

## Chapter 849

### The Work of Higher Beings

The tree was quarter again the height of Everest, clouds hiding most of it. The battle that had been waged around it was over, leaving little indication that it had even taken place. The roots of the tree, being impervious to damage, were untouched by the conflict. The earth they were buried in was a different story; countless destructive powers had churned it up and scorched it to black dust. At a glance, though, it looked like ordinary black dirt.

The thousands of messenger-shaped anomaly corpses had turned to rainbow smoke, mostly through the loot powers of various adventurers. That loot had been packed up and hauled away in dimensional bags and personal storage spaces. Although too many of the expedition would never make it home, those that did would bring treasure troves with them.

At the base of the tree, two cloud flasks were immeasurable specks in comparison to the massive trunk. Just as hard to see were the narrow streams of cloud-substance they were spraying into the air. The cloud material snaked up the trunk in two streams until they reached the lowest level of actual clouds, around a kilometre up.

The cloud material condensed into a pair of building complexes, highly distinct from one another. The larger of the pair was a single enormous building; an ostentatious sky palace. The other was smaller and hard to spot at a distance. A series of smaller structures, rather than a single massive one, they took on the shape, colour and texture of wood. The rustic complex was made up of modest treehouses, connected by rope bridges and crude counterweight elevators.

Emir and Jason were floating in the air, watching the buildings as they neared completion. Emir was standing on a cloud that, being an essence ability, was superior to personal travel devices that looked similar. Jason held himself aloft with his aura. The icy wind that came with their altitude whipped his hair about.

“Really?” Emir asked as he cast his eyes over Jason’s portion of the complex. “Treehouses and elevators that pull people up from the ground using rope? I appreciate the rustic appeal but you could at least put in a proper elevating platform. There’s something to be said for efficiency, you know.”

“There’s also something to be said for subtlety,” Jason said, looking to the sunset blaze shining through the clouds of Emir’s cloud palace.

“We’re building cloud palaces on the side of a tree taller than most mountains,” Emir pointed out. “If that’s not a time for showmanship, when is? Also, of all the people who might lecture me about grandiosity, it shouldn’t be the man who carved a mountain into the shape of his own head.”

“There’s a time and a place for everything,” Jason said, his expression the picture of innocence. Emir shook his head.

“Oh, look: mine’s finished,” Emir said. “I’m going to go in and poke around. How is it that mine is bigger, yet yours takes longer to finish?”

Jason nodded sagely.

“You did finish first,” he acknowledged. “Constance said you like to do that. Poor woman.”

“Wait, what did my wife say?”

“Oh, look,” Jason said. “Mine just finished. I’m going to go inside and poke around.”

Jason floated toward his cloud building, Emir following after.

“Hey! You have to tell me what my wife said!”

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With everyone gathered up into the two cloud palaces, preparations for Jason to begin in earnest were complete. Jason had given everyone a choice between riding it out in his soul realm and remaining in the cloud palaces. Most had chosen the cloud palaces, whether out of curiosity or from reluctance to enter Jason’s soul any more than necessary.

Jason had one last thing to do before engaging with the task of re-integrating the transformation zone with normal reality. Two people had made important decisions and he was going to give them one last chance to change their minds. He walked onto the balcony where they were waiting for him.

If not for the kilometre-high view, it would have looked like the porch of a log cabin. An invisible mist screen reduced the blasting icy wind to a warm breeze. Gary seemed at peace, his hands on the railing as he took in the vista. From their height, they could see the distinct boundaries of the once-separate territories. The sudden shifts in ecology and climate were clearly unnatural.

“It looks like one of your board games from up here,” Gary observed. He was the only one who could always sense Jason’s presence, even within Jason’s spirit realm. Jason joined Gary at the rail, looking like a child next to the massive leonid. He didn’t bother to say anything, simply happy to be in his friend’s company. The other person was standing by the wall, still and silent as a block of wood.

“Why did you put the cloud palaces all the way up here?” Gary asked.

“Because we could,” Jason said. “It’s an adventure, remember? There have to be joys and wonders to go with all the sacrifice and loss.”

Gary smiled.

“Fair enough,” he said. “You know, Rufus is going to be a problem for a while.”

“Farrah has an idea about that.”

“You talked with her?”

Jason shook his head.

“She’s discussing it with some of the others now. I’m listening in.”

Jason waved his hand at the air around them.

“Now that I control all of it,” he said. “I can eavesdrop where and when I like.”

“What’s Farrah’s idea?”

“I’ll let her explain it. I don’t know if Rufus will go for it, or how well it’ll work if he does.”

“You should ask his mother.”

“I know. I’m sorry I won’t be around to help with him. I’ll be gone before you.”

“We do what we can and accept what we can’t,” Gary said.

“If either of us was willing to accept that,” Jason said, “neither of us would be here.”

“And we’ve both paid the price,” Gary pointed out.

Jason shook his head.

“No, you’ve paid the price. I always seem to come back stronger, but you’ve given up everything. It doesn’t feel right.”

“Don’t,” Gary said. “I get enough of that from Rufus.”

“Sorry. This is your last chance to change your mind, though. If you want to stick around. I know you won’t, but I still have to ask.”

“What do you think I should do?”

“Whatever feels right.”

Gary nodded.

“I thought you might say that. I was half-hoping you had a compelling reason for me to stay, but I know what’s right for me. It’s just easy to doubt, you know? Especially with Rufus telling me to cling onto life. Even if it’s a ragged, broken scrap of one.”

