

## Chapter 778

### Come Like a Tsunami

The expedition moved forward with extreme wariness. The elemental messengers ranged ahead of them while scouts were left behind to monitor the approach of the undead. Miriam and Jason were atop Onslow's shell in the middle of the formation.

"I'm surprised that the messengers went along with this," Miriam said. "This isn't just mutual defence against the undead but reshaping the reality their tree is in."

"I'm not sure how much of what I explained they really understood," Jason told her.

"You may be overlooking something," Clive said.

"Oh?" Jason asked.

"As best we can tell, the messengers aren't in charge. The tree that made them this way is. We think the tree has some kind of will, but does it have intelligence? Yes or no, I think the tree's objective is its own welfare, not that of the messengers it created. Whether it understands your proposal or not, we know it recognises the threat of the undead. Perhaps it has realised that your proposal is the only escape from them."

As the expedition moved through the tunnels and chambers, the brighthearts amongst them grew increasingly angry. These places had once been the homes where they lived. Where they grew their food, where they had played as children. Everything they had ever known had been stolen from them and left to ruin.

Once they reached the areas still claimed by the tree, it became so much worse. These places were unrecognisable, overgrown with vines and moss, but not the kind they were familiar with. Everything was washed in a blood-red light that came from the plants themselves, sickly red veins running through vines and leaves. Most disturbing were the pods, some empty and others containing half-grown messengers floating in murky fluid. They hung from the walls and ceilings in clutches.

All this had been made from the brightheart dead, tens of thousands of them. The material processed by the tree; the fertilizer used to grow it. This was a defilement of their entire species, their families and friends churned up and reused like sacks of manure.

Lorenna worked to keep her people calm, although Jason could feel the volatility in their auras. They were on the verge of boiling over, which would be a disaster in their current location. Attacking the messengers this deep into their territory would get them swarmed on every side. Jason considered trying to clamp down on them using his own aura but decided the risk was too high. He trusted Lorenna to keep her people in check, knowing their trust in her was strong.

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Stone and steel erupted as the wall exploded, raining debris through the spreading cloud of dust. Yellow glow stones set into the wall around the breach dimmed as purple light shone through from the other side, the intrusion of undeath energy sapping their power.

Gary came tromping downstairs from above, followed by a massive iron golem that glowed with internal heat. He had summoned his forge golem after the first breach, the two of them being the main force of their response team. The others were stone and metal shapers who would repair the breach once Gary and his golem had beaten the undead back.

This breach was on the third level of twenty-six, the lower levels suffering the heaviest assaults. Other response teams were scattered across the walls, reinforcing where they could and reacting when they had to. Most of the assaults thus far had been streams of bronze-rank enemies, with a few silvers mixed in. The power level of the undead was climbing with every breach, however. Silvers and even the occasional gold were represented amongst the attackers in growing numbers.

The weaker undead were animated brighthearts and elemental messengers. Many retained elemental powers, breathing fire or lobbing small boulders. Gary deflected the projectiles with his shield and ignored the flames as he waded into the throng, pushing back the horde. He and his golem were like construction machinery, shoring up riverbanks against the flood.

When they had pushed back enough, Gary conjured a barrier that would only hold for moments, but that was enough. He and the golem pulled back and the element shapers filled the gap, restoring the barricades. The restored barriers weren't as strong as they were pre-breach, but they would do for the moment. The defenders knew they were plugging holes in a dam that would ultimately give way entirely. The best they could do was buy time.

Gary saw the stricken faces of his brightheart support team and placed a hand on the shoulder of Kollas, their leader.

"I know it's hard seeing your own people come at you like monsters. Trying to take away what little you have left. Just remember that they aren't the ones we're fighting; they're the ones we're avenging. They are not our enemies but the victims of our enemies. Save your rage for the ones who turned them into weapons and sent them against you. Stay strong and remember that you're also fighting for the people you've lost, not just the living."

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Jason and Miriam moved to the front of the group when Lorenn signalled them.

“We’re approaching the natural array chamber,” she said. “You’re about to see the tree.”

