

Chapter 801

Style Over Substance

The brighthearts and the cultists had gathered under a humungous stone arch not far from the battlefield. It was the best shelter they had found while roaming the territory before the battle. There wasn't enough room for all the messengers who had been left scattered around various lightning rod poles.

The space was large enough to fit all of the cultists and brighthearts comfortably. Comfortable was relative in the lightning fields, but hard earth instead of knee-deep mud was a welcome change. It was sufficiently sheltered that the stone over their heads and the dirt under their feet was red instead of scorched black. It didn't keep the thunder from rolling in, the lightning having resumed its normal behaviour.

Neil had left the cage, diplomatically putting himself on the same level as the other faction leaders. Even lower, given his lack of messenger slaves. He did not miss the avaricious looks that the brightheart and cultist leaders, Lorus and Higgins, were giving it. The other brightheart leader, Durrum, had shown little interest. Neil hoped that was out of honourable intentions and not just the massive brightheart being too big to fit inside.

The two brightheart factions and the cult were arrayed in a contentious triangle with the leaders, Neil and Dustin in the middle. Neil's threats and the protective wall used by Durrum and Dustin had at least kept the cultists from attacking the brighthearts on sight, enough that all sides agreed to talk it out.

The question was what to do with not just the territory they were in but the territories already claimed. Would they unify them into a whole or leave them as separate entities? On realising that Neil had a territory but no messengers, and seeing him out of the cage, Lorus had started loudly grandstanding.

"What makes you think you can come here and start giving orders?" Lorus demanded. "Your intervention was welcome, of course, but it does not..."

Thunder crashed, muffling his words and forcing him to repeat himself.

"...it does not put you in a position to claim the territory. If you can't build a messenger army, then you don't meet the qualifications to lead us through what lies ahead."

That struck a chord with the others, and not just with Lorus' group. Durrum's followers were less performative about it but showed clear agreement with the point.

"We don't want a slave army," Neil said.

“Speak for yourself,” Lorus said. “I definitely want a slave army, and I don’t see you convincing anyone else to give up theirs. Not only do we get to use our enemies as weapons but without the messengers, we wouldn’t have had the forces to defeat the undead priests.”

“Strictly speaking, they were Undeath priests, not undead priests,” one of the brighthearts behind Durrum said. “They were alive.”

All eyes turned to her and her dark brown skin kindly hid her blush.

“Which is not important enough that it was worth the interruption,” she said. “I see that now.”

The leaders turned their gazes back on one another and Dustin spoke up.

“You seem to have forgotten that your messengers weren’t enough to defeat the Undeath priests. You were on the losing end of that battle until we came along, and we didn’t have any.”

“You found a way to command the lightning,” the cultist Higgins pointed out.

“Yes,” Dustin said. “We were moving in a small group. All but impossible to find in this place. Faster to move than an army, especially one wading through mud and dodging lightning. How much time did relaying all your messengers from storm rod to storm rod cost you? In the meantime, we didn’t stumble into battle and instead investigated the thing that won it.”

Neil knew exactly how much of what Dustin described was dumb luck, but he wasn’t going to say anything.

“If you weren’t hauling around an army of messengers,” Dustin continued, “you wouldn’t have needed the battle. Do you have any idea how hard it is to spot anyone out there? A small group could have used the environment to strike from hiding and take down the priests in one fell swoop. Instead, you waded into a losing fight.”

“A battle where not only were you outmatched but you then made things worse by fighting one another,” Neil pointed out.

“We approached in good faith and were ambushed,” the cultist Higgins said.

“Is that true?” Neil asked, looking at Durrum, but it was Lorus that answered.

“We should never have—” Lorus began, only for Neil to cut his tirade off before it got going.

“It’s clear what happened here, then,” Neil said. “And who is responsible.”

He turned to Higgins.

