

Chapter 773

Control the Pot

Jason watched the brightheart population migrate towards the ground level in preparation for moving through his portal. The base of the chamber was little more than rock carved flat for the most part, aside from the roads moving between the pillars and the growth chambers. They, at least, were flagstone paved and lined with garden beds, although the plants had long since died. Outside of the growth chambers, the lack of good air and people to care for them had left the moss, vines and fungus withered and brown.

Illumination for the tight-packed lines of brighthearts was provided by glow stones. The local variety had a yellow tinge, being crystals charged with fire energy. They were being carried by brightheart officials, forming chains as they guided their people down. Jason couldn't see into the pillars, although he could sense the mass of people through their auras. He felt their fear and confusion, along with an undercurrent of despair born of too much misery and too many deaths. Hope was in disastrously short supply.

There hadn't been time to hold massive meetings and explain everything to the brightheart population. That left most with a tenuous grasp of why they were being moved, leading to uncertainty and unease that spread like a virus. There were systems in place to disseminate information, but anything beyond the practical basic was counterproductive. Too many details would just lead to confusion as large groups did not handle context and complex ideas very well. Any information given out would be distorted as it spread in a game of telephone thousands of links long.

What made the process of moving everyone work was the trust the brighthearts had in their leadership. This led to minimal pushback against the officials working to get and keep everyone moving.

The residents of the upper pillars that linked the citadel to the ceiling had to be ferried around the outside of the citadel as part of their descent. Elevating platforms were in constant motion, but they could only move a fraction of the required number. Spiralling ramps had been stone-shaped around the outside, hastily enough that the structural integrity of the slapdash design was a concern. Not only would a collapse slow the process and get people killed but it would make the population wary of the process entirely.

Gary had joined the brighthearts in establishing the ramps. During Jason's time back on Earth, Gary spent a couple of years helping small towns with their defensive infrastructure, in readiness for the monster surge. That time building walls and reinforcing structures to withstand monster attacks left him with experience that was paying off again.

Expertise in shoring up swiftly built structures against significant strain was exactly what the brighthearts needed. They also had their own experts, as well as some deep earth metals that got the smith in him excited.

Miriam flew from the upper levels of the citadel on a flying motorcycle that was mostly black with a few embellishments in dark grey. She pulled up next to Jason's floating cloud chair as he observed proceedings from on high.

"This vehicle type is very convenient," she commented.

"Yeah, vehicle design in Pallimustus is pretty bad," Jason said. "A private jet that's a giant construct eagle is awesome, don't get me wrong, but a plane is just more practical. That being said, most motorcycles don't fly. I think the police in Dubai might have them? Dubai is a city in the world I come from that's pretty much the capital of doing weird stuff because they have too much money."

"I don't know the vehicles you're describing. Except the bird one. How did it go with Councilwoman Lorenn?"

"There's a reason I'm not the leader of my team," Jason said. "I think I did acceptably, but my mediocrity when it comes to maintaining a diplomatic demeanour is well documented. It's not a field in which my instincts lead me in the right direction. How goes the tactical planning?"

"I've been consulting with Marla and Beaufort. They're the local equivalents of my role as tactical commander. Their knowledge of the local terrain, conditions and enemy disposition has been valuable in plotting out the next stage of the mission. Standish has been working with us to set the objectives and we've been figuring out how to make that work."

"We have a plan of action?"

"We do. Objective one is the astral space chamber and we've plotted out an approach that we think will meet with the least amount of resistance. We're not sure if the messengers will attack us once we claim the chamber or if they're as wary of it as their tree is. Either way, we have plans in place to hold the chamber while the ritualists learn whatever it is they need to learn from it."

"And then it's on to the natural array chamber and the tree itself," Jason said. "I assume that will be the hard part."

"A safe assumption. Moving to objective two requires that Standish is confident in activating the device effectively after what he learns studying the astral space chamber, however. We have contingencies involving a retreat to the citadel chamber or into the

astral space if Standish thinks we need to revise our approach. That will be for you and him to decide in the field.”

“But the hope is that we move onto the natural array chamber,” Jason said.

“Yes. We’ll need to operate under the assumption that the messengers will spare nothing in defending the tree. We’ve established a series of different scenarios for going in, securing the area around the tree and performing the ritual.”

“One of those scenarios being to kill all the messengers?”

“Yes. The last scenario because it’s the least viable. Even with the addition of the brighthearts and the cult to our forces, we would most likely exhaust ourselves and fall before their numbers were expended. But assuming we can secure the site and activate the device, that’s where things get uncertain. I do not like uncertain, Operations Commander.”

“We work with what we have, not what we want.”

“I know. But turning on the magic device given to us by our enemies and then waiting for those same enemies to sabotage us and hope we can work around them is as bad a plan as I’ve ever been involved in. That’s assuming that only the regular messengers interfere and not the god of destruction.”

“It is very bad,” Jason agreed. “But it can be done, trust me. Saving civilisations from destructive cosmic forces is kind of my thing. I’ve had to deal with transcendent-level enemies and the fact is, they’re incredibly restricted when working within physical reality. If Destruction had the power to wipe us all out, he would. If he was as confident as he put himself across, he wouldn’t have been talking to us; he’d have just been doing what he wanted. Take it from someone who’s been on both sides of the confident bluster when world-level stakes are in play: that guy is not as confident as he seems.”

“Are you as confident as you seem?”

He chuckled.

“I’ve briefed you on transformation zone events, which Knowledge thinks is the key, and I can see why. Whatever the sabotage ends up being, it’s going to involve dimensional magic. Probably trying to lift the soul forge out through the side of the universe, the same way the Builder steals astral spaces. Given that the device itself is already playing with the dimensional membrane, I may not need to push the transformation zone into forming. The messengers do not care about dimensional integrity.”

“But you can push it over the edge if they don’t?” Miriam asked. “You have the power to do that?”

“It’s not about power as much as the right tool for the job. I have something called an astral gate that allows me to manipulate dimensional forces. Think of it like a normal ranker who can’t push a nail into a board, but give them a hammer and it’s easy.”

“So long as they don’t hit their thumb.”

“Very true,” Jason said with a laugh. “I was warned not to use the astral gate until I’m diamond-rank at least.”

“At least?”

“Yeah. I disregarded that advice almost immediately, of course, and brought the hammer down on my thumb pretty damn hard. I imagine you heard about it.”

“The incident in Rimaros where you spent months in recovery?”

“That’s the one. Spiritual damage is a real prick, let me tell you.”

“*At least* diamond-rank?” Miriam repeated.

“Yep.”

“Since I started working with you, Asano, it’s felt like I’m swimming over very deep water. I’m not used to that as a gold-ranker.”

Jason burst out laughing.

“Try dealing with great astral beings at iron or bronze.”

“I would point out, Operations Commander, that my question is about confidence. You strike me as a man who starts giving context until he forgets what he was talking about in the first place.”

Jason laughed again.

“You figured me out pretty quick. Okay, the point I’m slowly meandering towards is that a transformation zone is exactly what we need. The good thing about a transformation zone is that it’s all-encompassing. It’ll take everything that’s going on and throw it into a big pot. All this uncertainty, all these factions and whatever weird magic is going around, all into the pot. That means we aren’t dealing with all these unknowns anymore; we just have to control the pot. If we do that, we win.”

“And you think we can do that?”

“I’ve done it before, and more than once. There are differences this time, I’ll admit. You’ve set up a meeting for me to brief everyone on how transformation zones work?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Long story short, a transformation zone is a bunch of territories. We claim enough territories and I can remake reality.”

“It’s that easy?” Miriam asked sceptically.

“No, it’s that simple. And it does start easy. Taking territory means eliminating anomalies, which are rather weak in the beginning. The more territories get claimed, though, the more dangerous the unclaimed ones become. But our people are solid, so I’m more worried about challenges I didn’t have to deal with on Earth. There, I was the only one with the power to properly claim territories.”

“Because of your ability that will let you trigger the zone?”

“Uh, no. It’s a different power, one of my outworlder racial gifts. It was a somewhat related power that was forcibly put through a secondary gift evolution the first time I was in a transformation zone.”