Jason had been expecting some level of reluctance on the part of the messengers to let the expedition into their most sacred space, but there was nothing. Clive’s thoughts on the primacy of the tree’s will seemed to be accurate, with the elemental messengers being little more than puppets. It was only the tree that mattered.

None of the chambers and tunnels they had encountered thus far had been sealed. Any construction they contained, from buildings to the doors and gates had been demolished, red-veined plants crawling over the few shattered remnants. The array chamber was different, with roots forming a solid mesh over the entrance to the chamber. As the expedition approached, those roots withdrew, the mesh unravelling to reveal the chamber beyond.

The room was awash with red light. At its centre the leafless tree grew like an enormous pillar, its branches digging into the ceiling and its roots into the floor. The bark had a craggy, stone-like quality to it and lava trickled from numerous points like sap. The result was a tree that looked halfway to being a volcano.

Pillars of natural stone filled the rest of the chamber like a forest. The walls, floor and pillars were all covered in vines and moss from which flowers grew in abundance. Those flowers shone blindingly bright, giving the room its red-alert tint.

Jason could sense the array under it all, essences and awakening stones embedded in the walls, floor, ceiling and pillars. He could feel their interplay, creating a power far greater than the sum of its parts. He could also feel its instability. The tree sat at the centre of the elemental power like a black hole, warping and twisting everything around it.

Jason floated forward alone. The messengers didn’t move to stop him and he gestured back Lorenn and Miriam when they moved to follow. He reached the tree, the trunk spread out in front of him like a wall. He extended his hand and touched it.

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### Birthing Tree (corrupted)

- This birthing tree is the result of a failed attempt to create a soul forge. Lacking the proper environment to grow, it has adapted a local energy source, corrupting it and being corrupted in turn.

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Jason could feel a will pressing against his own. It was powerful but young, scared and erratic. It tried to claw its way into him, but he sensed no maliciousness. To expand

was its nature and he felt how unsettled it was at having been forced to pull back from its claimed territory. This was not a malevolent force, Jason realised. It was an animal, wounded and confused, following its instincts.

The tree's will was strong, but a leaf in a hurricane next to what Jason had once experienced from the Builder. Jason fended it off easily, suddenly feeling pity for the tree, a warped living thing that did not even understand its own nature. He impressed his own will on it, his intentions not to destroy the tree but to heal it. There was a susurration in the chamber, a breeze that should not appear underground rustling the glowing flowers.

Jason nodded to himself, then turned and floated back to the group. On arrival, he was already snapping off orders.

"Clive and the ritualist team, get to work. Miriam, set up a defensive perimeter however you think best. We need to hold this chamber long enough for the ritualists to do their work. Councilwoman Lorenn, you and your people know these chambers, so please coordinate with the Tactical Commander. I seem to communicate with the messengers passably, so I'll do my best to play liaison."

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If the undead attacking the citadel chamber wall were just an army of reanimated brighthearts and messengers, the wall blocking them from the citadel chamber would never fall. They had elemental powers but used them crudely, lacking the finesse to stone-shape their way through. Instead, they blasted ineffectual attacks at the walls, getting nowhere.

The messengers had lost the power of flight in their transformation to the walking dead, even if their wings remained intact. The magic that allowed their flight had been lost, although some of their elemental powers remained. They were larger and stronger than the brighthearts, but still far from enough to shatter the barriers blocking the internal sections of the citadel chamber wall. The adventurers and brighthearts had reinforced them well.

The encroaching power of undeath would eventually overtake the wall, at which point, its fall was inevitable. The priests of undeath were unwilling to wait that long, however, and had already started deploying more powerful undead.

The rank and file, the brighthearts and messengers, did not require direct intervention to create. The priests had been quietly developing a self-perpetuating system while everyone believed the death chamber was quiet and empty save for some spontaneously risen spectres and zombies. The priests had carefully measured enough threat to make

the brighthearts and messengers wary without triggering a retaliatory response. That left them free to make their preparations.

The first undead the priests had animated themselves to serve as manual labour. From there, they established the spawning pits in which they seated the power bestowed by Undeath. These were the heart of this new domain, as not only would they animate any corpse thrown into them but they would spread the influence of undeath energy.