“We’ll never get along well,” he told the cultist. “Not you and us or you and the brighthearts. But I do believe we can get along well enough to get out of this alive. We all

know that the outcomes here won't be great for anyone, and worse for some than others. But getting out alive is better than dying in reality's butt-crack. I'm asking you, all of you, to put aside what just happened and look forward."

"We can," Higgins said. "So long as the fire brightheart gives up his territory to someone else. We cannot work with him while he still commands messengers. He won't give it up to us, I know, but we would accept his giving it up to you, or even the other brightheart. The earth one."

"I will not hand over my power on their say so," Lorus said. "Those cultist abominations invaded our city. They were the beginning of the end for our entire people!"

"Yes," Neil agreed calmly.

"Believe us that we have no love for their kind," Dustin added. "With the things they've done, I'd love to execute them out of hand. But we allied with them for a reason, as distasteful as it is for them and us. There's a larger picture."

"Fine," Lorus said. "If they want to work with us, they can cede this territory and surrender their existing territory to us. And since I represent the larger portion of the brightheart forces—"

"Because you hid yours behind mine and let them do the dying," Durrum interrupted.

The two brightheart leaders started arguing over one another until Neil's voice rang out.

"STOP!"

The brighthearts were silenced less by Neil's voice than the two lightning bolts that struck the ground to either side of the arch, sending thunder crashing through like a sonic weapon.

"No," Neil said in the aftermath, his calm voice contrasting with the bluster of the two brighthearts. "You're not getting the territory, Lorus, and you know that. You're just trying to establish a negotiating position you can argue from to keep your own territory. But we've seen your leadership and it will bury us all."

"You don't have any messengers," Lorus said. "You can't control them, can you?"

"I can't imprint on them," Neil admitted, "and I don't think I should. I don't want a slave army."

"We don't have a choice," Durrum said. He had calmed down but the earth brightheart's voice still carried a deep, arresting rumble. "I don't like using these things, but our enemies will. We have to match them."

“You already tried that, and what did it get you?” Dustin asked. “Two brighthearts and a cultist, all with messengers, and you still would have died without the people who had none.”

“Because you found a way to control the lightning,” Durrum pointed out. “If you can bring that power into each new territory, I will agree to your leadership. If we could expand this territory from here on all sides and use the lightning to wipe out the anomalies, that would be one thing. But almost all the border territories here have been claimed already. By you, me, Lorus and Higgins. By the Undeath priests as well, and they won’t come back. They’ll make us come to them.”

“He is right,” Higgins said. “They are probably still one or two territories bordering this one, but that is not enough to justify handing all our territories and their messengers over to you. I think the earth brightheart will make the better leader than either of you, adventurers. If nothing else, who is to say if the messengers would even survive passing into your control?”

“Yours would not,” Neil told him flatly. “Outside of Builder cult control, your messengers will die, be that under my command or Durrum’s. The elemental messengers will not, but that doesn’t matter. We shouldn’t be using them at all.”

“If there was time to indulge in ideals,” Higgins said. “You would all be fighting me like the fire one wants to.”

“It’s not just a matter of ideals,” Neil said. “We can’t play a numbers game with the Undeath priests. With every territory they claim, their numbers grow more than ours. Not only do they pick up the undead we have to fight, but when we win a fight, our numbers drop. They turn the fallen into undead servants, allies and enemies alike. It’s what makes the Church of Undeath so dangerous. Why they are so thoroughly stamped out whenever and wherever they are found.”

“If we had lost,” Dustin said, “everyone here would have joined their army. We can’t fight them on their terms because we’ll lose. That’s the undeniable weight of numbers and everyone here just felt it. You’re all talking like the messengers are the only way, but you’ve just seen what that will get you. We have to fight them on our terms, not theirs. Find other ways. In this place, the lightning was the key. Other territories will have other quirks we can use. It might be as simple as territory well-suited to hit-and-run attacks, or some strange magic like the lightning.”

“We need to move as a lean, efficient, elite force,” Neil said. “While they are lugging around their ponderous army, we fight smarter, not harder. The adventurer way.”