“Operations Commander, talking to you makes me feel like I’ve led a boring life, and I once discovered an underwater dome city on the back of a giant turtle.”

“Okay, that is awesome and you’re totally telling me that story, but later, when there’s booze. What was I talking about?”

“Challenges you didn’t have on your home planet.”

“Right. In the second transformation zone I was in, others were competing for territories. They weren’t real competitors, though. They had no idea what they were doing and no way to reshape a giant mass of reality in a state of flux. I have to assume that the messenger saboteurs have at least one astral magic expert with them, meaning that they may be able to figure it out. And then there’s the messenger tree. It may not have a mind, but I bet it has a will. I’m betting it will try and take over the transformation zone the way it’s been taking over this underground domain. Whether it can do something with it or not doesn’t matter. It’ll be a disaster either way.”

“What kind of disaster? What will happen if either of them wins over us?” Miriam asked.

“Some variety of bad. Maybe they get what they want, be it a soul forge to take away or a base from which to spread arboreal doom. Or maybe they screw up and the whole place blows up the way we came here to stop in the first place. The transformation zone is the thing we need but it won’t let us just win and it won’t solve all our problems. It solves one problem: the uncertainty you were talking about.”

“By throwing everything into a pot.”

“Exactly. It takes everything coming for us, whether we know it or not, and puts it in front of us where we can fight it. And a fight is something I know you can handle.”

Miriam nodded.

“Alright,” she said. “That makes things feel more manageable. I think you did instill me with some confidence. Thank you, Operations Commander.”

“I’d say it’s what I’m here for, but really I’m here to discuss different ways to trick Mr. T onto planes while you have no idea what I’m talking about.”

“Then congratulations because I do have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Mission accomplished.”

Miriam sighed, rolling her shoulders as if she’d just shrugged off a weight.

“I finally feel like there’s a path forward I can actually make out. Thank you, Jason. Everything should go fine and we just have to hope nothing unexpected prevents the transformation zone from forming.”

Jason’s jaw dropped.

“Why would you say that?”

Farrah met Jason outside the room that contained the echo array. They both had guides to help them navigate the citadel.

“How is it going?” Jason asked as Farrah came out into a hallway that didn’t run quite straight.

“Is that a friend question or an Operations Commander question?”

“Operations Commander.”

“Well. I’ll be ready to brief you and Miriam before you’re scheduled to open the portal.”

“That’s good. Should I have asked how you’re doing as a friend question?”

“No, I’m fine,” Farrah told him. “You look like something’s weighing on you, though.”

“Uh, yeah. We’ve got this thing where we’re trying to stop two different sets of evil angels and a god from doing some super-evil stuff. And some lunatic put me in charge.”

“No, that’s not it. This stuff is old hat for you.”

“Old hat? How much time did you spend with my grandmother?”

“Stop trying to derail the conversation, Jason. What’s going on?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“Just tell me.”

“Okay, fine,” Jason said. “It’s about taking all these people into my portal.”

“And?”

“And it’s been a while since I had people in my soul realm for extended periods. Back when my family were in there, my spirit realm was more spirit and less realm. But now I’ve got the astral throne and it’s much more of a physical reality.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Mostly, sure. But when Emi was living in there, she was kind of frozen. I mean, she could walk around in there or whatever, but she was in kind of a stasis, biologically. She didn’t get hungry, I don’t think she was aging. And she didn’t... you know. What if that isn’t the case anymore?”

Farah let out an exasperated groan.

“The poop thing again?”

“Yes, the poop thing, again,” Jason said.

“We’ve got a lot more to worry about than that, Jason.”

“Says the woman not about to have ten thousand people start taking dumps inside her soul.”

“They’re mostly iron rank, except for the children.”

“They aren’t essence users, Farrah. They don’t eat spirit coins and they still have those biological functions.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, I’m very sure. I spend hours learning all about their growth chambers so I could replicate them. Guess where they get their fertilizer?”

“Well there you go, then,” Farrah said.

“What do you mean, there I go?”

“Think about it,” Farrah said. “You’re trying to effectively replicate the growth chambers in your soul, right? Which means you’ll need their fertilizer. You need them to poop in your soul. And if they can’t, because your soul still stops people from needing to, then you’ll have to use your power to replicate all that poo yourself.”

Jason’s eyes went wide in horror.

Chapter 774

It Happens Because I Want It To

The meeting room in the citadel was more or less rectangular. Jason and Miriam were already waiting when Farrah arrived. She found the two commanders in the middle of a contentious conversation, their voices escalating in volume as they argued.

“...can’t believe you would say that,” Jason said.

“Are you still complaining about this? It was a fair assessment of risk.”

“It was tempting fate!”

“Fate isn’t real.”

“That was what I thought until I got destiny magic.”

“What is destiny magic?”

“I’m not entirely sure!”

“Why are you angrily shouting a confused statement like it’s an accusation?”

“I don’t know! Maybe so I don’t lose argumentative momentum!”

“Talking to you makes no sense.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” Farrah said from the doorway. “Perhaps you should let an old hand take over, Tactical Commander.”

Miriam looked embarrassed for a moment before she schooled her expression. Jason was shamelessly unembarrassed and gave Farrah a cheery wave.

“You’re here to brief us on your study of the echo array?” Miriam asked.

“I am,” Farrah said. “The brighthearts were kind enough to give me access to the array and their ritualists.”

“What have you learned?”

“The surface messengers will need to access the natural array if they want to sabotage the device activation. We assumed that they would try and get as close to the array as possible, but I no longer think they’ll be going for the natural array itself. I think they’ll go for the echo array here at the citadel. I suspect it would be just as good for their needs, if not better.”

“We do know their numbers are unlikely to be high,” Miriam said. “It makes sense for them to avoid the natural array if they can. They can also safely assume that the bulk of our power will be sent to the natural array, to fight through the messengers. They will only have whoever they can muster with elemental powers, if your messenger prisoner is to be believed, Operations Commander.”

“She also said that any gold-rankers the messengers bring will be ringers,” Jason added.

“Ringers?”

“People brought in from the outside. The astral king we're dealing with, Vesta Carmis Zell, doesn't have any gold-rankers with elemental powers left. If any turn up down here, they'll be one she had to bargain away from other astral kings.”

“How likely is that?” Farrah asked.

“The messengers are slaves, whether they know it or not,” Jason said. “The question isn't whether Zell could trade for them but if she had the time for them to arrive from whatever parts of the world they were in.”

“And the messengers kept delaying handing over the device,” Miriam said.

“Exactly,” Jason agreed. “I think we can anticipate seeing some of them down here.”

“But they still won't have the numbers to charge into a fight between us, the cult, the brighthearts and elemental messengers, will they?” Miriam asked.

“I'd consider it highly unlikely,” Jason said.

“Then a small force attacking this place after we've emptied all the combatants to attack the tree makes more sense,” Miriam said.

“It's also a strong move if you want to interfere with the natural array while we're trying to use the device on it,” Farrah said. “If they have good array and astral magic specialists with them, they could wreak havoc.”

“Could we destroy the echo array?” Miriam asked.

“No,” Farrah said. “Not unless you want an extremely powerful and completely unpredictable backlash from the natural array we're trying to stabilise. In my assessment, that would be worse than bugging out and letting the messengers have it. At least their sabotage is within our plans, unlike an uncertain magical disaster.”

“Then we'll have to leave a sufficient defensive force to protect it,” Miriam said.

“Agreed,” Jason said. “We couldn't destroy it anyway because we may need to let them have it, depending on how things go. If we end up needing a transformation zone, we'll probably need the sabotage to help weaken the dimensional boundary. I can't just muster up a transformation zone whenever I want. It's a defence mechanism of the world, not an ability of mine. The best I can do is act as a fulcrum to make sure it happens if the conditions are right. Even that much I'm only confident of because of the goddess of knowledge.”

“We can work on contingencies before we brief the teams,” Miriam said. “Moving on from the echo array as a potential vulnerability, have you learned anything from the echo array we can use, Miss Hurin?”

“That’s the good news,” Farrah said. “I suspect I got more from examining the echo array than I would from the natural array itself. It amounts to an artificial extension of the natural array, less elegant but more comprehensible. It uses a lot of the principles I managed to decipher by studying the grid network on Earth. I suspect that I’ll be able to give Clive a much better understanding of the device, and probably help create a stable zone for a portal as well.”

