

Chapter 834

When We Worry the Most

“I’m sorry,” Jali Corrik Fen said as she walked alongside Jason in the mountain fortress. The corridors of black stone and red metal were high and wide enough to drive a freight truck through them. It was more than sufficient for the messenger to walk beside Jason without shrinking herself or dismissing her wings.

“What are you sorry for?” Jason asked.

“The messengers you’ve liberated aren’t getting the indoctrination they normally would.”

“I seriously hope you’re not apologising for not brainwashing children.”

“No,” Jali said, her face flushing red. “It’s just that we haven’t replaced it with anything. The messengers are being left to their own devices and some of them are... going a bit odd.”

Jason laughed.

“There’s nothing wrong with a bit odd.”

“Um, alright. There’s nothing wrong with a little structure, either. At some point, we have to find a place for them, and I don’t think either of us want them in the hands of your Adventure Society.”

Jason’s mirth quickly shifted to a frown.

“That’s a fair point,” he said. “Do you have a suggestion?”

“The obvious choice is Boris Ket Lundi, but I don’t think you want to just hand them off to the Unorthodoxy, either.”

“While he’s in dire need of a trip to HR, Boris seems a likeable sort. But I don’t want to push these messengers into a conflict they don’t even know about. Their origins may be less than ideal, but at least they were born outside of your kind’s civil war.”

“A war most of us didn’t realise was taking place,” Jali said. “If the messengers as a whole learned how many Unorthodoxy are out there, it would fracture our society.”

“It needs fracturing,” Jason said.

“Not like this. If information that wildly contradicts the narrative we’ve been taught managed to spread, the astral kings would stage an unprecedented cull. They’d burn half our species to excise the rot. And the half that is left would be the ones that kept the faith. The ones like Tera Jun Casta who would fight any attempt to liberate them.”

Jason nodded.

“There has to be a better way to shift messenger society than that,” he said. “That isn’t our fight though; that’s for Boris and the people behind him. You and I have to deal with these child messengers, and turning them into child soldiers isn’t the way. That being said, I don’t see how we have an alternative to sending them off with Boris. My soul realm is going to be closed for business soon.”

“We will be in this transformation zone for some time yet. Enough to give them some manner of education about the worlds beyond this place.”

“What kind of education are you thinking about?”

“My thoughts on this are inexperienced and rather basic. But I have heard both Rufus Remore and his father Gabriel mention that their family runs a school.”

Jason burst out laughing, to Jali’s confusion.

“I don’t see the humour.”

“You don’t need to. It’s a good idea, provided you can get the messengers to accept tutelage from a pair of humans. And, despite my reservations, I think Boris should be in the mix. There are aspects of being a messenger that humans can’t teach them. I want you to be part of that as well, but I want them to learn about being a free messenger. That’s new to you as well.”

“Some of the messengers will be more accepting than others. The ones freed directly by you and your closest companions never saw battle. They were never used as weapons. Many of the others were, by both your allies and your enemies. Those will be less open.”

Jason nodded.

“All we can do is the best we can with what we’ve got. After the meeting clears out, I’ll have Boris, Rufus and Gabriel stay behind. There’s something critical you’ll need to know before that, though.”

“Which is?”

“Have you ever heard of drinking games?”

Clive stood at the head of the conference table. Jason’s throne-like leather chair had been moved and the window looking onto the lava waterfall had been turned a smoky opaque. An illusionary map of the transformation zone floated in the air like a hologram. Sitting around the table were the leaders and important members of the alliance between adventurers, brighthearts, cultists and messengers.

“Scattered amongst the territories of the transformation zone,” Clive said, “are those with environmental extremes that can be controlled. The control centres are well hidden and take time to learn to use, but it can be done. One of the key indicators separating the

controllable environments from those that are ordinarily dangerous is an aspect of artificiality.”

Clive waved his hand and the map was replaced with three images floating in place, as if seen through a trio of round windows. One showed lighting striking an iron tower. Another had lava passing through a series of sluice gates in what looked like a subterranean complex made of red brick. The third showed pipes rising out of a swamp to spray scalding water.

“I believe that most of us have encountered these territories, and most of them are now under our control.”

