lucky I could even find your arm," Farrah told Rufus. "It's getting hectic out there."

"I appreciate your efforts," the priestess said. "Having the arm to reattach is much faster and less mana-intensive than growing a new one."

"I was, perhaps, a little reckless," Rufus admitted. "I'm not sure how much longer we can hold against the strength and numbers they have."

Taika came in through one of the corner doors and crashed into a seat next to Farrah. The fact that it didn't buckle under his massive frame as he carelessly threw himself onto it proved that the wood was magically reinforced.

"The gold-rankers have started moving in," he said, panting as he took a mana potion from Onslow and nodded his thanks. He removed the stopper and took a swig.

"These big mana potions are good," he said, holding up the large bottle. "They top me off pretty well without having to wait between drinks to avoid potion toxicity. That helps when this is my third time coming back to rest."

"Fourth for Farrah," Rufus said. "She's mana-hungry, even for a brawler."

"Has Humphrey come back in?" Taika asked. "He's a brawler too."

"Not once," Farrah said. "He uses a lot of mana recovery items."

“It’s more than just items,” Rufus said. “I’m not sure you understand how well-trained Humphrey is. And that’s coming from someone whose family runs a school.”

Farrah and Taika shared a look and Rufus glared at them.

“Don’t even think about pulling out drinks in the middle of a battle,” he said, pointing at them with the arm not held in place by Hana’s magic. “My point is, it’s easy to look at Humphrey swinging that big sword and think he falls short of Sophie in terms of skill. He doesn’t.”

He grunted and looked at the priestess.

“Stop shifting around,” she told him.

“Sorry,” he said, then turned back to the others.

“Using Humphrey’s huge sword on a silver-rank battlefield is harder than you think. A lot of enemies are blindingly fast, but that’s not his real skill. His real skill is judgement. You don’t notice it unless you know to look, but Humphrey’s management of his mana and cooldowns is perfect. Scarily perfect. That matters when you’re a brawler, as you both demonstrate every time you go out there. Or come back here for a rest.”

“Actually,” Taika said, “What’s going on with cooldowns? It’s not a video game, bro, even if Jason can pull up your character sheet.”

“It’s about meridians,” Farrah explained. “Your body moves away from lungs and heart and veins as you go up in rank. You develop a new system that channels your blood and mana.”

“Meridians,” Taika said.

“Yes,” Farrah said. “In an essence user, meridians develop in accordance with your abilities. Certain meridians become optimised for certain powers, allowing you to use more mana to greater effect. Your soul reshapes your body so you can use your powers better. It’s more complicated than ‘this is your lava cannon meridian,’ but that’s the basic idea.”

“That’s how ranking up works?” Taika asked.

“That’s part of it,” Farrah said. “When you use a power, it puts a strain on related meridians if it’s strong enough. The actual mechanics are complicated, but it basically means you can’t use the same meridians in the same way until they recover. If a power is minor, like Jason’s special attacks, the cooldown is short or non-existent. Humphrey’s Immortality power is on the other end of that spectrum, badly straining the related meridians.”

“And that’s how cooldowns work.”

“Kind of. Clive would tell you that everything I said was an oversimplification and wrong, but I gave you the ‘I didn’t spend a decade studying magic theory’ explanation. It’s

all about meridians. Powers that manipulate mana costs, lock out abilities or affect cooldowns all work by impacting meridians. Ones like Belinda's that can reduce or reset cooldowns are very specialised healing powers that help meridians recover faster."

"Learning to manage your cooldowns and mana costs effectively is crucial," Rufus said. "Especially for brawlers like you. You're tougher and more powerful than the average adventurer, but your mana costs and cooldowns are high, meaning you're out of the fight earlier."

"I bring more power to the table than most brawlers," Farrah said.

"Which is why we give her a treat if she stays in the fight a whole minute," Rufus said with a grin. Farrah got up to slap his arm but was driven back by a look from Hana so sharp it almost required healing.

"Humphrey's cooldown and mana management is perfect," Rufus said. "And I mean *perfect*. People always get better with experience but he was better than most silvers at iron-rank. Now...? His mother built that boy up from the ground. I'd put money down on her planning the mana recovery gear he's wearing now before he learned to walk. Probably before the church of Fertility cracked him out of the vat. If you haven't seen thousands of adventurers at all ranks, and aren't looking for it, you'll probably never notice, but Humphrey Geller is the most skilled person on our team."