“This messenger device we brought with us,” Miriam said. “It’s designed to turn the unstable array into a soul forge, yes? Something the surface messengers will attempt to steal.”

“That’s our best guess,” Jason said. “You already knew that.”

“Yes,” Miriam said, “but you never explained what a soul forge is. Not what it does — that’s something to do with astral kings and I don’t care right now. I’m talking about what it is, as an object. Is it the size of a loaf of bread? Of a wagon? How much does it weigh? Is it fragile? Will we be able to move it? How are the messengers expecting to take it? Especially if they approach the echo array instead of the natural array itself.”

“I don’t have any answers,” Jason said. “At best I have guesses. I’m not even certain the soul forge will have a physical form; it may be a purely spiritual construct that gets drawn straight into the astral. Or maybe it’s a tree. The messenger tree may be a corrupted soul forge that the messengers want us to cleanse so they can swoop in and take it. I won’t know until I encounter it for myself, but I’m guessing the messengers plan to yank whatever it is out of the universe without ever getting close enough to the natural array for us to fight them. Having the echo array as a proxy only makes that easier.”

“That’s at least actionable information,” Miriam said. “I’m going to go and organise a defensive force to protect the echo array in our absence. If we can stop the intentions of the surface messengers, perhaps we can succeed without needing to rip a hole in the universe with your transformation zone, Operations Commander.”

Miriam strode out, giving Farrah a nod as she passed.

“I’ll go too,” Farrah said. “I need to discuss the messenger device and the echo array with Clive.”

The brightheart stone-shapers had put up small barriers to guide the thousands of people ready to enter the portal in switchback queues like an airport check-in desk. Jason

and Lorenn were at the spot where the queues converged. Clive, Belinda and the ritualists had roped off a wide area and set out a large ritual diagram. It was sealed under glass produced by one of the brighthearts and magically reinforced. The thousands of people about to trample over it would otherwise have disrupted the magic.

Clive arrived riding Onslow. After dropping Clive off, the rune tortoise turned into a cloud of colourful lights that sank through Clive's shirt to become a tattoo on his torso.

"Clive," Jason said. "I always wondered, does the big chest tat help with the ladies?"

"No," Clive said. "Turning it into an adorable tortoise they can feed lettuce leaves to helps with the ladies."

"I can see how that would work," Jason said, holding out his fist. Clive rolled his eyes apologetically at Lorenn but gave Jason the fist bump.

"You do realise," Belinda said to Jason, "that by 'helps with the ladies,' Clive means women kept hitting on him while he was feeding Onslow and he shoos them away like annoying flies."

"Still counts," Jason said. "If anything, knocking them back counts even more. High standards, showing some class. Nice one, Clive."

Clive eyed Jason suspiciously waiting for a reference to his nonexistent wife. It didn't come, to his surprise, yet that left him feeling more uneasy than relieved.

"Are we ready to begin?" Lorenn asked.

"We already have," Clive said. "The echo array is calibrated and the ritual is working. Once it reaches a critical threshold, we should..."

There was a pulse of magic that passed over the adventurers and the brighthearts like a wave.

"...get a sense of when it's ready," Clive finished.

Jason extended his magical senses. He could feel the elemental power being held back at the edge of the ritual circle. Some still permeated the area within, but it was greatly reduced. He concentrated on calling up his soul portal as cleanly as possible, making as small a ripple in the ambient magic as he could manage. He balanced stability against the need to make the portal arch larger than normal to let people through faster.

The arch rose from the floor, the width of a large set of double doors. Unlike the dark crystal of Jason's normal portals, the soul realm arch was a milky crystal with swirling motes of blue, gold and silver light floating inside it. A sheet of rainbow energy filled the archway as the portal activated and Jason looked at Lorenn.

"You wanted to go first," he told her. "We're on the clock, so let's get it done."

He moved through the portal arch. Lorenn hesitated only a moment before following.

Lorenn had never used a portal before. She had heard of them in the old stories, some of the ancestors having such powers before their people became brighthearts. Stepping through one and suddenly being somewhere else was disorienting.

“Keep moving,” Asano told her. “You’ve got a few thousand friends on your heels.”

The reminder snapped her back to attention and she looked around as she followed him, already striding away. They were in a cavern, or perhaps a large tunnel, an underground river running along it. The walls were natural stone and covered in glowing fungus, not the same ones as in her home but not too alien, either.

What was alien was the absence of the elemental power that had surrounded her since birth. It was as if sound had suddenly stopped existing, a fundamental part of reality suddenly absent. At least the surroundings had a subterranean familiarity. The old stories spoke of the open sky on the surface, something she had a hard time imagining. If her people had walked out under some vast emptiness, she could easily imagine a panicked stampede.

The tunnel was quiet but for the underground river flowing along its stone channel.

“This is your soul?” she asked. She needed no confirmation; the question was something to fill the quiet while she reined in her unease. In this place, the familiar pulse of elemental energy was absent, replaced with Asano’s presence. It permeated everything, benevolent but with ominous undercurrents just beyond her senses. It was like feeling the breath of a sleeping monster she couldn’t see in the dark.

As they walked, the world around them was changing. The cavern was expanding and forming a massive circular chamber. Natural walls became worked stone and a dozen massive archways were set all around. The river now flowed into the centre of the room with a series of small bridges crossing it. It reached the centre of the new chamber and poured into a hole right behind the portal, spilling down into the darkness.

The portal arch was in the middle of the chamber and people were already coming through. Lorenn found herself floating into the air alongside Asano as the chamber filled under them. The first through were Lorenn’s officials who were also floated into the air. Lorenn and the others went to work calming people as they arrived, although that didn’t seem to be a large problem.

“I’m using my aura to create a naturally placid environment,” Asano told her, floating close. “It’s not mind control as such. You know how groups can start thinking as a whole instead of as individuals?”

"I'm the leader of an entire people. I am tragically and intimately familiar with the phenomenon."

"We call it pack mentality where I come from. This technique fosters that, but it doesn't impose anything. Strong individualists will be unaffected and other emotions that diverge from the group push it back easily enough. But for moving some people who just need a nudge in the right direction it's useful."

Asano had assured them he could create space to contain all of their people and Lorenn was seeing him do so in real time. They had worked out a layout based on his assurances and it was happening right in front of her, although there were certain changes, like the river. Somehow she could feel the complex expand, tunnels and broad stairwells leading off from the arches of the central hub. Some led to peripheral hubs, others to dormitories and even growth chambers that were forming, flora and all. It was all lit up by luminescent plants or glow stones in familiar warm or soothingly cool shades.

There were signs over each archway, indicating where they led. Lorenn had a mysterious certainty that everyone shared her understanding of the layout, however, making the signs unnecessary. She felt it as a suite of chambers came into being and immediately understood they belonged to her. There was a meeting chamber, an office and a small residence.

She saw her people already moving off, each also apparently having a sense of the places that belonged to them. Children were breathing deeply, able to do so for the first time in a long time. Lorenn sensed cafeterias, but fresh fruit and mushrooms were materialising out of nothing into people's hands. Normally they would be wary of such a thing, but food had been too scarce for too long and they immediately dug in.

"How?" she asked.

She looked at Asano floating beside her, he shook his head instead of responding, his eyes closed in concentration.

"Replicating the elemental power is harder than I thought," he said through gritted teeth. "I'll have to tap into some things I didn't want to, which may leave me weakened."

"You don't have to."

"The growth chambers need it if I'm going to maintain them, and I need them so I can replicate your food properly. Organics are still hard for me to get right."

A small cloud appeared under Lorenn's feet, solid but with a comfortable give, like plush carpet. She saw the same happening with her similarly floating officials and she instinctively understood how to move it around.

“So I don’t accidentally drop you,” Asano said. “I’m going to go and have a sit-down. Find your spot, guide your people. I’ll add some meeting halls once everyone has a place to stay.”

“I don’t understand what’s happening. How do I know that I have a place here? How do I know where it is?”

“Because I want you to,” Asano told her. “That’s how everything works here; it happens because I want it to.”