“But do they do us any good?” Gabriel asked. “We’ve cleared out those territories in the process of claiming them.”

“As they are, no,” Clive said. “As you said, those territories have been cleared and claimed, so they’re under our control now, but we can’t just dig up their infrastructure and move it around. But ever since I learned that there were as many of them as there are, I started wondering about their purpose. I’ve developed a hypothesis and, if I’m right, they represent an asset that could be as useful to us as our resident demigod.”

“How confident are you about this? Arabelle asked.

“In the wake of his recent unusual and extreme experience, Jason believes my hypothesis to be accurate.”

“You’re going to have to narrow down ‘unusual and extreme experience’ for us,” Neil called out. “For us they’re unusual. For him, they’re something to spice up his week.”

“I concur with the girthy elf,” said Beaufort, leader of the Builder cultists. “There is no shortage of strange events centred on Asano, even in the short time I have known him.”

“I am not girthy.”

Clive continued, ignoring them both.

“While fighting the remnants of the avatar,” he said, “Jason entered a spiritual state where he gained several insights. Most were personal in nature, but he also obtained a better understanding of the transformation zone. More than half of it is connected to him now, after all.”

“What is this hypothesis you mentioned?” Boris asked. “Assuming that you are willing to share. And, while I mean no offence to Asano, have you tested this hypothesis beyond ‘Jason thinks he figured it out while he was fighting a god?’”

“Exploring my hypothesis is the next step,” Clive said. “It won’t be a small undertaking, which is the reason for this meeting. When we needed everyone clearing territories and it was little more than postulation on my part, exploring this was logistically

infeasible. Now there is a level of confirmation from Jason and our silver-rankers are sitting around with little to do. We also have the magic researchers who managed to survive the early days of the transformation zone. The Operations Commander has given me permission to use them.”

“Use them how?” asked Lorenn, leader of the brighthearts. “And do you intend to use my people?”

“No,” Jason said. “The adventurers and magic researchers should be sufficient to our needs. If it proves sufficiently safe and useful that bringing your people in makes sense, we’ll make that request at that time. You won’t be pushed into anything.”

“The actual work involves setting up some laboriously large rituals around the control centres,” Clive explained. “All in spaces that have been cleared, so I anticipate little danger. The idea is to have the silver-rankers working on that while the gold-rankers continue expanding our territory. We’ll be taking precautions, obviously. Assuming there will be no threat is the best way to be blindsided by one. The only threats we anticipate are messengers or Undeath priests who either escaped the battle or haven’t encountered anyone else yet. It’s likely at least some people are still roaming around.”

“You still haven’t explained what you think these special territories are,” Arabelle pointed out. “Or how you think we can use them.”

“Jason affected this transformation zone from the beginning,” Clive said. “You only have to look at where we are for that to be obvious. While his influence was unmistakable in his initial territory, I also believe that his influence extended throughout the zone. The effects here were more overt because this is where he arrived. Outside of that first territory, his influence was significantly lessened. That’s why the rest of the transformation zone isn’t as... personality-filled as this area.”

“Shouldn’t you have known that you’d influenced everything already?” Belinda asked. “How did you miss having rewritten a pocket universe larger than most countries?”

“I haven’t rewritten whole sections of reality very often,” Jason said. “It was only my third time. What I did manage was effectively unconscious expression. I wasn’t actively trying to replicate my hometown or create a mountain in the shape of my head. It just worked out that way because I’m awesome.”

“Jason subconsciously created a home base from which to expand his territory,” Clive said. “While the results are... quite specific, it does meet our needs. It has the infrastructure and supplies to be a staging ground from which to take over the transformation zone. The space simply took a form that Jason subconsciously equates with doing that.”

“You’re saying that in Jason’s mind,” Gabriel said, “infrastructure and supplies means a mountain shaped like his head?”

“Our ultimate objective,” Farrah said, “is to seize control of this transformation zone. We’re in an isolated world that Jason knew he would need to take over. And I can promise you that, in Jason’s mind, a volcano lair in the shape of your head is exactly how you start your plan to take over the world. The only thing missing is a…”

She trailed off as her eyes went wide. She turned to look at Clive.

