

Chapter 830

Right Now

The avatar was gone. Pieces of it had been wrenched away, one by one, and consumed by white fire. The final destruction of the avatar marked the final excision of the god of Undeath's power and Jason's soul realm immediately grew more stable. White flames kicked up into an inferno that was harmless to the living but swept across the landscape. Where it passed, damage was repaired and the marks of corruption were wiped away.

From the moment that process had begun, Shade, Farrah and Colin had been trying to contact Jason. They stood facing each other in silence, eyes closed, as everyone else looked on. They stayed that way for a long time, no one saying anything.

"So," Nik said. "This is exciting."

"Hush, you," Arabelle told him.

"You're not the boss of..."

Nik trailed off as he met Arabelle's gaze. As he bowed his head, Rufus gave him a brotherly pat on the shoulder.

Colin opened his eyes, followed by Farrah.

"This isn't working," Farrah said.

"We're reaching him," Colin said. "He's not reaching back. I don't think there's enough of him left to understand who or what we are. If we can just get him to connect with me, it will all—"

He was cut off as his facial features were once again replaced with blank skin. It was happening for longer each time, and with each restoration, more of Jason's divine markings were being etched into Colin's body.

"We have to find a way to make him reach out for me," Colin said. "I don't know how much longer before I'm as blank as he is and we're both lost."

"We need something that resonates with Mr Asano," Shade said. "Something that links him to the parts of himself he left in Colin, but is still part of him as he is now."

"He purged all of that and put it into me," Colin said. "There's nothing left."

"Some things are left," Farrah said. "God Jason didn't just defend himself against Undeath's power; he protected us. He left enough of his normal self in there to know what was important. Part of him is still in there."

“That is what we need,” Shade said. “Something from Mr Asano’s very core. Something so intrinsic to who he is that it remains a part of him, no matter how much of himself he casts aside.”

Farrah paced around, rubbing a hand over her tired face. She froze when her eyes fell on Nik.

“Something intrinsic,” she said.

“That’s right,” Shade said. “To connect him with the aspects of his identity that he set aside, we need to find a fragment of his original identity that he retains even now. Something fundamental to who he is.”

Farrah grinned.

Hegemon was uncertain. It did not know the path forward. It had understood exactly what it needed to do: excise the antagonist, take the pain and consume it. That was done and now its purpose was gone. Its realm was clear. There were outside elements it did not understand, but they were not the antagonist. They were not the pain. They were from the outside, but they belonged.

Prisoners; friends; refugees. Hegemon knew the words, if not their meaning; taken from memories put aside because they kept it from being what it had needed to be. What he knew was that they’d needed protection, so protect them it did. Now, some of them were reaching out, but Hegemon did not understand. Strange connections reached out but they meant nothing. They spoke to parts of Hegemon that had been sent away that he might become what he was.

The connections stopped. It felt a loss but was unsure why. Then they came back, with a one message, not the scattered meaningless garble of before. This was singular, speaking to a part of Hegemon that it did not realise remained. Something buried deep within itself, like the key to a lock. He heard a voice and thought of strawberry blond hair, a savage smile and a voice reaching out.

“Vehicle Voltron is the best Voltron.”

Hegemon felt something surge up from within. A response, driven by a part of itself it did not know still existed.

Well, that is some bullsh—

“—it right there,” Jason said, suddenly standing between Farrah, Colin and Shade. He blinked as if waking up to find he’d been sleepwalking. He was naked but for a pair of lion Voltron boxer shorts. Colin slammed into him, wrapping him in a hug.

"Oh, hey, buddy. You did good."

"I'm so glad you're back," Colin said.

"Me too."

"I want to eat people again like normal."

"He meant to say 'eat like normal people again,' right?" Neil asked.

"Sure," Jason said unconvincingly.

"All I've wanted to eat since this started was sandwiches," Colin complained. "It's been awful."