He vanished and she turned her attention back to her people, still pouring through the portal. They were moving off in orderly lines, calm and merrily eating with barely any guidance from her officials. She watched, somewhat at a loss until she felt elemental power come flooding in, putting her at ease.

Chapter 775

More Urgent With Your Warning

Jason and Lorenn were the last to return to the citadel chamber through the soul realm portal. Everyone left inside was staying for the duration. The portal closed and Jason nodded at Clive.

“Sorry you didn’t get to spend long in the rooms I set up for you,” Jason told Lorenn.

“I’m more interested in putting the plan into action than resting, although you look like you could use it.”

“I’m getting better at tapping into my astral gate, although it still takes it out of me, even when I’m working entirely in my soul realm. The astral gate is the thing I used to draw the elemental aspects out of the magic my realm draws in. I didn’t manage to fully replicate the elemental magic out here, sorry.”

“You did better than that,” Lorenn assured him. “What you produced is closer to what the natural array was like before the messengers came. What you failed to replicate was the instability.”

“Oh, uh... good, then?”

Clive was shutting down the active ritual that had kept the portal mostly free of elemental interference for the hours it had taken to evacuate the population. He and his ritualists, Magic Society and the local brighthearts, had managed to keep it functioning the whole time. They channelled magic through their bodies to maintain the portal for hour after hour as people shuffled into Jason’s soul realm, but they were at their limits.

Clive stepped down the ritual in stages rather than let all that elemental energy crash back in. As the ritualists released the power flowing through them one by one, they dropped to the floor for some much-needed rest, not even looking for furniture.

“Brighthearts, thank you,” Clive said to the contingent of local ritualists. “Your stamina carried us through. As for you Magic Society members, you are all embarrassments to your organisation.”

“Hey,” one of them complained. “We gave it our all.”

“Yes, you did wonderfully,” Clive agreed. “You were all excellent; I couldn’t have asked for more. None of you belong in the Magic Society.”

“Uh...”

With no way to open the portal without another draining and elaborate ritual, the civilians were now sealed in Jason’s soul realm. Everyone still outside was a combatant,

either staying to defend the citadel and the echo array or setting out with the main force. Lorenn mustered the brightheart forces, the largest group, while the Beaufort gathered the cultists. Miriam organised the adventurers, which amounted to stopping anyone from wandering off. That was as much wrangling as adventurers were likely to tolerate, especially high-rank ones.

“I’m still unclear on our contingency plans,” Gary said to Jason. “Do we want the messengers to sabotage the echo array or not?”

“If we can fight our way to the tree and keep the messengers off the echo array, that’s the best-case scenario,” Jason explained. “If we can stabilise the natural array without having to rewrite a chunk of reality, leaving it with a dimensional scar in the shape of my head, that’s a good thing. More likely is something going wrong and we need the transformation zone just to make sure all the weird stuff that went wrong is caught up in it. That way, we can deal with it all together.”

“Which is when we pull back and let the messengers think we left the place unguarded?”

“Pretty much.”

“And if they notice us doing that and wonder why we’re leaving all the doors open? Or don’t notice us and wonder why we left all the doors open?”

“Then our defensive team mugs them and does the sabotage themselves. That’s why Clive and Farrah have had Ramona from Miriam’s team working with them and studying their notes. We can’t spare Clive or Farrah but, after Clive, she’s the best magic expert we have here.”

“You can spare me, though,” Gary said. “I can be a lot more effective with the defences in place here than as part of the attack force. I asked the Tactical Commander to add me to the group staying.”

“So that’s why you’re asking about the contingencies.”

“Yeah. The briefing told me what they were, but not why. Now that I think about it, it also didn’t mention what happens when we win.”

“That’s because we have no idea. At least we know what happens if we lose.”

“We all die?”

“Yeah. And then I make a break for it, see if I can get back to the surface to warn them before I die two more times.”

“Two more times?”

“It’s all these messengers I’ve been draining. I’ve got two resurrections in the can, so it’ll take three kills to drop me permanently.”

“That must be nice.”

“No, Gary. If it comes to that, the rest of you gone... I think dead might be better.”

Jason sighed.

“Well, that got dark. Who else is hanging back to defend with you?”

“Rufus and his parents, plus some of the brighthearts and half the Magic Society researchers. Not a lot of golds, since we're probably letting the bad guys through anyway.”

Jason nodded.

“I knew Clive was splitting up the researchers. They won't be great in a fight and Ramona may need help with the echo array. We have to take some of them to help Clive and Farrah, though.”

Jason glanced at Miriam who was looking in his direction.

“Time to go play boss man,” he said. “At this point, I'm pretty much a mascot with Miriam in charge, but I have to at least wander around looking confident.”

“Are you confident?” Gary asked.

“Relative to what's going on? Yeah. As these situations go, this one's pretty good. There's a lot of gold-rankers around, that's not new, but some of them being on team good guy is. There's a god looking to interfere, but at least it's not a great astral being. The evil army is a bunch of elemental messengers, not vampires and their ghoul minions, so I guess that part's a wash. It could be worse.”

“So you think we'll win.”

“I think we will, yeah. If I didn't, I'd be hatching some insane scheme to get us out of here. My real concern is how many people that victory is going to cost us. Fighting our way to the tree is going to bleed us.”

“Good thing I'm staying behind, then. Nice and relaxing for me.”

Jason chuckled.

“You might not want to get too comfy, mate. These things have a way of going pear-shaped.”

The main force set out from the citadel chamber through the massive gate. The gate was a tunnel boring through the wall to the next chamber, a wall thick enough to have entire buildings dug into it. At the end of the tunnel was a massive stone slab that had been rolled aside to let the group pass through. Brighthearts made up around two-thirds of the force, all silver and gold-rankers, but also the weakest. These people were new warriors, used to lives of peace, although the last few months had blooded them sharply. Even so, it was the cult and adventurer groups that were the stronger powers.

Flight was accomplished through a variety of devices. The cult had flight tools that seemed unaffected by the elemental magic, along with some vehicles that could accommodate a few others. Once again, familiars and summons did a lot of the work, although some would be precarious should combat impact them. Shade was counted amongst these, serving as vehicle transport for many of the brighthearts.

“I wish I could use my cloud flask for this,” Jason told Emir. “I don’t think a vehicle made of air and water is the best idea down here, though, heavily upgraded or not.”

“Wise,” Emir said.

Only a few of the brighthearts could fly under their own power. Those that could were usually ash types like Lorenn, along with some of the fire types. Those with metal, earth and magma affinities required outside assistance.

The passage across the death chamber took place almost entirely in silence. When they reached the other side unmolested, Lorenn gestured for Miriam, Jason and Beaufort to approach.

“What’s the issue?” Miriam asked.

“Nothing came at us in the entire chamber,” Lorenn said. “Not even a few loose spectres.”

“I take it that’s unusual?” Jason asked.

“It’s unprecedented,” Beaufort said. “I’ve had crossings where some genuine threats came after us, but mostly it’s something fairly weak. What I’ve never seen before is being left entirely alone.”

“Especially with a group this size,” Lorenn added. “There’s a reason I warned everyone before we entered the chamber. That normally attracts trouble which is why it’s a problem for the messengers. They like to travel in hordes.”

“You think something is going on in the dead zone?” Miriam asked.

“Yes,” Lorenn said. “I’m inclined to take small mercies, but I don’t want to dive into messenger territory, only to find an undead horde at our backs.”

“I don’t see an alternative to moving forward,” Jason said. “Not unless you want us to dive into the bottom of the death chamber looking for trouble, which is self-defeating as methods to avoid trouble go.”

They looked to their destination, another gate. This was open, the edges cracked and crumbling, roots poking out in various places. The roots were dark brown, almost black, looking more like stone than wood. Beyond the gate was darkness, although Jason could see what looked like an empty chamber beyond.

“We should hasten,” Beaufort said. “The tree will have sensed us by now. Messengers will already be on the way.”

Beaufort was proven right as the messengers arrived like a river soon after the group entered the chamber. As they crossed the threshold of the gate, the permeating sense of death was replaced with elemental power, but unlike that of the citadel chamber. This energy was turbulent and volatile, pressing on the mind like half-heard music from a downstairs neighbour. It was enough to annoy but not distract as the force battled their way through.

