

Chapter 791

What Makes Them Our Enemies

He was standing next to Gary, chatting in an oddly calm fashion given their presence in an underground necropolis. They both felt the surging disruption in the fabric of reality and Jason gave him a smile.

“See you on the other side, brother,” Jason said.

“Is this going to hurt?” Gary asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason told him. “You’re the first person I know to pick up a temp job as a god. Are you prone to exploding under dimensional duress?”

“I’m not a god, Jason, even a temporary one. That’s blasphemy.”

“That’s—”

“Kind of your thing, I know. I’m a demigod, and even that through the will of a true god.”

“So, you’re more like an intern?”

“What’s an intern?”

Suddenly Gary was gone and the world fell apart. He could still feel his own body but nothing else. The absence of even gravity’s familiar pull left him feeling untethered. Most of Jason’s mundane senses were blanked, with nothing to see, smell or hear. His magical perception suffered the opposite, bombarded with what once would have been an incomprehensible deluge of sensory input.

Jason had been through a lot since the last transformation zone back on Earth. While his essence abilities had barely shifted, his knowledge and power in other metrics had advanced by orders of magnitude. Half-transcendents stood at the peak of diamond-rank, be they essence-users, messengers or some other magical entity. The other half of transcendence was something many spend millennia trying and failing to achieve, while Jason was already striding down that path.

Between his gestalt body and his astral throne and gate, he was unharmed and unbothered. He observed the forces at play with detachment, seeing patterns in the seemingly random chaos. He only comprehended a fraction of what was going on around him, but it was a valuable education in the nature of both reality and the astral realm beyond it. He was glimpsing a realm that belonged to gods and those things that lay beyond them.

It was not the first time Jason had felt the universe break around him. This was his third transformation zone, and each time the experience was different. In the first, he had

broken into a zone already in place, with little power to manipulate the forces involved. The zone itself had transformed him, taking one of his outworlder powers and forcibly evolving it into the Spiritual Domain ability. This gave him the power to imprint himself on physical reality, reshaping it to his own will. It had been an early and critical step on the path to astral king.

For the second transformation zone, Jason possessed the power to reshape it from the beginning. In doing so, he had brought a fundamental change to Earth. The base level of magic had risen and magic no longer manifested in proto-astral spaces before spilling into the world. Jason had brought Earth into a new age of magic where monsters and essences appeared directly in the world.

The third time was set to be different again. Transformation zones on Earth were the result of the World-Phoenix intervening in eons past, to prevent Earth from breaking under the influence of magic. Pallimustus had no such need, not being as fragile. As a result, the dimensional rupture that had now appeared required another hand to trigger the transformation zone, and Jason was the only one available.

An unmoving stone is a whirlpool of cosmic power, Jason could feel the fundamental design of the universe. Imprints taken from countless realities that had come before, the original Builder had melded them into the blueprint for two linked universes. This cosmic experiment in recycling was the very act that had gotten the first Builder sanctioned.

As he sought out every scrap of power and knowledge within himself, he found a tenuous thread of power, something he was barely conscious of. Shade had called it destiny magic, a power to sense the most powerful and fundamental aspects of the cosmos.

Shade suggested that Jason had been using that power instinctively from his first introduction to magic, but they had also seen it used more actively. Gordon was a young familiar where Shade was ancient, but he had demonstrated a connection to that power, something even great astral beings were wary of. Jason suspected his connection to that power was the very reason the familiar had chosen him.

Jason called on that power, crudely and instinctively. He felt Gordon offering guidance and support from within Jason's soul realm, pushing him in the right direction. Jason followed that thread, feeling some distant thing at the far end. It was a whisper in the hurricane of power raging around him, but he put all that aside, reaching out with his soul.

He could barely sense what was tethered at the end of that thread. Stretching his senses to the limit he could feel that it was broken, yet was so much more vast than he was. Even sundered, it rivalled the might of the great astral beings.

Jason could barely touch it, unnoticed, like kelp brushing past a whale. Even so, just the echo of it helped Jason understand how to tame the power storming around him. The distant power was a thing of boundaries and that was what he needed. He could not control the power so much greater than himself, but he didn't need to. The right nudge, in the right way, would cause the power to bind itself, setting in motion the forces that would resolve into a transformation zone.

Jason drew on his soul realm. He tapped his astral throne and gate, along with his power to create spiritual domains. He took a delicate hand, aware of his shallow understanding of the forces at play, and the insignificance of his power before them. He used his meagre power, along with every scrap of knowledge and intuition he had painstakingly built up about cosmic forces and physical reality. He let the distant power guide him, a weak and imperfect vessel, but he was determined it would be enough. Jason had always done what he could with what he had. Now he had to be the butterfly, flapping its wings and waiting for the hurricane.

Jason felt it when the storm of dimensional forces took the first step towards forming a transformation zone. It was a tiny thing as the patterns within the chaos became slightly more ordered. The crux of a transformation zone coming into being was the imprints of older universes used by the old Builder. Broken shards of reality started collecting, taking shape in accordance with those imprints, forming the territories that would make up the zone.