"Really?" Taika asked. "More than Sophie? More than *you*?"

"Yes," Rufus said. "Humphrey isn't just working around his own limitations and gear. He adapts in the moment to every tweak to his mana recovery and cooldown times. If he's in range of Clive and Belinda's auras. What buffs and debuffs are on him. How many potions he has, and how long until he can drink another."

"He's thinking about that the whole time?" Taika asked. "While also directing us in combat?"

"Yes," Rufus said. "And he keeps his cool so emotional decisions don't throw him off. It's how he stays in the fight while Miss Lava Cannon here stops to rest faster than you can say 'mana efficiency.'"

"I don't see Humphrey firing off a lava cannon," Farrah said huffily.

"No, he doesn't," Rufus agreed. "You might all be brawlers, but you have different roles. Taika is an initiator and you're a deleter. You make a problem go away. Humphrey is a stayer, which is rare for a brawler."

"Because of how hard it is to manage powers as well as he does."

“Exactly,” Rufus says. “Brawlers are common because they’re great, but they’re also basic. Especially one that is more rounded than specialised, like you two. That specialisation is what keeps you effective at higher ranks.”

“Which has people wondering why Danielle Geller pushed her son into one of the most commonplace, bread and butter roles in adventuring,” Farrah said.

“Yes,” Rufus agreed. “What they don’t realise is that what she’s done is take one of the most useful-but-basic roles in adventuring and create the greatest version of it that there is.”

“Like how really good bread and really good butter is simple but also fantastic,” Taika said.

“Exactly,” Rufus said. “Like any brawler, Humphrey hits harder and survives more than most adventurers. The trade-off is endurance, which is why you two are back here resting, but Humphrey doesn’t stop. He has less explosive power than either of you, certainly, but he’s always out there, always putting on pressure. Farrah, you are the best there is at intervening in critical moments. He intervenes at every moment, not just the critical ones. Not as much as you, but he’s always there; a perpetual influence. Next time you’re outside, look at the impact he has. Not just on the fight he’s in but the whole battle. The way it moves around him like water shifting course around a rock.”

“But isn’t that kind of bad for typical adventuring?” Taika asked. “An adventuring contract is go out, kill maybe three things and go home. Farrah is way better for that.”

“Yes,” Rufus agreed. “It’s almost like his mother wasn’t training him for typical adventuring.”

“Oh,” Taika said, realisation in his voice.

“She was building him for some weird Jason stuff,” Farrah said. “Long before Jason ever came along.”

“Yes,” Rufus agreed. “Danielle and I spoke about Jason days after he first arrived.”

“And then she glued her son to the outworlder the moment he showed up,” Farrah said. “That lady is kind of scary.”

“Yes,” Rufus agreed.

Farrah stood up, took a cleansing breath and stretched.

“Oh well. Time to get back to it.”

“See you back in a minute,” Rufus said.

“Hilarious,” she said, then turned to Hana. “How long will this one be?”

“Another few minutes to make sure the arm reattached properly,” Hana said.

“Out of curiosity, did you know his family runs a school?”

“He mentioned it,” Hana said, drawing a snorting laugh from Taika.

Farrah grinned at Rufus’ glare until her conjured armour covered her face in a helmet of black obsidian. She moved to the door and leapt out as wings of fire appeared at her back. Much of the battle was happening in the air as the elemental messengers could all fly, although not all chose to. Many had earth powers that were more useful while grounded.

Her eyes picked out Humphrey with ease. He was forming a defensive line with an army of condor-sized bird skeletons made of dragon bones. They were on fire and wearing armour that somehow didn’t interfere with their flight. Humphrey’s summoning power was most useful in pitched battles and his magic dice that altered them randomly had provided good results this time.

Humphrey and his forces were flying, enormous dragon wings spread out from Humphrey’s back. He and his summons were close to the ground as they covered the withdrawal of a silver-rank brightheart contingent. Silver-rankers were pulling back across the battlefield, but Farrah could see that none were doing so as efficiently as those shielded by Humphrey. He was effectively blunting the elemental messenger assault, aided by some of the team.