Battling through the endless supply of elemental messengers was reminiscent of the descent through the shaft. Fortunately, each new batch had failed to learn the lessons of their predecessors and fell to the same tactics. The adventurers and their allies learned with each new battle while the messengers did not. Not only did they lack the intelligence to share experiences and strategies but most of those attacking the adventurers died, without even a chance to share their knowledge.

With new messengers still being churned out by the tree, these messengers could have been as little as a few hours old. Messengers were produced to be battle-ready, only heightening Jason's suspicions that they were artificial in origin. As Clive was convinced that Jason was somehow linked to that origin, he expected to find the answers once he was an astral king. Assuming he got through the current situation alive.

The expedition moved with purpose. They fought through the first chamber, down a tunnel too narrow to allow the messengers to swarm them, then through a second where they were again attacked from all sides. One more tunnel led them to the astral space chamber and respite.

As the expedition had hoped, the messengers refused to enter the chamber. They were even wary of the tunnel leading into it, giving the expedition some breathing room. The root system that poked through every wall was still evident in the hall, but there was no sign of them in the chamber itself. The chamber was small, relative to others they'd seen, although still the size of a gymnasium. With so many people in the expedition, there wasn't a massive amount of spare room.

The walls and floor were carved in the same style Jason had seen in the citadel room's pillars, although more elaborately. The chamber had something of a cathedral feel to it, complete with an astral space aperture in place of an altar. Clive and Farrah immediately dragged the researchers in that direction while Miriam organised a defence of

the entrance, an opening in one wall around twice the height and width of normal double doors.

Jason moved down the hall at a more sedate pace than Clive who all but cracked a whip over the heads of his ritualists. The wall carvings were frescos depicting what he guessed was the arrival of the brightheart ancestors to the underground realm. Unlike the tunnels, the carvings hadn't been shattered by countless roots punching through, although there was some crumbling. It looked like there had been a mid-strength earthquake with no one to clean up afterwards.

Beaufort followed behind Jason and they arrived at the aperture, a circular sheet of red, orange and yellow energy that floated in the air. Clive and Farrah were already setting up testing devices as Jason extended his senses towards the portal, finding a seal in place that locked the aperture from the other side.

"You shut the gate behind you," Jason said.

"We did," Beaufort confirmed.

"Clive, the portal is sealed from the inside," Jason said. "Will that interfere with your tests?"

Clive let out a groan as he glared at Beaufort.

"Yes," he told Jason. "Can you go through and shut it down?"

"Sure," Jason said, weaving past the Magic Society researchers as they unpacked magical tools and supplies. As non-combatants, they had been put to work as pack mules.

"Asano," Beaufort called out. "You might want to wait until I... and he's gone."

Jason vanished through the portal, ignoring the seal that would have prevented anyone else from getting through. He appeared on the other side and was immediately blasted with fire and impaled multiple times by a series of elaborate mechanical traps.

"Rude," he croaked as Gordon appeared and used his beams to cut the offending blades from the mechanism, freeing Jason to yank them from his body.

Jason's regeneration quickly repaired his body as he kicked away the damaged trap device and broke the sealing ritual on the ground around the aperture. Having done so, he took a quick look around before leaving. There wasn't much to see, just a natural stone tunnel with a red glow coming from around a bend.

The elemental energy was more balanced here, free of the influence of the messenger tree. It was even more placid than in the citadel chamber, closer to what he'd created in his soul realm. It was probably a reflection of the natural array's original state. He went back through the aperture to inform Clive and Farrah.

“Oh, that’s excellent,” Farrah said. “That will give us the baseline readings we’ve been missing.”

“Go,” Clive said. “I’ll finish setting up here and join you.”

“Is there anything carnivorous in there?” Jason asked Beaufort.

“Probably,” Beaufort said. “It spawned the occasional monster. Bronze and silver-rank, mostly. We never saw a gold, but I wouldn’t rule it out. How did you avoid the trap?”

“I didn’t,” Jason said, pulling back his hood to reveal his blackened and bloody face and charred hair before pulling it back up. “I’m just not worried about anything your kind can do. That said, you could have been a bit more urgent with your warning. Did Admiral Ackbar teach you nothing?”

“No, because I don’t know who that is.”

Jason went and found Valetta, the gold-rank architect studying the walls with a more educated eye than Jason had.

“Can you go into the aperture, please? Someone needs to be on watch in case a monster wanders in on the researchers.”

Valetta nodded and walked towards the aperture.

“Oh, and Valetta?”

She stopped and turned with an enquiring look.

“If a monster does show up, don’t just watch them fight it to see what happens, alright?”

She opened her mouth to fire off a retort but stopped herself, responding with a nod instead. Not long after she had followed Farrah through the portal, Jason and every gold-ranker present all snapped their heads to look in the same direction, as if they could see through the walls.

“What is that?” Miriam asked.

“Death,” Amos Pensinata answered. “A lot of death.”

Chapter 776

A Little Bit Odd

The silver ranks in the group immediately saw the concern on the faces of Jason and the gold-rankers. Jason stepped right into Clive's personal space, arresting his attention.

"Clive, how long until you've learned enough here that we can try and activate the device without it being so much of a gamble that we may as well not bother?"

"Jason, what is—"

"How long?" Jason snapped as his aura rolled out like a military parade. Normally he masked the authoritarian aspect of it, but now it choked the room such that even the gold-rankers were taken aback.

Clive frowned but his mind went to work, eyes darting left to right, unfocused as he processed.

"Six minutes, but I don't like—"

"Then start," Jason said, already wheeling on the Magic Society researchers. "Figure which supplies are essential for activating the device. Everything else gets left behind."

Jason turned to face Miriam but she pre-empted him.

"We'll be ready to move in six minutes," she said.

Jason spared one second for an appreciative smile and sharp nod before heading for the aperture and passing through. Farrah had barely arrived and was still pulling tools out of one of the packs the Magic Society members had been lugging. She took one look at Jason's face and stood up.

"What is it?" she asked.

"The death chamber just went active. Like Makassar, probably worse."

"Oh. How long?"

"Five and a half minutes. As much as you can get that Clive can use, then out. Ditch anything you won't absolutely need."

Jason didn't wait for a response before leaving and Farrah didn't give one. More than any other members of the expedition, they understood the sudden appearance of monster armies and fell into their old rhythm from Earth. When he emerged from the portal, Miriam was wrangling the silver-rankers, cultists and brighthearts. Miriam sent one of her team members, Alice, to update him.

"The messengers that were amassing outside of this chamber pulled back," she told him. "Even the roots sticking through the walls in the tunnel outside pulled back. It's like the tree is scared."

Jason nodded and they headed for the gold-rank adventurers who were in huddled discussion. Along with Emir and Constance were most of team Moon's Edge, Amos Pensinata and Hana Shavar, archbishop of the Healer.

"...must be what Destruction was actually after," Emir was saying as Jason and Alice joined the group.

"You think this is Destruction?" Jason asked.

"Destruction wasn't too fazed by us taking out his priests," Emir explained. "We all assumed that he was after the natural array, and that he believed we couldn't do anything about it. Either he gets his big blast as it reaches critical instability or the tree turns into some kind of apocalypse beast, turning every living thing into elemental messengers."

"Now," Hana said, "we think his goal was the death chamber all along."

"Undeath priests," Amos said. "You can feel the divine power in the death energy."

"Well, some of us can," Emir muttered.

Jason probed the energy with his senses and did find a touch of the divine. It was an utterly foul power, rancid like the fluids spilling from a plague-ridden corpse.

"The Church of Undeath is one of the few reliable allies the Church of Destruction has," Hana explained. "After Destruction didn't seem worried by the loss of his priests, I should have guessed what was happening the moment we came across that chamber full of the dead."

"What we missed doesn't matter," Constance said. "What we do now does."

"Asano," Amos said. "You once told me that you've encountered death on this scale before. That was a necromancer?"

"Yeah."

"This will be worse."

"Undeath priests are the most reviled people in our world," Constance explained to Jason. "More than Pain priests, even more than messengers."

She looked over at Beaufort getting his cultists into formation, ready to leave.

