

Chapter 770

Citadel

The sense of death from the previous chamber vanished the moment the expedition passed through the double doors set into the giant gate. The pervasive elemental influence on the ambient magic snapped back into place so sharply that Jason doubted it was natural. His suspicions were only raised by the elemental power feeling a lot more stable than it had in the shaft. He reached out to Clive through voice chat with an idea.

“Can’t say,” Clive responded. “There are a lot of variables I’d have to check. Definitely not with a regular portal, but your soul portal... maybe.”

The arrival of a combined force of adventurers and Builder cultists did not, unsurprisingly, go unremarked. A defensive squadron rose up to meet them, mostly travelling on flat floating rocks. As Beaufort worked to calm a visibly agitated defence commander, Jason and the other expedition members took in the last bastion of the brightheart smoulders.

While not as vast as the one they had just left, the chamber was still implausibly large and, to Jason’s sensibilities, more impressive. Buildings were again carved into the walls but not from the ceiling and floor, with a significant exception. Massive pillars rose from the floor and descended from the ceiling to suspend a massive citadel in the very centre of the chamber.

The pillars themselves were some of the largest towers Jason had ever seen, but they weren’t just solid supporting posts. The windows and balconies showed that the pillars were occupied spaces. Not being solid, Jason doubted they could hold the weight of the massive citadel without some kind of magic. It could be enchantment but he suspected the whole chamber had been carved out of some high-rank magical stone. Normally that would ping his magical senses, but the ambient elemental magic blanketed everything.

The citadel itself was a confusing mess of different design elements. It looked like someone had taken sculptures, frescoes and buildings in a dozen clashing architectural styles and attempted to meld them together with magic. Badly. There was gothic statuary, time-worn crenellations and scattered murals with no cohesive theme. Some looked like defensive measures that were uselessly suspended in the air, while other parts were artistic and without practical purpose.

“Can you make any sense of this design?” Jason asked Miriam. They were standing at the front of the expedition atop Onslow’s shell, flanked by their respective teams.

“I’m recognising elements of architectural designs I know,” Humphrey said. “Old, though. Historical buildings more than anything modern.”

“Valetta, you’re an architect,” Miriam said. “What do you make of it?”

“Master Geller is correct,” Miriam’s teammate said. “This is an amalgam of design elements from the surface, but all centuries out of favour. Look at the pillars. They reflect the buildings we saw in the previous chamber and are likely a reflection of the architectural style of the people that dwell here. The architectural abomination in the middle is almost certainly the result of a dimensional prefabrication disaster.”

“Which is what, exactly?” Miriam asked.

“A dimensional accident,” Clive said. “I’ve never seen a building like this in person, but I’ve seen recordings. Always in extreme environments.”

“I think it’s safe to call this massive underground chamber full of elemental power an extreme environment,” Neil said.

“There is a construction technique,” Valetta explained, “for establishing buildings in extreme environments. Underwater is the most common.”

“Like that village under Sky Scar Lake, near Greenstone,” Clive said. “That was modest compared to this massive building, but they still probably portalled in materials rather than carting them down through the water.”

“For more involved builds and more extreme environments,” Valetta continued, “building sections are pre-fabricated for rapid assembly. Then they’re then brought to the location in dimensional spaces or through portals.”

“But some extreme environments,” Belinda said, gesturing at the space around them, “aren’t friendly to dimension magic.”

“Precisely,” Valetta said. “If the dimensional magic goes wrong in just the right way, you get something like this.”

“Most likely what the first smoulders to arrive here brought with them,” Miriam said.

The conversation ended as Beaufort returned.

“We’re heading in,” he said. “Most members of our groups will be placed in one of the ready areas used for quick mobilisation. I’ll be taking your leadership to meet with that of the brightheart smoulders right away.”

The group landed on a set of three clustered balconies, none individually large enough for the whole group. The expedition went to one and the cult to a second. Beaufort and the expedition leadership, Miriam, Jason and Clive, landed on the third. The larger groups were escorted into the citadel by wary guards while the leaders were guided by just one, a smoulder named Marla.

Jason got a close-up look at more brightheart smoulders as they moved towards the upper levels of the citadel. Normal smoulders were all fire-aspected, their eyes and often hair reflecting this. Their skin markings normally stayed subdued. All of that was prone to change with essences and racial gifts, and the brighthearts all demonstrated this to some degree.