Sophie was everywhere and nowhere, almost impossible for anyone below gold-rank to track. Any time Humphrey’s line of summons showed vulnerability she was suddenly there, stopping attackers dead until the line was reinforced. Jason was amongst the enemy, also hard to track as he flicked like a shadow. He was thinning them out as they approached, making sure they couldn’t overwhelm Humphrey’s summons with raw numbers. One of Belinda’s familiars was present as well, the astral lantern helping with the group’s mana recovery. It was behind the line with Neil who was standing atop a giant bird, a moustache perched incongruously on its beak.

“WHY ARE YOU A GIANT CHICKEN?” Neil’s voice rose over the sounds of battle.

“I’m a cockatrice!” Stash yelled proudly. “Look, I turned that guy to stone.”

“That guy was already stone!” Neil yelled back. “He’s a stone elemental messenger. YOU’RE A GOD-DAMNED CHICKEN!”

“Humphrey, Neil’s being mean to me!”

“Both of you shut up,” Humphrey told them.

Stash flapped forward, past Humphrey’s dragon bone condors.

“What are you doing?” Neil yelled, gripping huge feathers to keep his balance. “You better not drop me in the middle of the enemy!”

Stash let out a rooster crow that sent shock waves blasting through the elemental messengers. Metal bodies warped and stone bodies cracked while other types bled from their eyes and ears, many dropping to the ground. Stash then curved his flight back behind the lines.

“See?” Stash said. “Not a chicken.”

“You just yelled out ‘COCK-A-DOODLE-DOO!’”

“And now you did too,” Stash said. “At least I’m a chicken. You’re the guy who yelled ‘cock-a-doodle-doo’ in the middle of a battle.”

“I told you two to shut up,” Humphrey scolded. “And Neil, stop using chicken noises as a battle cry. You’re making us look bad.”

The giant chicken somehow managed to look extremely smug as Neil glared down at it.

“Oh, you little bast—”

The more vulnerable silver-rankers pulled back, being the brighthearts along with most of the cultists and allied messengers. A few stayed, Boris and Beaufort judging which of their people were strong enough to stand with the adventurers. Once the withdrawing forces were safely en route to extraction points Miriam ordered a fresh attack on the crystals.

As had happened previously, this prompted a fresh wave of elemental messengers coming from the tree, more powerful than those that came before. This time they did not come alone, however. A hulking figure emerged from the tree that looked startlingly like the avatar of Undeath. Instead of skinless flesh, it was made of roots that looked like ropey muscle. The glow coming from its eyes was molten-steel-orange instead of purple, but it shambled like the zombie had. Towering over the battlefield, only next to the tree did the fourteen-storey figure look anything but outrageous in scale.

“Gary,” Jason said over voice chat. “I’m going to do you a favour and take all the little ones. That just leaves the one for you.”

“Oh, thank you so much,” Gary responded.

“You’re very welcome.”

Gary had been easy to spot already, wreathed in golden fire, but he became unmissable as his size grew to match the root avatar.

“Oh, come on!” yelled Rick Geller. He’d been standing beside Gary and had been half-buried in displaced dirt in the growth process.

“Sorry,” giant Gary rumbled before moving forward in massive steps, careful to only tread on enemies.

Gary hefted his hammer, hoping this root avatar was easier to kill than its undead counterpart. The fire shrouding the hammer in his hand grew brighter and brighter until he finally threw it at the root monster. When the hammer landed, a massive blast of golden fire sent the root monster hurtling back. It struck the tree with enough force that even the geographically scales trunk shook, freeing leaves on branched kilometres above.

The explosion of flames outright disintegrated the messengers it washed over. The adventurers it touched were instead given a magical boon, enhancing their power and speed. The hammer, its flames diminished, flew back to Gary’s hand as the root avatar pushed itself to its feet. Its root flesh was blackened and it had a rectangle indent in its torso, matching the shape of Gary’s hammer. There were cracks on its body leaking orange light.

Miriam watched as the root monster struggled against the golden chains binding it as Gary hammered off parts of its body, chunk by chunk. She reflected that Gary’s stalemate against the avatar of Undeath had made her forget how much power flowed through the leonid demigod.

“Looks like he’s got us covered,” Jason observed through the command channel.