"The Builder cult might be the only ones who come close," she said, "given that they desecrate living bodies along with the dead."

"It's more than just how despicable they are too," Emir said. "The things they can do with the dead..."

He trailed off with a shudder.

"We came across one of their operations once when we were on a treasure-hunting contract," Constance explained. "I've never seen such horrors."

“The Church of Undeath does not act frequently,” Hana said. “We don’t give them the chance, and by we I mean everyone. The Adventure Society and the Church of Death especially. So, they lay dormant for generations at a time, making plans in the dark. When they finally get that chance, it’s like their god has been saving up his chances to intervene in the world. Expect to see some dark miracles.”

“The plan doesn’t change,” Jason said. “It accelerates. From what I can sense, all that death energy has undergone a fundamental change. Presumably to undeath energy. It also seems to be spreading. Lord Pensinata?”

“Agreed,” Amos said. “It seems to be devouring the elemental energy somehow.”

“Undeath magic is hungry when the god of undeath gets involved,” Hana said.

“Which is why we can’t let it have the natural array. His priests could use that power to create powerful and unusual forms of undead. As it is, we can expect to see grave and pyre elementals.”

“I don’t know what they are and don’t have the time to ask,” said Jason.

“We don’t know how much the messengers will back off before fighting back,” Emir said. “There’s no doubt they’ll defend the tree, but we might have a short window to make a run at the tree without too many messengers in our way.”

“Or we might try,” Constance said, “and get pincered between the messengers and the undead.”

“We’re going,” Jason said, his tone brooking no dissent. “Whatever we encounter, we encounter. My concern is the people we left in the citadel. The undeath taint on the local mana is interrupting the elemental energy that previously infused it. That’s still affecting the range of my communication power, but can you communicate with your bodies in the citadel, Shade?”

“The connection is growing stronger,” Shade said as he emerged from Jason’s shadow. “This foul power is the opposite of everything my progenitor stands for, but undeath trembles before true demise. This power is antithetical to my nature but it does not impede me. Once the elemental power has diminished further, I should be able to communicate with the citadel. I would strongly recommend against attempting to shadow jump there through me, however.”

“We’ve got more than enough to be going on with here,” Jason said. “If other people could do that it would be more disappointing. Still, coordinating with them will be good, given what’s happening. I hope they’re alright, being right next to the death chamber.”

“We can’t do anything for them from here,” Amos said. “I’m not sure we can do anything for ourselves. I’m sensing the undead rise as the priests create them.”

“Rank-for-rank,” Emir said, “even powerful undead can’t match adventurers on our level.”

“Not when the numbers are even,” Amos said. “I’m already sensing bronze-rank undead in the tens of thousands. Silver in the thousands. Less than a hundred gold, but that number grows with each passing moment.”

Arabelle and Gabriel Remore floated towards the massive gate halfway up the wall of the citadel chamber. They were carried on an ash cloud created by Gabriel whose fire powers were enhanced by the elemental energy. But as the undeath energy started seeping through the wall between the citadel chamber and the death field beyond, he could feel that advantage eroding away.

“Priests of Undeath?” he asked, knowing the answer but hoping he was wrong.

“Yes,” his wife confirmed.

“Even if we joined up with the other group, do we have the numbers to handle this?”

“No.”

“Course of action?”

“Around two hundred thousand brighthearts died in that chamber, along with who knows how many messengers. Nothing short of rewriting reality to change the situation entirely will get us out of it.”

“Good thing that’s Asano’s plan, then.”

They arrived at the short tunnel that led through the wall to the gate. The massive stone slab had been rolled back into place after the expedition departed but the magically warded doors set into it were open. The brightheart guards stationed in the alcoves on the outside of the slab were retreating inside and their leader gestured urgently to the approaching adventurers.

“Mr and Mrs Remore. My name is Yokas. We need to seal the doors so their wards can help resist the death energy, but there’s something you need to see.”

Gabriel floated his cloud to the door and they looked out into what had been darkness the last time they passed through the chamber. That was no longer the case. The death chamber had once been the main home to the brightheart population, with buildings carved into the walls and hanging from the ceiling, along with sprawling across the ground. Many of them had crumbled under the assault of the messenger tree root system that itself had abandoned the place as it became a hall of death. The glow stones had long dimmed and the luminescent flora had died, leaving it dark, empty and ruined.

Most of the chamber was unchanged, dilapidated and half-collapsed, but now washed in an ominous purple light. The source of the illumination was a cluster of buildings on the ground, at the centre of the ruined brightheart city. There, the building had been wildly transformed. Towers were warped, sections of stone bulging like blisters and shining with the purple light. The light pulsed in a slow, heartbeat rhythm, in sync as if the buildings were a single organism.

Other buildings, half-ruined already, had been crudely reassembled with sections of masonry held in place with massive bones, skewering the stonework like chunks of meat. The results looked oddly like the buildings themselves had somehow been turned into zombies.

The affected area continued to spread as they watched. Massive bones, like the legs of giant spiders, raised up chunks of masonry and returned them to broken buildings. Stonework pustules distended out like pregnant bellies and started to shine with purple light. The affected area of the city was growing at a rate that would reach them in a couple of hours, perhaps less.

“I’m going to go ahead and say that’s bad,” Gabriel said.

“The ground level of the citadel chamber is already under siege,” Yokas said. “The gate down there has been sealed entirely for months; we filled it in with rocks and fused them together. The undead are coming through the wall instead. The buildings left it hollowed out, and while we filled and sealed them as best we could, there was only so much we could do.”

“Zombie brighthearts?”

“Some, yes. The ones that are just animated people seem to retain at least some of their elemental power. There are other things too, though.”

“That shouldn’t happen with reanimation,” Arabelle said. “The priests of Undeath must be using their god’s power to feed on the elemental magic. Using it to create more powerful undead.”

“They definitely are,” Yokas said. “We’ve seen things out there that aren’t right. Some of them are big; you’ll see them wandering around the buildings if you give it a moment. It might be best not to, though.”

“I’m worried about the messengers from the surface,” Arabelle said. “We don’t know how they intended to get into the citadel chamber, but now we need them for Jason’s plan. If they’ve been caught up in the... are you sensing that?”

“It’s a little hard to miss,” Gabriel said as they looked at the city.

Tainted magic energy surged from somewhere within the expanding undead metropolis.

“It’s been doing that,” Yokas said. “We think it happens when they make the big ones.”

“There’s something else,” Arabelle said. “Something alive. There.”

She pointed at a section of the city, just outside the limits of the current expansion. Several figures rose into the sky, shooting towards the gate. These were messengers from the surface, not the elementally transformed ones, and they were fleeing for their lives. They shot into the air, making a beeline for the gate from which the adventurers watched them.

Messengers were not small, standing from seven to ten feet on average, but what came after them was much larger. It held the vague shape of a messenger, flapping enormous wings as it pursued the real thing. There was no mistaking it for the real thing, however, as it was a heinous abomination.

Beyond the size, around twice that of a regular messenger, the body was much bulkier. It was not some giant messenger raised from the dead, either, but an amalgam of other creatures, parts crudely sewn together with dead tree roots. The flesh had been taken from messengers, brighthearts and what looked to be some monsters, their corpses somehow preserved instead of turning to rainbow smoke.

Whoever or whatever had created the abomination had not found a way to build a large head from the parts it had available. Instead, the broad shoulders were topped with five messenger heads that appeared to do nothing, lolling like the corpses they were.

The messengers fled from it, a gold and several silvers. One of the silvers carried a bathtub-sized object that looked much like the device the messengers had provided the expedition. As they fled, the heads of the monstrosity woke up. Their mouths opened wide and their heads swivelled in unison like the clown ball game at a fairground, but not as creepy. Fleshy tongues shot out, the only part of the creature that looked like living flesh. They whipped forward, dancing with prehensile agility to wrap up the silvers. Only the gold-ranker was nimble enough to avoid them and kept bolting for the gate.

“Husband,” Arabelle said. “Fetch.”

Gabriel shot off, leaving a trail of flame in his wake. Arabelle levitated in the air, the one way that essence users could employ physical force with their auras, if far less effectively than a messenger.

“Would you like me to take the form of a mount, Mrs Remore?” Shade asked from her shadow.