“No,” she said.

Clive let out the sigh of a man fresh from a losing battle.

“I’m afraid so,” he told her.

Jason sat back in his chair with a grin so wide it looked like he was propping his mouth open with raw smugness.

“I don’t suppose you’d like to share with the group?” Arabelle suggested.

“To be clear,” Clive said, his expression screaming reluctance, “what we’re talking about is an integrated array on a geographic scope, with the power to manipulate the environment on a macro scale.”

“Yeah,” Sophie muttered. “That cleared it right up.”

“He means a weather machine!” Jason said as he shook his fist in triumph.

“I do not mean a weather machine,” Clive said. “calling it that is not an accurate representation of the underlying—”

“WEATHER MACHINE!” Jason yelled joyously over him.

A fluffy white cat leapt into Jason’s lap and he started petting it. The cat had a bushy moustache.

Clive sighed again.

“Let me explain where all of these environmental control territories came from,” he said, eager to change the subject. “The transformation zone includes all the elements of the area in physical reality it overtook.”

“That area being the home of my people,” Lorenn said.

“Yes,” Clive said. “We are anticipating a large part of the unclaimed areas of the transformation zone to be tainted by undeath energy, given how much of the brightheart city was affected. Many of our groups encountered such zones.”

“We’ve scouted the territory Jason took from the avatar when it was finally destroyed,” Miriam said. “Much of it was infested with undeath energy and we’re expecting to see more territories like that.”

“I believe I can do something about that when I reintegrate the transformation zone with reality,” Jason said. “I don’t want to rebuild the brightheart home and leave a massive pit of undeath energy sitting in the middle.”

“What will our home look like when all of this is done?” Lorenn asked.

“Come find me later today and we can discuss it more privately,” Jason said. “While we have everyone together, we should focus on broader concerns.”

“Thank you,” Clive said. “Things brought in from the outside are changed by the zone but their core nature remains. The corrupted soul forge tree, for example, is now the towering thing visible from all the other zones. I suspect we’ll see a lot of elemental-messenger-shaped living anomalies when we confront it.”

“You’re suggesting that these territories where the environment can be controlled were brought in from the outside,” Farrah said.

“Yes,” Clive confirmed.

“You mean the natural array,” Farrah said.

“Yes,” Clive said with a nod. “We believe that the natural array was transformed into the scattered environmental control nodes we’ve been discussing.”

“We also believe that they’re connected,” Jason said. “Just like the array from which they were derived. I learned to connect with things more spiritually while facing the avatar, and I could feel the ones in the territory I’ve claimed.”

“Our current hypothesis,” Clive said, “is that the segmentation of the transformation zone meant that the individual territories were cut off from one another. The links weren’t entirely severed, however, which is what Jason was able to sense. But just uniting the territories they’re in hadn’t been re-establishing their link. That’s what we’re looking to do.”

“The idea,” Jason said, “is to pull all these environmental control nodes into one territory and repair the connections. That will turn the whole thing into a single, zone-spanning array. We have to claim all the zones anyway, so what we’re proposing is that we unify the special ones we’ve already got. Then we add the rest as they get claimed. Even if we can’t use the array until every node is integrated, having extra power for the final push on the tree will be of extreme tactical value.”

“What that looks like from a practical perspective,” Clive said, “is a lot of very large rituals being set up all across the transformation zone. We’ll start by trying to link one pair to see if we’ve gotten this all completely wrong. If that’s the case, we let it go and proceed as we have been. If we’re right, or the results suggest there’s value in further testing, we’ll go from there. If we reach the point of full implementation, that’s where our idle silver-

rankers come in. We'll work on the control nodes we have access to now and cover the rest as we claim the zones they're in."

"Do we need all of them?" Neil asked.

"I don't know," Clive said. "It seems likely if they are based on the natural array."

"The avatar destroy the control centre in the lightning field," Neil pointed out. "If we need every one of these areas to be connected, doesn't that mean we've failed before we begin?"

"That's something we'll need to figure out," Jason said. "I have considered that point, and I have a plan. You don't have to worry."

"I hate to break it to you, Jason," Belinda said, "but you having a plan is when we worry the most."