"I know, buddy," Jason said, patting him on the back.

"I haven't thought about marinating Neil's thighs this whole time."

"Wait, what did he just say?" Neil asked.

"Don't worry about it," Jason said.

"I'm extremely worried about it!"

"Neil, it's fine," Jason assured him. "Colin's a good boy and he's done very well. Which is why he deserves a treat, and since you're a healer..."

"Absolutely not! I want a soul portal out of here right now."

One popped up right next to him and he immediately all but jumped through it. A moment later, he came back out with a glower on his face.

"Jason," he said through gritted teeth.

"Yes, Neil?" Jason asked as Colin finally let him go.

"That portal did not lead outside your soul realm but into a kitchen."

"Did it? The old powers must still be a bit wonky. I just fought a god, you know."

The messengers were shuffling through the portal to leave Jason's soul realm. Boris stood beside him, watching his people leave.

"Not you," Jason said and Tera Jun Casta was plucked out of the group as if by an invisible hand, loudly protesting as she was whisked away.

"Who is that?" Boris asked. "She's not one of mine."

"She's... it's complicated. She challenged me with a duelling power and I had to do something drastic to keep us both alive."

"You survived a duel power?"

"Yeah. But I had to break her to do it. Torment her soul until she opened it up and I could shut the power down. I purged her brand while I was at it, but I had no idea what I was doing. I still don't know how much damage I did. She's a true believer, and she hates me."

"That's good," Boris said.

"Really? Because everything I just said seems bad to me. She's in my soul, so I know everything she does. Everything she feels. The loss of purpose; the loss of faith. How she hates what I've made her as much as she hates me for doing it. Sometimes I wonder if it wouldn't have been kinder to kill her."

"The hate is good. She'll need to get past it, but it means she's fighting. There's passion there. The trauma of attacking someone's soul until they open it up is something many don't come back from. They just shut down. Of course she's damaged, but she's alive and she's fighting. There's a path forward, however long and rocky it might be. That's good. And setting her free is good, even if she hates you for it. I have no time for that 'slavery is good because house elves like serving humans,' crap."

"I don't know what to do with her. I have these other messengers who are keen to join the Unorthodoxy but that also makes her angry. And they're a bit zealous. I don't think fanaticism from the other side of messenger politics is what Tera needs."

"You have messengers that want to join the Unorthodoxy?"

"I don't think they realise how many of you are out there," Jason said. "Their leader seems to think it's a few isolated cells. Keeps talking about 'the seeds of revolution' and such. I don't think he'll know what to do with himself when he finds out the rest of you are out there. Can you take them off my hands?"

"I can do that. I'd like... could I prevail upon you to keep this conversation private?"

The air around them shimmered as a privacy screen was set in place.

"Thank you," Boris said. "As I was saying, I would like your aid in erasing my soul brand, and sooner rather than later. The astral king I used is an ally but I don't like not being my own man."

"That's a lot of trust, letting me in your soul."

"I'm in yours right now."

"And what does being in mine tell you?"

Boris chuckled.

"That making you an enemy would be a very bad idea. I would like your trust, Asano. Jason. I know that's hard when I'm a messenger who knows so many answers you want. So much about you, and you aren't sure how or why."

"I know you have to have been on Earth, and not for a short time. I know that Earth went through a lot and I didn't see you coming out to help."

"We were there, and we did what we could from the shadows. Do you think a secret army of angels appearing would have calmed things down? When magic had just been revealed, the monster surges were happening and the religions were already in a frenzy?"

"I can see there would be complications."

"There was also the matter of an agreement made long ago. To hide ourselves from you until the time was right."

"An agreement with whom?"

"Noreth. You might know him as—"

"Mr North. The rune spider."

"We were wondering how much he revealed to you."

"I knew he had more secrets. Things he refused to tell me. For my own good, so he claims."

"For what it is worth, I believe he was right."

"Then you won't tell me what he was hiding? Other than your existence, obviously."