“Thank you, Shade.”

A cloud of darkness emerged from her shadow and took the shape of a giant crow with glowing white eyes. She sat cross-legged atop it, riding the gentle undulations as it held itself aloft with the slow flapping of wings.

“I went with a darkwind crow,” Shade explained. “It is not native to this world but is highly popular in—”

“I am sure the history is fascinating, Shade, but perhaps when events are a little less urgent.”

“I apologise, Mrs Remore. I get rather out of sorts when my bodies are isolated from one another. Mr Asano’s niece repeatedly talked me into exercising bad judgement while most of my bodies were with him in isolated astral spaces.”

A trail of fire led from the gate, past the gold-rank messenger to where the silver-rankers were entangled in tentacle tongues that were now growing barbs that sank into their flesh. Gabriel arrived in a literal blaze of glory, his sword the yellow-white of molten steel, flames dancing along the blade. He swiftly went to work, not on liberating the messengers but cutting loose the magical device. The tongues had wrapped around the messenger carrying it and the device both, so Gabriel cut them away with a sickly sizzle of flesh.

As soon as the device fell loose, Gabriel snatched it up and shot away. The messengers he left to their fate, the monstrosity content to feed on them as he made good his escape.

“Any word from Jason?” Arabelle asked as she watched the proceedings.

“Not yet, Mrs Remore, but I am starting to get a sense of my other bodies as the elemental energy diminishes. I imagine that communication will be possible soon.”

The gold-rank messenger trailed a cloud of embers behind him as he flew. He arrived in front of Arabelle and stopped in place. After glancing at the guards who had weapons at the ready, he held up his hands.

“Take me to your leader?” he asked, then glanced back. “Quickly, please? This new job sucks donkey balls.”

Arabelle and the guards looked at the messenger in startled silence as Gabriel arrived behind him.

“Is it just me,” Gabriel asked, “or is this messenger a little bit odd?”

Chapter 777

Dubious Alliance

Onslow's shell was stuffed full of adventurers and brighthearts as the expedition moved through an empty tunnel. The cultists could propel themselves and, even if they couldn't, Clive wouldn't allow them on anyway. Clive was on top of the shell, along with Neil, Belinda, Rufus and other non-fliers that couldn't fit inside. Belinda had conjured a flat surface for them to sit on, atop a frame that held it fast to the sloping lid of the shell.

Neil brushed stone powder from his hair, not for the first time since re-entering the tunnels. The roof had been riddled with protruding roots the last time they passed through and now there was nothing but empty holes. Crumbling stone had been dropping onto their heads and clouds of stone dust drifted slowly down.

The expedition moved in wary silence, following the guidance of Lorenn. They had been expecting to fight tooth and nail but the messengers had packed up and left. Tunnels they'd claimed from the brighthearts in long, bloody conflict were now abandoned and empty.

"This is eerie," Clive said. "The messengers fought us for every step we took on the way in."

"We're flying," Belinda pointed out. "We didn't take any steps."

He turned his head to give her a flat look.

"Hey," she said. "I'm not the one complaining that we *don't* have to fight our way through an army that flies and breathes fire."

"It does make you wonder what's waiting for us at the end, though," Rufus said.

"I see that everyone's optimistic today," Belinda said.

"I might be optimistic, you don't know," Neil said. "Maybe what's waiting for us at the end is snacks."

"There's an undead army coming," Belinda pointed out. "We are the snacks."

"Now who's short on optimism?" Neil asked.

"Nothing wrong with a little hope," Jason said as he approached through the air, his cloak spread out like wings. "It takes hope to find the light in the dark. Give up and you'll miss it."

He landed on the platform and his cloak gathered around him. The result looked like a human-shaped portal with a pair of glowing eyes.

"That would be very inspiring," Neil said, "if it didn't come from a void monster here to snatch away children in the night."

"That's a little hurtful," Jason said.

"No, that's what you look like," Belinda said, the others nodding their agreement.

"Look, you're even spooking the brighthearts."

Jason turned his gaze on the other occupants on top of Onslow's shell. Some of them flinched back.

"Your aura doesn't help," Rufus pointed out. "You're pushing it out pretty hard and it's feeling a bit... strict."

"I need everyone following orders, be they mine or Miriam's."

"Yeah," Neil said, "but your particular brand of authority is less 'obey or die' and more 'to transgress against my will is a sin that shall render thee unto damnation.' I know we want everyone sharp, but there's such a thing as too on edge."

"Did you just use 'obey or die' as the example of something I'm worse than?" Jason asked. "It's not that bad, is it? Rufus?"

Rufus absently scratched his chin while awkwardly looking off to the side.

"Oh, come on."

"Mr Asano," Shade said, one of his bodies stepping out of Jason's cloak. "I have managed to re-establish a connection with my bodies in the citadel chamber."

"Thank you," Jason said, then turned to his team members.

"I'm going to project my senses through Shade. Do me a favour and make sure I don't fall off while I'm distracted."

"I'll do it!" Neil said.

"Anyone but Neil," Jason said and Neil groaned.

"I knew I was too enthusiastic as soon as the words came out of my mouth."

Arabelle, Gabriel and Yorkas, the gold-rank brightheart guard, escorted their messenger prisoner to the citadel, flying formation around him. A silver-rank guard carried the device Gabriel had liberated from the messengers as they were being snatched by the undead monstrosity in the death chamber. The doors to the death chamber were now closed and sealed, their warding magic in full effect.

"You're suspicious, I get that," the messenger said. "I don't think there's much I can say that will turn you around on that. I need to speak to Jason Asano."

"He's not here," Gabriel growled. "And if he were, we don't have time for that."

"Yeah, no kidding. No one likes a surprise zombie army, especially Asano. Last time he fought one, he went dead-voiced murder machine on them all, and he never really came back from it."

“He came back from it,” Arabelle said.

“Not on Earth. He became a recluse after that, and when he did show up it was to conquer parts of Europe or kill a bunch of people with his mind. I saw him do that on TV.”

Arabelle observed their prisoner with a frown.

“How much time did you spend on Asano’s world?”

“A lot more than he ever did.”

“You have a lot of explaining to do,” she told him.

“Yeah, but like your henchman said, we don’t have time for that.”

“Henchman?” Gabriel said. “I’m her husband!”

The messenger looked from Arabelle to Gabriel and back to Arabelle.

“You could do better,” he told her. “I know we don’t have a lot of time to spare, but you and I could—”

“You don’t seem too worried about the death of your fellow messengers,” she said, cutting him off. She’d learned how to keep Jason on track through years of counselling. Compared to that, this messenger was an amateur at conversation derailment.

“Those poor saps worked for Vesta Carmis Zell,” the messenger said. “We’d have just had to kill them anyway once they realised I’ve already rigged the device to help Asano.”

“You’re claiming that you don’t work for Zell?” Gabriel asked.

“Yes and no. It’s complicated. You’re not going to trust me and Asano is the only one who can fact-check the details of my story.”

“Before you speak with Jason,” Arabelle said to the messenger. “Let’s start with your name.”

“Boris Ketland. You can call me Boris.”

“That’s not a messenger name,” Arabelle pointed out.

“Right, sorry. My real name is Boris Ket Lundi. I haven’t used that in a loong time.”

They landed on a balcony platform where Marla was waiting for them with a pair of offsidars. As Lorenn’s second-in-command, she was in charge of the citadel. As the group landed, Boris looked her up and down, taking in the glowing orange hair and delicate features.

“Hey, I’m Boris. How you living, girl?”

“Chain him,” Marla said. One of her offsidars was a gold-rank metal-affinity brightheart who conjured chains that wrapped around the messenger.

“Oh, I like you,” Boris said as his wings vanished and he shrank to human size, the chains falling to his feet. The guard moved to replace them but Marla stopped him with a gesture. She looked at the device being carried by the guard.

“Do you know how to use that?” she asked Boris.

“Sure do. I also know why Asano needs me to, and it’s already rigged. Take me to your echo array chamber, let me knock out a ritual circle and we’re good to go. But as I told the unsatisfied wife, here, you won’t trust me. I need to speak to Asano so I can convince him and he can convince you.”

Shade rose out of Arabelle’s shadow.