“This is all just you trying to make the messengers not matter,” Lorus said. “If we need the messengers, then you’re off the table as the one to unify the territories.”

“It doesn’t matter who unifies it,” Neil said, “so long as they don’t lead the rest of us to oblivion. In the end, the territories will all go to Jason Asano. That’s the only way we get out of this place instead of dying along with everyone and everything you’ve ever known, Lorus.”

“Then give the territories to me,” Lorus said. “Once everyone actually obeys, I will make us stronger as we go. I’ll show you that we can fight the undead. Our messengers are stronger than theirs.”

“And ours are stronger than yours,” Higgins said. “By that standard, I should be the one to unify the territories. If you take ours, the strongest messengers we have will die. The adventurers admitted that.”

“How do they even know?” Lorus asked.

“The same way I command the lightning,” Neil lied. It was the rabbit watching through surreptitious drones who was commanding the lightning from the mesa. Neil appreciated the dramatic flair with which the rabbit used it, not that he’d ever admit it. Jason’s stance on style over substance was not something Neil would allow to propagate, even if adventuring was *occasionally* about how good you look doing it.

“How do you control the lightning?” Durrum asked. “I think that is something that should be shared.”

“And I will,” Neil said. “With the person that ends up unifying the territories. All of them. Higgins, you know we won’t let it be you. Any more than we will Lorus.”

“Don’t think you can speak for everyone, outsider,” Lorus said. “Yes, the cult messengers are strong but we won’t allow the cult to lead us. The earth messengers are tough, but you are right about the undead’s numbers. What you failed to mention was that those numbers are weak individually. Their messengers are weak and their undead weaker. My fire messengers have the offensive power to wipe them out fast and make those numbers irrelevant. Giving the territories to me is the only responsible choice. You’re painting me as ambitious, but the truth is, I’m the only one who can lead us to success. I only want the power to lead us all out of here.”

“So you say,” Neil told him, “but talk is easy. Actions tell the real story, and what have your actions told us about your intentions, Lorus? What do they say about your reason for wanting all the power? If the benefit of all was your objective, the way you claim, you would have put aside your distaste and allied with the Builder cult. I don’t think leading everyone to safety is what your actions tell us.”

“You—” Lorus moved to rebut, but was cut off by Durrum.

“You spoke your piece, Lorus,” the earth brightheart rumbled. “Let the aboveworlдер finish.”

“Thank you,” Neil said with a nod to Durrum. He then turned back to Lorus and continued.

“Your actions, Lorus, tell us that you like the power. Having command of all these messengers. Your leaders aren’t here to tell you what to do and you’ve been revelling in the power. Indulging in something it feels like you’ve wanted for a long time. Even if we gave you all the territories here and let you lead us, it would only last so long. Sooner or later, you will have to hand over the power that you’ve built. That you’ve earned. Whether to one of your gold-rankers or to Jason Asano.”

“Of course,” Lorus said.

“Are you genuinely willing to do that, though?” Neil asked. “Or do you have some idea in your head of accruing so much power for yourself that you can decide how this ends? Strike down the Builders, do as you will? Force Jason to show you how to unify the territory yourself and come out of this as ruler of the brighthearts? You know that you all have to capitulate to him, right? Your kind has no recourse but to obey him. He may be a stranger to your realm, but it’s his to rule now.”

Neil was gambling that he understood Lorus, despite having just met him. He was confident the fire brightheart was a volatile mix of ambition, impatience and pride, with an unearned sense of entitlement. He and Dustin understood the type better than most. He remembered how easily Jason had provoked Thadwick in those early meetings, prodding him until he erupted. The fire brightheart did the same when Neil kept poking.

“THIS IS NOT SOME OUTSIDER’S PLACE TO TAKE!” Lorus roared. “You have come here and torn our home asunder, but it is still our land! Our land to fight for and our land to rule!”

