

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.