The physical area containing the underground realm of the brighthearts stopped existing by most metrics. The astral space inside it ruptured and the whole area was encapsulated in a dimensional boundary. From there, the transformation zone began forming in earnest.

The transformation zones that Jason was familiar with weren't the common type that had appeared on Earth. Those were self-resolving, leaving a scar on the universe but repairing the damage they were a reaction to without intervention. It was the ones that formed over an astral space that were too unstable, requiring an extra hand to properly resolve without explosively ripping holes in the universe. Special transformation zones were comprised of territories that had to be unified before the transformation zone could serve as a repair to reality.

Jason had plenty of experience claiming and unifying transformation zone territories, and as he watched territories form in this new zone, he decided to get a jump on the competition. Given his access to the already forming zone, he was confident that he could not just pre-emptively claim a territory for himself but establish a solid foundation from which to expand and unify the entire zone.

Experience let Jason know that, in the early stages, claiming territories was easy. The more that were claimed, however, the more difficult it would become. The baseline was also set by the most powerful people within a zone. That meant gold-rank or even something more powerful given the presence of Gary and the avatar of Undeath. If the zone reacted to their divine power things would become even more dangerous than anticipated.

These thoughts galvanised Jason's resolve to establish himself quickly and strongly. He picked a single territory as it was forming, something that had a familiar feel so he could better work with it. The territory was something close to Earth-like, which made it easier for him to shape.

He exerted his will, shaping its formation and imprinting himself upon it. There were limits and restrictions, elements he didn't fully understand, but this was something he was comfortable with, both in scale and scope. Claimed transformation zone territories was something he'd done many times, and he was just getting in early. He couldn't define the specifics, but the territory would very much be a reflection of him as his will imprinted upon it.

The wild forces calmed as the transformation zone developed. Territories formed and linked together to establish the geography of the zone. The space was highly manipulated, like others he had seen, with the dimensional barrier containing it smaller than the space inside.

Everyone in the underground realm had been dragged in and would be scattered around the territories at random. Jason suspected that only he and Gary, who was filled with divine power, had managed to retain consciousness throughout the process. The Undeath avatar was an open question, as it was a direct conduit of Undeath's power and the god was now cut off. Ideally, they would eventually find it standing around doing nothing. The messengers were another question, with their gestalt bodies, but that alone was unlikely enough to let them keep their senses.

Jason had sensed presences floating through the dimensional chaos but had not dared reach out to them. Not only could he not identify them but he did not want to risk affecting them adversely. Essence users were highly resistant to change but not everyone

was an essence user. What effect the zone would have on the elemental messengers, the Builder cult converted and the brighthearts, Jason could only wait and see.

On Earth, many normal-rankers had been transformed into other races, in accordance with the transformation zones in which they found themselves. He'd seen people become leonids, celestines and other races native to neither Earth nor Pallimustus. Some managed to resist the change, but most were affected, their souls accepting the transformation. As best Jason understood, the process was a more gentle version of what the Builder had attempted on him when trying to implant a start seed: Applying pressure until the soul willingly accepted the change.

The various transformation zones settled into their final form and Jason pushed himself into the territory he had shaped for himself. It had taken the form of his hometown, the sleepy tourist destination of Casselton Beach, with one major change. There was a mountain behind the town that did not exist on Earth and had been carved into the shape of Jason's head. He manifested inside the reality, high in the air. His cloak formed around him, although it was his aura he used to hold himself aloft.

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- This area of the local physical reality has been in a state of dimensional flux and has been isolated by [Nascent ??? Intervention]. The influence of a broken astral space on the area has prevented the natural resolution of the transformation zone. This special transformation zone must be unified to restore stability, reintegrate it with physical reality and re-establish an astral space.
 - The transformation zone can be unified by claiming all non-central territories.
 - Territories can be claimed by eliminating a final anomaly that will appear in each territory when all other anomalies are eliminated. If multiple people are present in a territory when the conditions for claiming it are met, it must be ceded to one individual through conflict or forfeit.
 - Claiming additional territories after the first will unify them with already claimed territories.
 - The central territory cannot be claimed until all other territories are unified. The Central territory is in an incomplete state. The final state of the central territory shall be defined when it is unified with the other territories.
 - Final unification requires the ability to reshape the transformation zone to reintegrate it with physical reality. Final reunification without this ability will cause a dimensional rupture as the transformation zone attempts to reintegrate with physical reality.
 - Some inhabitants of the transformation surge have been affected by elements isolated in the central territory and cannot effectively function without replacing that influence. Those inhabitants have been placed into stasis in the territories in which they arrived. They will be imparted with the influence of whomsoever claims the territories in which they are held. The inhabitants in stasis may or may not survive this process, depending on the nature of the influence.