“And you’re the one to rule it?” Neil asked calmly. “With an army of brainwashed slaves? Your people have been fighting the elemental messengers for how long? And now you’re going to use them to seize power?”

“These messengers obey. And so will everyone else, so long as I have them!”

Lorus realised he had gone too far and looked around at the faces of his fellow brighthearts.

“We have leaders,” Durrum said, his voice as soft as the sound of grinding gravel could. “They are wise leaders, who have led us through greater tragedy than any of us

thought we could endure. They have earned our trust with sacrifice and sage guidance. Look around you, Lorus. None here will follow you and your ambition. Not anymore.”

Lorus looked around again, seeing that Durrum was right. Even his own followers either failed to meet his eyes, their faces showing disgust, disdain or disappointment.

“Lorus cannot lead,” Durrum announced to the group. “But the cultist was right that we should not give up the power of the messengers. Ideals are all well and good, but they avail you nothing if you’re dead. The Undeath priests are not shy about taking control of the messengers, and neither should we be. These messengers were grown in pods, using our people as fertiliser. We will use them in turn and, when we’re done, put them down like the twisted creations they are.”

“Then you will lose,” Dustin said. “You may not be Lorus, but you don’t know how to lead an army. That much was clear from the battle we just saw. Neil and I have been taught strategy and large group tactics, and you know what we’ve learned? Just enough to realise that neither of us should command an army either. We don’t have the experience to make it work, especially when the Undeath priests will be growing their forces faster than we can.”

“We’ve already said it,” Neil added. “We need to be fast and effective, not ponderous and unwieldy. Armies are hard to move and harder to feed. I suspect that even these messengers need to eat, but the undead ones maybe not. They’re weaker than yours but I bet that’s a trade-off. Do you have a spirit coin supply? A food supply? My territory is lush and replete with food, and I imagine some of you can say the same. But this place has nothing, and marching a hungry army through more barren territories will turn them from a weapon into an anchor.”

“If we move as a small group,” Dustin said, “we can carry enough food that we only have to resupply so often. Fast and effective. Hitting the Undeath priests and taking out their territory leaders while they are still trying to establish and consolidate. They have the numbers, so instead of trying to match them and falling short, we should use those numbers against them. Leave them with the weaknesses of an army while we gain the advantages of an elite strike force.”

“You talk a lot,” Lorus said. “But all I hear are reasons that we should hand over what brighthearts have won to you.”

“Then don’t,” Neil said. “The cult have already said they will follow Durrum. I will accept that as well, under the condition that he is at least willing to explore small-group tactics. To see for himself whether motivated champions or enslaved armies are the way forward.”

“Durrum,” Lorus said. “Don’t let this outsider lead you to disaster. Without enough messengers—”

“I am willing to trust in our people,” Durrum said. “In the strength we have, not that of the monsters we’ve shackled. You have never been content with what you have, Lorus, long before today. Always wanting more. Coveting that which was not yours. If these aboveworlders are wrong, then I will use the messengers. But first, I will see for myself what we can accomplish by relying on each other.”

“And if I refuse to hand over my territory?” Lorus asked, pulling himself up to his full height. It didn’t have the effect he hoped, given that the earth brightheart Durrum stood head and shoulders above him.

“Then you will die,” Durrum said. “If you use your messengers to fight under this arch, you will have no range and die quickly. If you fight under open sky, you will face the lightning in the air. On the ground, my earth messengers will make short work of you. Give up your ambitions, Lorus. They have cost us already, but we will forgive and accept if you’re willing to come back to the fold now. This is your last chance.”

“It’s a shame,” Durrum said as one of the brighthearts carried away Lorus’ body. “He was a fool, but a strong fool.”

“We need strength,” Neil said. “But even the greatest strength can be sapped away by poison, and that man was poison.”

Durrum nodded his acknowledgement.

“I don’t like how that went,” he said, “but perhaps it was for the best. Now, I will accept your territory and you can show me how to command the lightning.”