"I won't. I realise that will make it harder to gain your trust."

"Not as much as you'd think. Someone I already trust also warned me not to try and find out. That it would do more damage than it would prevent."

"You speak of Dawn?"

"You know her?"

"Only by reputation. And occasionally spotting her with you when there was footage of you on the news. Farrah is a somewhat known quantity to the people of Earth, but Dawn remains a mystery. The internet theories are—"

"I know what internet theories are like."

Boris laughed again.

"So, the issue of trust. It seems that if I want your trust, then giving you mine is a strong, perhaps even necessary first step. And since I need someone to go into my soul for some spring cleaning, that works out nicely."

"You've done this before, haven't you? Taken on a brand to infiltrate messenger operations?"

"Many times."

"You'd have to have a fairly well-developed soul space then."

"I do. There's no budging a brand without an astral king's help, though. I can finish it myself, once the process has begun. I've done it enough times that I'm an old hand at it now, but I need someone to loosen the jar before I can get at the pickles."

Jason nodded.

"Once I step out of here, I'm going to get hit with the side effects of having claimed around a quarter of the whole transformation zone from the avatar. Once I get over that I'll do it."

"What about side effects from your fight in here?"

"It's fine. I've rampaged through here a few times myself. Used my astral throne and astral gate more than I should."

"You're an incomplete astral king. You shouldn't be using them at all."

"I know, right? But I've battered things up in here enough that I'm pretty much inured to the level of damage Undeath's power did. It'll finish healing up before I'm done absorbing that massive chunk of transformation zone."

"You are a dangerous man, Jason Asano."

"I suspect, Boris, that you are more dangerous still."

"I've had a long time to work on it. You're younger than *Jurassic Park* and I'm older than the Jurassic period. By a considerable margin."

"How considerable?"

"Enough that I suspect I'll be dodging your friend Clive and his questions for some time."

"I might have a few questions of my own."

"As I said, there are some I won't answer. I suspect I have a lot of historical context to offer, but knowledge is power, and power does not come cheap."

"How about we start with why you're still gold-rank if you're that old?"

"That is an important secret of the Unorthodoxy. Sharing it would be a greater act of trust than letting you in my soul. It imperils not just me but my entire people."

"You're telling me that the Unorthodoxy has some secret that no enemy astral king has dug out in the last however many squillion years?"

"That's not a real number."

"But that is a real deflection. You're trying to sell me a secret the other side probably found out before my planet existed."

Boris let out a villain's laugh.

"You can't blame a guy for trying. It is a secret, though, just not from the enemy astral kings. It's from the rank-and-file messengers."

"Because it's related to how their astral kings drain their potential for authority?"

"Exactly. What we've discovered is that we can learn to tap into our own potential. Stall ourselves out at a given rank in return for more power at that rank. We can't generate authority from it the way an astral king can, but it gives us what amounts to overcharged

mana that we can use to enhance our abilities. I wasn't lying about its importance to the Unorthodoxy. It's one of our key weapons."

Jason looked around, despite it not being necessary to know anything happening in his realm. He had an odd sense that if he didn't take the time to act like a mortal he might fall out of the habit.

"Your people are almost all out," he said, "and mine are getting suspicious about my secret talks with the enemy."

"I'm not your enemy."

"I'm not going to start putting everyone with wings into camps, Boris, but the messengers have a lot to answer for. Fair or not, it's going to take a lot to build goodwill with people. Including with me. At some stage, we need to talk about why you're here and what you want."

"We do. But, as you said, my people are all out and yours are looking at us funny. That's my cue to go."

Jason's companions followed the messengers out through the portal until Jason and Humphrey were watching the last of their friends depart.

"Not going?" Jason asked.

"Jason, you and I need to talk."

"It seems like my near future involves a lot of serious conversations. Is right now really the time to do this?"

"Yes, Jason. This is the time and the place."