“For now,” Miriam said. “I just hope we handle whatever the tree has for us next as easily.”

“Wow,” Jason said. “A real bundle of sunshine, you.”

Chapter 843

A Better Adventurer

The root avatar had not gone down easily but Gary had kept it largely contained. Once it was dead, the adventurers started destroying more crystals and the elemental messengers became even more dangerous. Clive was sent away when the expectations for another special enemy grew.

Clive and Onslow were amongst the last silver-rankers to evacuate, with only Jason staying longer. Clive had convinced Miriam to let them stay and continue to serve as a rest and recovery station. Miriam kept Onslow well behind the front line as, even when reinforced by Clive's rituals, Onslow's formidable shell was not indestructible. Once the elemental messengers were firmly into gold-rank power levels, Miriam started ordering the less powerful gold-rankers to evacuate. Clive and Onslow withdrew with the first wave of them, carrying many to the evacuation point.

The evacuation sites were comprised of ritual circles in a line that headed directly away from the tree. Going over the circles in sequences granted a stacking movement buff that was equally applicable to individuals, vehicles and familiars like Onslow.

Onslow's shell drifted over the first in the sequence of ritual circles and immediately started accelerating. Inside, Clive and Mini Onslow were seated on a heavily padded couch. The momentum increased with each circle until they were pushed deep into the cushions. Clive groaned as Onslow threw his little hands in the air, letting out a chirping laugh like a child on a rollercoaster.

Regrouping sites were set up at the points where the movement boosts ran out. They were sufficiently clear of the battle zone that even gold-ranks would take time to reach them. Onslow arrived in a pleasant grassy zone, one of the more common terrains amongst the territories. Several adventurers were portalling others back to the main base, but many had sat right down in the grass and started meditating.

The transformation zone had been a massive boon to the silver-rankers whose advancement had stalled following the monster surge. Most had taken between two to four years to go all the way through bronze-rank to silver and found the subsequent slowdown frustrating. The early stages of silver hadn't been bad, especially when so many ranked up during the surge. The infamous wall at the fourth stage of silver-rank was a stark change as advancement slowed to a crawl.

The transformation zone had proven a salve to frustrated silver-rankers. As the living anomalies had become more challenging, advancement started picking up. It wasn't a

match for pre-silver levels, but adventurers were finally reaching the fifth and sixth thresholds of their essence abilities. Coming less than a year after ranking up, those were impressive gains when a decade was considered a lightning-fast rise from silver to gold.

The adventurers came to a very adventurer-like conclusion: that for all its weirdness and danger the transformation zone was a rare and precious opportunity. That had led to renewed frustration when Miriam benched them all after judging the anomalies as too dangerous. Now they had finally leapt back into the fight, many were eager to consolidate their gains, meditating as soon as they hit the safe zone.

It didn't take long for Clive's team to find him and Clive set up different décor inside of Onslow. The plain wooden tables and chairs used for the mobile clinic went into Clive's storage space. Only the couch was left out and it was soon joined by more soft and luxurious furniture. The team had developed a taste for large and plush furniture from living in a cloud house.

The team, minus Jason, climbed into Onslow's shell, once again set up with open sides. They started heading out overland, despite the portal and teleport powers they had access to. They weren't in a rush and didn't want those powers on cooldown; they wanted them available to move far and fast if needed. The team settled in before turning to Humphrey as he let out an unhappy sigh.

"It wasn't that long ago that I was lecturing Jason about leaving us out of things," he said. Sophie leaned into him, worming her fingers between his and giving his hand a squeeze.

"Teamwork is good," she said. "But sometimes what you want has to give way to what's best. Jason needs to be there but we can't help him now. If we were there, the only thing we could do would be give him another thing to worry about."

"She's right," Clive said. "Miriam was starting to move back the gold-rankers, let alone me. She wouldn't let you anywhere near the battle. Once whatever comes out of that thing next is dealt with, it will probably be Gary doing the fighting alone. Everyone else will either be sent back or hide with Jason in an invisibility ball."

"I just wish we could do more," Humphrey said.

"We can," Rufus told him. "We can get stronger."

Rufus left his armchair and took a meditative pose on the floor.

"And this is why I'm a better adventurer than you," Neil said, drawing all eyes.