- The influence of the [Nascent ??? Intervention] on the special transformation zone has established an interface available to all inhabitants.
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Jason read over the system box, although some of this information was already imparted by his senses. He could feel his influence finalising his control over the territory below. His efforts had created it without anomalies, thus making it his own. He could feel the last vestiges of his influence still taking hold and he looked over the terrain while he waited for the power to settle.

Below him was the town, the small mountain behind it not much more than a very large hill. Even so, having a mountain fortress in the shape of his own head ticked one of the big-ticket items off his bucket list. He looked at it proudly as his familiars manifested around him. Shade emerged from his void cloak while Gordon just appeared. Blood spilled from Jason's hand, collecting into a blob that became a replica of Jason himself. The blood clone conjured a starlight cloak to keep himself in the air.

"It would seem that you have much more control here," blood clone Colin said in Jason's voice. "No need to unlock powers and it appears everyone will have your system interface."

Shade was looking at the mountain fortress.

"You couldn't help yourself, could you, Mr Asano?"

"Hey, that just happened on its own," Jason said. "I only got to shape this place vaguely, not set all the details. It just turned out this way."

"Of course it did, Mr Asano."

Jason turned his gaze to the distance, far beyond the reach of his own territory. Although the air was hazy, the shape of an impossibly large tree loomed over the horizon.

"I'm pretty sure the messenger tree, soul forge or whatever it is got sealed away in that central territory," Jason said. "Now it's winner take all."

"We knew that going in," Colin said. "Learning the specifics doesn't change that."

"You're right," Jason agreed, "and we've even got a head start. I think we should use it to get a handle on things. Can you sense those people in the air, way above us?"

Shade and Colin looked up while Gordon flashed his orbs in the blue and orange flickering patterns he used to communicate. He was the familiar most closely tied to Jason's aura and his perception was boosted accordingly, so he had also sensed them.

"They're messengers," Jason said. "Held in stasis, which apparently means just hanging way up in the air. I think they were the elemental messengers, but with the tree sealed away, they're just regular messengers now. But without the imprinting of an astral

king, or even the corrupted imprint from the tree that left them all messed up, they're incomplete."

"The inhabitants that cannot effectively function," Shade said. "The ones mentioned in the system box. This means that when a territory is claimed, any messengers in it will be claimed as well."

"They could be trouble," Colin said. "I should go up there and eat them before they wake up."

The others all turned to look at him.

"It was just a suggestion," he said defensively.

"Not all the messengers were spawned by the tree," Jason pointed out. "Some were sent down by Jes Fin Kaal and already have an astral king. They're probably free of the tree's influence now and will be competitors."

"They were sent to create the soul forge from the natural array," Shade said. "They likely have the magical knowledge to unify the transformation zone properly."

"Yeah," Jason agreed grimly. "If they don't know how already, they can probably figure it out."

"Still doesn't change what we have to do," Colin said. "We fight, we win, we eat what's left. Oh, don't look at me like that; there aren't any vegans here."

"I think Shade and Gordon are technically vegan," Jason said. "They only eat raw magic. Mostly. I did keep catching Gordon disintegrating candy and trying to inhale the fumes, but only while we were in America. I think he likes high-fructose corn syrup."

Jason felt a shift as his influence finished permeating every corner of the territory.

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- Conditions to claim this territory have been met.
 - Due to your influence already having been established, other individuals in the territory cannot contest your claim.

 - You have claimed a territory.
 - You may extend your influence into another territory in order to claim it.

 - Your influence is being imposed on the inhabitants in stasis.
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Jason felt a connection to the space around him as if the land, air and sea were all extensions of himself. It felt like his spirit domains back on Earth. He could feel two people on the ground and hundreds of messengers in the air. His power, invested in the territory, was already reaching out to influence the messengers.

After helping the messengers in his soul space shrug off the influence of their astral king, Jason wasn't about to create an angelic slave army. Using his experience, he altered

the influence of his power as it seeped into the messengers. He guided the power as they awakened, leading them to not bear his brand but to each make one of their own, setting them free. It was the work of a few moments and soon the messengers were descending from on high.

“I assume you’ve set them free,” Shade said.

“Of course,” Jason said.

“Our enemies won’t do the same,” Colin pointed out. “They’ll use them as weapons.”

“Which is what makes them our enemies,” Jason said. “Also, how is setting them free worse than eating them? That is what you suggested, right?”

“It would make for better planning,” Colin said.

“How do you figure that?” Jason asked.

“I think better on a full stomach.”

Gordon’s orbs flashed a sequence that pointed out that Colin belonged to a species that devoured every living thing on entire planets, suggesting he was incapable of having a full stomach.

“That’s a good point,” Jason said as Colin glared at Gordon. “Do you even have a stomach?”

“Do you not remember when I ate that world-taker worm queen?” Colin complained. “It took me weeks to sleep that meal off.”

“Ooh, you’re right,” Jason conceded. “He’s got you there, Gordon.”

Gordon flashed more lights in response and Colin jabbed a finger in his direction.

“I do not look fat!”