The skin of the brighthearts remained the traditional obsidian black while their other features changed with elemental affinity. Iron and Ash were usually shades of dull grey while fire and magma glowed brightly. Fire aspects were the most common, although they were also the most likely to have their skin markings lit up.

Marla seemed to have a less common affinity, her aura radiating strong metal energy while her characteristic features glowed red-orange. That was striking enough on her eyes and skin markings, but the effect on her hair was flabbergasting. In a world where magic made everyone beautiful, she was one of those that truly stood apart, like Sophie, Rufus and Zara.

Marla led Jason and the others towards the upper reaches of the citadel. Their route was far from direct but Jason didn't think they were getting the run-around. The issue was that the citadel's interior was just as bizarre as the outside, if not more so. Corridors zigzagged, the floors awkwardly undulating instead of staying flat. Stairwells led up and back down again without any access to other levels.

The doors were eclectic in design with some doorways simply empty, revealing what was on the other side. Most of the rooms were relatively ordinary, although many had slightly distorted measurements giving them an unnerving optical illusion quality. One room was just a slanted shaft with a rail for some kind of transport set into the wall.

"You must have all manner of stone-shapers down here," Clive said. "Why haven't you fixed this distorted building?"

"This underground realm is called Cardinas," Marla explained as they walked. "This citadel was formed by accident when our ancestors first descended to the natural array. It has been a monument to their early efforts, serving as a museum and school. We also hold government in the upper levels, which is where we are going. Until this crisis, it hadn't served as a residence in centuries."

"What kind of government do you have?" Jason asked.

"We had a ruling council of nine," Marla said. "Three were elected from the gold-rankers, three from the normal-rankers and three from the guilds. Now only Lorenn remains, the others having sacrificed everything to keep the rest of us alive. She is the

last, and the burden lies heavy. I ask that you address her as Councilwoman Lorenn or just Councilwoman.”

“I’m sorry to ask such a grim question,” Miriam said, “but how many of your people are left?”

“Fewer than ten thousand, now. Less than one in twenty of what we had before the messengers came, but even this many we struggle to feed. Aside from the citadel chamber, we have only two growth halls remaining. The growth halls are where we grow our food and purify the air. Most of our remaining citizens have advanced to iron rank and can sustain themselves on elements other than air. Most of the others died as our remaining growth halls were overtaxed and the air grew too thin. The children and the elderly were the first to...”

“Don’t,” Miriam said in half a sob. “I am sorry for asking such a thing.”

Jason paled at the thought of watching thousands die as the air grew too thin, most of the population gasping desperately through their final moments. For all the horrors Jason had been through, he realised these people were going through worse. A society without children was a society without hope.

“Many of the children live still,” Marla said. “We’ve moved them to the growth chambers where the air is strongest.”

Unbreathable air was no impediment to the expedition members who were all silver-rank and above. The air underground would have killed them long before they reached the bottom of the shaft otherwise.

“If most of our people hadn’t died,” Marla continued, “we would have starved by now. We are rationing heavily but we’ve already seen the first starvation deaths. We can’t sustain ourselves on spirit coins like you surface people, and they can’t be created from the magic here anyway. We grow moss, fungus and other plants that thrive on the heat of magma vents. They take on elemental properties that sustain us very well. Or did, when we had enough growth halls for all. But they were the places the messenger tree claimed first.”

Jason had more questions about the tree but couldn’t bring himself to ask. The three adventurers all had pained expressions, shoulders tensing and fists balling. Beaufort was fine. It reminded Jason that the cultist had the same name as Thadwick Mercer’s father. Beaufort Mercer wasn’t a villain like his namesake or his son, although the trio did share a significant deficit of empathy.

Marla led them to a large room where a horseshoe-shaped conference desk curved around a model that floated in the air. It looked to be made of coloured sand that Jason

realised must depict the full underground realm. It was a surprisingly vast network of chambers and tunnels, although most of the map was obscured by a green glow. The largest chamber, which showed the shaft leading out through the top, was shrouded in darkness. One small chamber stood out, having a shifting glow of warm colours, reds, oranges and yellows. The only areas of the map not obscured were at one end. One chamber had a very clear depiction of the citadels, while two chambers branched off from it.