The greater that influence spread, the more powerful the undead created. This was why the first waves had been weak bronzes, but more and more silvers emerged with every passing moment. As for the source of the bodies, the undead were tossing in one corpse after another. The tainted death energy of the chamber was preserving them, even high-ranking bodies not dissolving into rainbow smoke.

The preservation of bodies was the very reason Undeath had sent the priests so deep underground. A massive supply of corpses, death magic gone wrong and a well-hidden location was a veritable wish list for the Church of Undeath.

Silver-rank was as far as the pits would ever raise the undead, so the priests also had their part. It fell on them to create individual undead that could reach greater heights, custom-building gold-rank undead one by one.

Garth Larosse was a priest of undeath, and was himself an unliving thing. He stood at the same height as a messenger, some nine feet tall, his skeletal body wrapped in a dark green cloak. The silhouette it formed showed that the body underneath, formed from the skeletons of a dozen monsters, did not conform to humanoid norms. Beneath his hood, a skull with glowing red eyes watched the undead crawl from the spawning pits.

The priests had already claimed any prime material for their more elaborate creations, while anything else went to the pits. Most of the corpses were brighthearts and messengers, but there were monsters as well. Anything relatively intact would eventually crawl back out while loose limbs and other chunks were consumed as fuel to spread the influence of undeath in the ambient magic.

The priests did get an occasional treat when the pits spat out some abominations of flesh made from fused random parts. They weren't especially powerful but the priests did find them hilarious with arms sticking out of faces and eyes in the back of knees. They tended to stumble around, accomplishing nothing, and sometimes just exploded without warning.

Garth knew that hordes did not matter for the moment. Barely controllable, he left them to their impotent scratching at the wall blocking them from the citadel chamber. The weak masses were for overrunning the enemy once their defences broke.

Garth and his priests had been focused on crafting their more powerful undead. Bespoke abominations, exalting the glory of Lord Undeath, he who would claim the world. None of them were strong enough to put down the strongest defenders, unfortunately.

If they had more powerful creatures as base materials, that would be a different story. As a boy, Garth had seen an undead dragon. In that moment he had understood that he would forever serve the god of undeath. The concept of such power at his command was a dream that he had never lost.

This task, deep underground, was that chance. The gold-rank messengers and adventurers that currently opposed them would become the core of a new army. As for the tree, even Undeath himself was excited at the prospect. Garth had felt the god's eagerness each time they communed.

But first, this underground realm needed to be captured. Left to his own devices, Garth would have ignored the citadel chamber where the last of the brighthearts had hidden away. The expansion of the undeath influence would claim them soon enough. But the lord had manifested in person to instruct him to wipe them out. Although the god did not say as much, Garth knew there was a threat there that had to be eliminated sooner rather than later.

The gold-rank abominations they had would not break through the wall any faster than waiting for the undeath influence to reach it. For this reason, Garth and his priests had created a wasteful but effective-for-purpose form of undead. One of Garth's priests, Jeff, insisted on calling them boomers, an idiotic name that had sadly caught on amongst the rest of the clergy.

The boomers were simple creations. A mound of flesh on four legs, the flesh was overcharged with volatile elemental power. If detonated amongst their own forces they were a liability, but they had forces to spare. So long as they were effective at breaching the wall it didn't matter. When they could at least enter partway into the walls before exploding because of the old buildings, it was all the more effective.

With preparations to take the citadel chamber progressing, Garth called up his servant priests.

"The wall to the citadel chamber will soon collapse," he announced. "It is time to turn our attention to our next objective and make sure our preparations are in order. The messenger tree is the greater objective, and while there is no wall to stop us, the tunnels and chambers between here and there will be filled with defenders. Make sure the lesser undead do not depart yet as they will be wasted if we allow them to trickle in. Hold them

back until they are ready to inundate the tunnels like a wave. When they come, they will come like a tsunami.”

There was a smothered snort of laughter and the red light in Garth’s skull sockets dimmed in frustration.

“I swear to Undeath, Jeff, if your uncle wasn’t a rune lich...”