"Really?" Belinda asked.

"Yes," Neil said. "I'm going to meditate too, but I'm staying in this comfy chair to do it."

Belinda looked from Neil to Rufus, then back to Neil before finally settling her gaze on Rufus.

“He’s right,” she said. “He is a better adventurer than you.”

The root avatar had been hard to kill but ultimately not that much of a threat. With Gary onside, they had an invincible weapon against any individual combatant. The root avatar was powerful but Gary had chained it down and beaten it to death. The largest problem it presented was tying up Gary, leaving him unable to aid the other adventurers. With the elemental messengers growing stronger with every smashed crystal, that was an increasing problem.

Once the root avatar was down, Miriam prepared for the next escalation. She didn’t like having Jason stay but he insisted his presence was necessary. She didn’t think it was just stubbornness or bravado, so she arranged the best protection she could manage. She had Ramona, the shield specialist from her team, create an invisibility sphere in the air. It held her, Jason and the healers who weren't combat specialists, Hana Shavar and Carlos Quilido.

The weather machine had proven increasingly useful over the course of the battle. It took time to make changes to the weather and its targeting was not precise, but that became less of a concern as more and more allies evacuated the field. Fire tornados sucked in messengers as adventurers herded their enemies into range. When one wave of messengers had been almost entirely fire and magma types, gold-rank monsoon rain had severely dampened their powers.

Being babysat by gold-rankers, Jason had little to do but consider the potential threats ahead. It seemed obvious at this stage that there would be more singular threats like to root avatar and he considered the possibilities. The first major threat had been a copy of the now-dead avatar of Undeath. Would further copies replicate other powerful combatants that had appeared in the zone? Would the end fight be Gary vs Tree Gary?

Two other things were playing on Jason’s mind. One was that Jason himself had undeniably imprinted on the transformation zone. He was too weak to be an end boss, but would the tree start producing versions of him instead of messengers? An army of affliction-wielding, life-draining root monsters? The area around the tree was already carpeted in the dead, with elemental messengers piled up on the ground.

The other concern Jason had related to the tree itself. Aside from the crystals set into it, the tree had proved impervious to any form of damage, even from Gary.

That level of imperviousness was rare and usually related to souls somehow. The tree was a corrupted soul forge, so that seemed possible according to Jason's admittedly limited knowledge. He intended to expand his understanding of soul engineering in the future, given how often it kept coming up.

He wondered if they were caught up in something like a messenger challenge power. When he had been in the past, that involved invulnerability to outside interference. That would make the key figuring out how to get past the invulnerability. The crystals embedded in the tree trunk were obviously part of it, but was there more to it than simply smashing all the crystals to expose the tree itself? With the transformation zone on the line, figuring out the rules was of critical importance.

Jason had managed to break the rules of a challenge power once before, but that had been against one silver-rank messenger. She was young, little more than a girl, and he had no illusions he could break whatever passed for a soul for the giant corrupted tree.

As they prepared to shatter more of the crystals, Miriam made sure that the other gold-rankers were ready to evacuate if necessary. The root avatar had appeared when a third of the crystals had been broken and they were about to reach the two-thirds mark.

She had already ordered some gold-rankers out of the fight. The healers were secure with Jason in case anyone needed drastic attention and others had already evacuated. She was ready to pull the rest at a moment's notice.

After the current wave of elemental messengers was cleared out, Miriam ordered Emir Bahadir to attack the crystals. His staff extended comically to strike them from a safe distance. The crystals were destroyed and, as anticipated, a fresh wave of enemies emerged.

Alongside the stronger elemental messengers, another towering figure stepped out of the tree, passing through the bark as if stepping through a waterfall. The giant was a replica of Gary, carved from dark wood. The head was carved into a fixed mask of Gary with blank-faced features. Instead of a mane, fire blazed yet did not scorch the wood.

The armour it wore and the hammer and shield it carried were an odd mix of iron, stone and packed earth. It was as if the material had been dug from the ground and pressed into the shape of Gary's armour. The same material comprised a replica of Gary's hammer and shield, both shrouded in orange flame.