Waiting for the group was a weary-looking brightheart with the washed-out markings of an ash type. Having come close enough to sense a few of the smoulder now, he could tell them apart with his magical senses. The differences were much like those between the elemental messengers, although the comparison only went so far. The elemental messengers felt corrupted and twisted while, in the brightheart, that power felt natural and balanced. The woman got up from where she had been sitting at the desk, going over lists spread out in front of her.

“I am Lorenn,” she said as she moved around the long desk to greet them. “You, I understand it, are Beaufort’s enemies.”

She paused, sensing something, and narrowed hostile eyes on Jason.

“You’re like them,” she accused.

“In some ways,” Jason said, realised she meant that he shared the gestalt nature of the messengers. “But, in some ways, so are you.”

Lorenn gave him a long look, their eyes locked as no one said anything. Finally, she nodded.

“They are a mockery of what we are,” she said. “I suppose they are a mockery of what you are as well. I was not expecting the leadership of the group Beaufort was so insistent on retrieving to have more silver-rankers than gold. Although he assures us you are dangerous, I hope you understand I was hoping for more.”

“I won’t bother trying to convince you with words,” Jason told her. “You’ll see our actions soon enough. My name is Jason Asano, operations commander for this expedition. This is my tactical commander, Miriam Vance, and our magical expert, Clive Standish.”

“Do not underestimate Asano or Standish,” Beaufort told her. “They may be silver-rank but they were giving the Builder black eyes at iron and bronze-rank. The surface messengers have marked them both as personal threats as well.”

“Wait, what?” Clive asked. “Since when do the messengers know me by name?”

“Clive, you’re the bloke neck deep in messenger magic with that study trove,” Jason pointed out. “You know more about the messenger device than they’d like and we didn’t clear out all the spies until right before we left.”

“Oh, great,” Clive said.

“So long as you can do something about the elemental messengers,” Lorenn said, “I don’t care what you are.”

“Dealing with them is why we’re here,” Miriam said.

“No,” Clive disagreed. “It’s not. We came here because the natural array has become unstable. Councilwoman Lorenn, I presume you are aware that the core aspect of your people’s predicament is the disruption of the natural array by the messengers.”

“Yes,” she said. “This citadel chamber is the site of the echo array, a powerful artefact that allows us to affect the array. We have been using the echo array to fight the corruption of the natural array by the messengers and their tree, but we have only been able to slow it, not stop it.”

“We know little,” Clive continued. “Most of our information on your people is just guesswork. One of those guesses is that the natural array is central to your civilisation, and the power that transformed your ancestors.”

“That is an accurate assessment,” Lorenn told him.

“At the risk of being insensitive,” Clive told her, “are you aware that the natural array is likely beyond salvaging?”

“It would be strange to come back from what has happened,” Lorenn said. “We have accepted that with our minds, but doing so with our hearts is more difficult. The array has been the centre of our society from the beginning. Cardinas, our civilisation, is only possible because of it. It is responsible for not just who we are but what we are. For many of our people, accepting its loss will be one source of despair too many. But the truth is, it is lost, whether we accept that or not.”

“Most likely,” Clive said.

“To be open and honest,” Jason said, “We are here to neutralise the threat of the natural array. The odds of doing that by restoring it to its original condition are close enough to nil as to make no difference. We have forged something of an uneasy alliance with the messengers — the regular ones on the surface, not the ones you have here. Like the Builder cult, they are our enemies. We hope that the cultists are more honest with their dealings, though, as we know the messengers are working against us for their own ends.”

“The messengers want to turn your array into something called a soul forge,” Clive said. “They cannot do it alone as this place corrupts them.”

“So they struck a false bargain with us,” Jason said. “Send us here with a device they claim will stabilise the array. We believe it will finish the job the messengers started when they first came here and change the array into a soul forge.”

“Or that’s the intention,” Clive said. “They may have gotten this attempt as wrong as the first.”

“But if it does work, they intend to take it somehow,” Jason said. “Then kill me and probably leave the rest of you to your fates.”

“Why you?” Lorenn asked.

“Let’s sit,” Jason said. “We can introduce ourselves and explain everything from the beginning. And then we would like to hear about things from your end.”

He glanced at Beaufort.

“Both of your ends.”