“It might not be that bad, and none of us want to lose you, Gary. But there’s courage in letting go when holding on isn’t right. Shade refuses to tell me what comes next, but he does think you’re making the right choice.”

“I am still not going to tell you why,” Shade’s voice came from Jason’s shadow.

“Not even a hint?” Jason wheedled. “You know his situation.”

Gary's chuckle came out as a deep, resonating growl.

"Leave him alone, Jason."

"I am not privy to what will happen to Mr Xandier," Shade said. "All I know are the possibilities — which I will not be sharing."

"Don't you let him push you around, Shade," Gary said.

"Of course, Mr Xandier. I wish you good fortune on the next step of your journey... Gareth."

"Thank you," Gary said. He pushed himself off the railing and looked over at the other person on the balcony. It was the tree's avatar, the wooden replica of Jason.

"At least I can do one last good deed, even if it is only stepping aside to make survival easier for someone else," Gary said. "I'll see you on the other side."

Gary left as Jason nodded, his eyes on his wooden doppelganger.

"You get the same chance," Jason told it. "Last opportunity to change your mind."

"Do you not still wish me to take root in your soul realm?"

"It's a risk for both of us," Jason said. "If we do this, we're saddled together for all eternity. I can't tell you how that will go, but I can tell you there's more risk to you than to me. At the end of the day, if we do this and we don't end up getting along, it's my soul realm. If push came to shove, I could probably strip the mind out of you and turn you into just another power for me to use. You're trusting me with your very existence with little time and less information to base that decision on. It's a terrible choice to have to make when you'll be living with the consequences forever."

"We have been over this," the replica said. "My mind is unchanged."

"Okay," Jason said. "I had to offer. All that's left is to get it done."

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Jason stood alone on a wooden balcony. He let the invisible mist screen dissipate, allowing the chilling, high-altitude winds to wash over him. This wasn't his first time resolving a transformation zone, but this time the training wheels were off. No instinctive, good-enough-will-do solutions would do; too many details mattered for him to be anything but exact. He couldn't afford close-enough when it came to the soul forge, the natural array, the tree or the new home for the brighthearts.

There was also the mass of undeath energy to deal with. Two hundred thousand dead brighthearts left to fester had created an energy that had permeated the old brightheart city. That power had been brought with them into the transformation zone, and while they dealt with the priests and the avatar, that power remained. If Jason didn't handle it properly, it could infest everything again, making the new would-be home of the

brighthearts uninhabitable. If he let it infest the tree, he could create an adversary worse than the one they'd already fought.

For all these reasons, he couldn't just let instinct guide him. He needed to dig in and manage the details himself. Every mistake he made could lead to dire consequences.

"Well," he muttered to himself, "standing around brooding won't make it go faster."

"Oh, thank goodness."

"What was that, Shade?"

"Pardon, Mr Asano?" Shade's voice came from Jason's shadow.

"You just said something?"

"No," Mr Asano.

"You definitely said something."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Mr Asano. It makes sense that you are distracted, however; there is a lot on your mind."

"Uh-huh."

Jason shook his head and chuckled. He took one last look at the panorama of the transformation zone and then, with a startling simple act of will, destroyed it. The landscape smeared like wet paint splashed with water. Reality beyond the reach of the tree twisted and warped until it was nothing but a blur of colour. The colour slowly faded as it swirled around until all that was left was black, deeper than any night sky.

What Jason perceived through the blackness was not something he would later be able to explain. It was not the stuff of the material world but the space between potential and result; between what could be and what would be.

He was reminded of his time on Earth using the Builder's door, roaming in the space underneath reality. He'd been repairing the link between worlds and only now realised how crude and fumbling he had been. He'd gotten the job done, but he'd been trying to etch microchips with oven gloves, a blindfold and an axe. The result was just ugly, even if he did get the link more or less repaired.

Things were different now. Now he had the tools and experience to shape reality without making a complete ham of things. A large part was simply accepting that it was his work to do. This was the work of higher beings, and he had come to terms with the fact that he was on the path to standing amongst them. He was by no means an expert, but he wasn't the bumbling mortal he had been, either.

Jason's first task was breaking down the transformation zone into a state he could work with. He was already working on that, with the zone at large no longer inhabitable. Only the safe zone of the tree and the buildings upon it remained intact. Even that space

would get some changes, but it would remain a survivable area throughout the process. He could feel the occupants watching the zone break down from balconies and windows, although they would eventually be rendered unconscious.

In Jason's previous transformation zones, the safe spaces had been pagodas that became the heart of his spiritual domains. This time, Jason had decided to use the tree rather than create a new safe zone or use his head-shaped mountain. The tree was a sentient thing, and while he was going to change it, he didn't want to break it down and remake it from nothing, like the rest of the zone. He simply wanted to extract the natural array and the soul forge that were corrupting it.

Reshaping the zone required a precision and ability to multitask that was outside the scope of the mortal mind. Jason would not be able to carry out his task as he was. As he had when fighting the avatar, Jason had to become something else. The last time was dangerous, but he had learned much. He was confident he could come back to himself when the task was done.

He put his thoughts aside — not just his personal musings but everything. Mortal thinking would distract him from a task that required higher-order cognition. He let himself float off the balcony and join with the unformed space beyond. Once, this would have killed him. Now, it was what he needed to reshape himself, that he could reshape the zone in turn.