Gary immediately clashed with his wooden doppelganger. The titanic clash between real and fake demigods filled the air with thunder as their strikes landed on one another. The adventurers were left to deal with the new messengers, once more having grown in

strength. Miriam was in the fray as well, working with her team. She kept an eye on the larger battle as they fought, her team periodically shielding her so she could stay watchful. She assessed the enemy and her own forces, planning out the next move.

It became quickly evident that while the wooden replica could copy Gary's form, his divine power was harder to reproduce. It would be another hard clash, but Miriam had no doubt that Gary would be the victor. For the rest of the battle, her assessment was less optimistic.

The elemental messengers were approaching the power level of the adventurers. For now, the adventurers remained superior, their versatility and intelligence trumping the mindless surge tactics of the messengers. The problem was one of numbers. For every wave that was struck down, another came out stronger.

The adventurers, by contrast, were too few. That hadn't mattered when the elemental messengers were weaker, but that was no longer the case. With enough power, quantity became a quality that the adventurers were struggling to overcome. Superior abilities and tactics were still working for now but it was becoming a losing battle. The gold-rankers were forming up, supporting each other as a rising tide of enemies washed around them. There was no battle line anymore, just an island in a sea of foes.

It was time to pull back while the adventurers held a thin advantage. If the messengers grew stronger, the withdrawal would get bloody in spite of gold-rank resilience. Miriam reached out to Jason through the command channel.

"I need a portal," she said.

"On it," came the succinct reply, which added to Miriam's worries. If even Jason Asano wasn't taking the time to talk nonsense, things might be even worse than she thought.

A portal to Jason's soul realm appeared, a ring floating in the air. It was well back, near the closest evacuation point. Miriam knew that Jason was worried about opening it too close to the tree, fearing potential negative reactions between the two powers. With the transformation zone already starting to break down, Miriam had agreed that they should keep destabilising influences to a minimum.

The gold-rankers started pulling back, fighting their way through the army of messengers surrounding them. That was when Miriam was faced with another unwelcome surprise. The messengers and the giants summoned by the tree had shown no indication of intelligence. They had demonstrated only blind aggression; moving forward and lashing out was their only tactic. They had likewise not reacted to the tactics of the adventurers, getting caught out again and again.

Then something changed. For the first time, the messengers shifted their approach as if they'd sensed the intention to withdraw. They started using their numbers to not just surround and attack the adventurers but to dogpile, regardless of how quickly it got them killed. They pressed in, body to body from every side; from above and below. The living were pressed in with the dead but it didn't matter. If a corpse fell out, there were countless more to take its place. The adventurers vanished into a rapidly growing mound of bodies, living and dead.

It was not a strategy that would have worked earlier. The messengers simply hadn't been strong enough to prevent the adventurers from tearing a hole through any barrier. Now, with enough numbers, the messengers were managing to contain them.

"Jason," Amos said through voice chat. "I need water. What we talked about."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Quickly, please."

Within the invisibility field, Jason opened another portal. This one wasn't to his soul realm but a normal shadow portal to the control room of the weather machine. Nik's head poked through a moment later.

"What do you need?" he asked.

"Water ball."

"Can do," Nik said. "You know, my head's feeling funny being hundreds of kilometres from my body."

"Then go back," Jason said. "I need that ball *now*."

"Sorry," Nik said and his head withdrew through the portal.

"Semi-portalling like that isn't good for you," Hana Shavar said. "I'm surprised he didn't throw up. I've seen people have seizures."

"He's good with dimensional forces," Jason said. "He gets it from me."

Nik's head popped back out.

"It should be starting now," he reported.

"Thanks," Jason told him. "Now, go back."

"Can't I stay and—"

"No," Jason said and pushed Nik's head back through, then closed the portal.

It was raining again, in as tightly concentrated an area as Nik could manage. The water was pooling into a giant ball as if collected in an invisible bowl, but that was beyond the scope of the weather machine's power. This was a power that belonged to Amos Pensinata. By the time the clouds emptied and the rain stopped, a massive sphere of

water was hanging in the air. Underneath it was the mound of messengers with the gold-rankers somewhere inside.

From the water orb, a massive tentacle swept out, grabbing at messengers and dragging them into the orb, leaving a huge gouge in the mound. More tentacles sprouted from the orb until there were ten, digging at the mound like a monster from the deep, trapped behind a watery portal.