“Convince me of what?” Jason’s voice came from the familiar.

Gary had joined a group of brighthearts reinforcing the wall between the citadel and the death chamber. The problem was that the wall had been hollowed out centuries earlier and turned into level after level of buildings. Gary’s earth, iron and forge essences, along with his knowledge of defensive structures, complemented the abilities of the brighthearts. They were shaping stone and metal, shoring up the barricades that filled the building interiors. Gary then went to work, refining and strengthening the materials used, along with improving the barricade designs to be more effective.

“These were our government administration buildings,” Kollas told Gary as they climbed the stairs to the next level. She was a metal-shaper and the leader of the detachment.

“I thought your government was run from the top of the citadel,” Gary said.

“The council chamber is up there, and a few office and staff areas for the council and their staff. The actual business of government is all the people who keep it running, though, and all that was here.”

Her expression darkened.

“My wife worked in one of these buildings. When the Builder cult invaded, she signed up for the new defensive force. We had no idea of how to fight at all, back then. The casualties were...”

She shook her head to clear it as increased her pace up the stairs.

“Now we’re fighting alongside those same cultists,” she continued, spitting out the words.

Gary couldn’t think of anything that sounded supportive rather than trite, so he stayed silent as he followed her up the stairs.

“The lower levels are fairly secure as is,” Kollas said, her brief spate of melancholy absent from her voice as she changed the subject. “We’ve all but filled them in, piling them with rock and fusing it into solid stone. Less attention was paid to the defences the higher we go, but none of it was ignored. Now we need to strengthen some of the mid and upper levels.”

Their stairwell was just inside the buildings, on the citadel side. Being inside the wall, Gary could sense the undead on the other side. They were massed at the bottom, but some were climbing the wall as well.

“Do you think the wall will hold?” one of the other brighthearts asked nervously.

“I know it won’t,” Kollas said. “We have to do our best to make breaches as hard for them as possible. We work to stop any major breaches and make repairs after the minor ones that will be coming.”

“What about setting weak points?” Gary asked. “Create funnels. Kill boxes.”

“That would be nice if we had more people to put on the other side of those funnels. We’re kind of doing that by focusing our resources on the lower levels. At least we can make them climb for the weaker points. In the end, we’re not trying to win. We’re trying to not die until your friend yanks us all into an astral space or whatever he’s doing. It all sounds a bit crazy to me.”

“Sometimes crazy is the only plan that will work,” Gary said. “That’s when you need Jason.”

“You claim that you’re from Earth,” Jason said through Shade.

“Yes,” Boris said. “And I know that leads to about a thousand questions that none of us have time for. What I have to say next will lead to a thousand more.”

“And what’s that?” Jason asked.

“I’m with the Unorthodoxy.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Vesta Carmis Zell would never send anyone down here without a brand on their soul.”

“Correct. I’m going to need you to help me get rid of that, by the way. I’ve got another twelve days or so before she breaks through the thing keeping her from exerting control over me.”

“How is that even possible?”

“Zell likes to think that she’s the best soul engineer in the cosmos. She’s not. Messengers all tend to think they’re the best whatever in the cosmos.”

“But not you?” Jason asked.

“No, even me, although I happen to be right. I’m the best lover in the cosmos.”

“Why should I believe any of this?”

“You could have Marla check real quick. Well, not *real* quick. I am the best lover in the cosmos.”

“Anyone can tell you that I love some quality banter as much as the next guy,” Jason said. “But there is a time for it to stop, so any more of this and I’ll have them kill you because I don’t have time to put up with you. Why should I give you even the slimmest modicum of trust?”

“Because you don’t have time not to, which everyone keeps saying. I promise that I am downright eager to explain all this once we don’t have an army of undead we need to deal with. We need to trigger the transformation zone.”

“How do you know about that?”

“The Cabal has managed to gather a lot of information on you, and I’ve seen you use transformation zones on the news.”

“You’re with the Cabal?”

“We *founded* the Cabal, but that doesn’t matter right now. When Vesta Carmis Zell started shopping around other astral kings for elemental messengers, my real astral king realised what was going to happen down here. Zell’s plans aren’t exactly a secret amongst her peers. Once we figured out how much the dimensional membrane here would get battered by what Zell was doing, we realised how you would respond. As I said, I’ve seen you using transformation zones before. I pitched a plan to my astral king and was fake sold to Zell to make sure you succeeded. It was going fine until the undead army no one expected raised their flag.”

“Why do any of this? The Unorthodoxy doesn’t care about this world.”

“No, we care about you. I don’t know how much you know about us, but the Unorthodoxy is scattered and lacking in allies. We hide because we lack the strength to fight, and nothing ever changes. You’re shaping up to be the largest shift in the game state in millennia, but you aren’t any use to us if you die while you’re still mortal. And getting on your good side now seemed like a good idea.”

“You know how to use the device you have?”

“Not a problem. I was never put through messenger indoctrination, so I was never told what I could and couldn’t learn. I’m the best astral magic specialist on this planet.”

“Second best,” Jason said.

“Jason,” Neil said, shaking Jason’s shoulder. His eyes snapped open.

“What is it?”

“You’d best go up the front.”

Jason realised that the expedition had come to a halt. His cloak flared out like wings and he flew forward while reaching out to Miriam through voice chat.

“What’s going on?”

“We caught up to the elemental messengers.”

He reached the front of the group where the gold-rankers were set up in a defensive line. Clive was behind them, riding on a black flying bird with white eyes. They were near the end of a tunnel leading into an open chamber. At the entrance was a row of gold-rank elemental messengers, a mirror of the expedition’s frontline. Jason moved next to Clive and Miriam turned to look at him.

“They haven’t attacked, or even made aggressive moves,” Miriam said. “They’re trying to communicate with hand gestures.”

“Anything you’ve managed to make out?”

“My translation power is picking out bits and pieces,” Clive said. “These were originally messengers from the surface, so they have the capacity for language, but I doubt that language includes a hand-signing component. But it’s obvious what they want.”

“And what’s that?” Jason asked.

“An alliance,” Miriam said.

Jason’s eyebrows shot up.

“That’s... unexpected.”

“We need you to make the call, Operations Commander,” Miriam said. “Do we fight our way in, or try to deal with them?”

Her eyes glanced at Beaufort briefly, the cultist in line with the other gold-rankers.

“We don’t understand how they think,” she said. “It’s a risky proposition, even compared to our other dubious alliance.”

“According to Marla,” Jason said, “the undead are expanding some kind of territory through the dead zone. Infusing the buildings with their tainted mana. They expect it to reach the wall in less than two hours, and they don’t expect to hold out much longer after that.”

“You’re saying that we don’t have a lot of time to do this.”

“I am. I’m going to go have a chat.”

“You’re going to go over there?” Miriam asked.

“Yep.”

“With all those gold-rank messengers whose minds have been warped by unstable magic.”

“Yep.”

“You have the power to come back from the dead, right?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, good luck.”

Jason floated through the line of gold-rankers and towards the messengers. One of their number floated out to meet him, a fire type whose body looked to be made up almost entirely of diamonds and rubies that shone with internal light. The only part of her that looked organic was her long red hair, and even then it had the metallic sheen of celestine hair.

The messenger immediately started to communicate through large gestures, her meaning plain. She gestured at her own people and then at Jason’s, followed by putting her hands together, fingers interlocked.

“Can you understand me?” Jason asked. The messenger nodded.

“You want to ally with us against the undead.”

Nod.

“What assurance do we have that you won’t massacre us the moment we enter your territory?”

The messenger looked frustrated, her mouth opening and closing repeatedly. Finally, her face took on an expression of exertion and she spoke one word in something between a growl and hiss.

“Need.”

“You need us?” Jason asked.

Nod.

“Here is the best offer I can make,” Jason said. “The dead are too numerous. Even together, we can’t kill them all. Especially not if you are especially vulnerable to them, and I think your actions have proven that to be the case. Do you understand what I am saying?”

Nod.

“And do you agree?”

The messenger’s face showed reluctance, but after a moment, it nodded.

“Alright. The only way we have to overcome the undead is to trap them in a distorted reality, and us with them. This whole underground domain, in fact. Including your tree.”

The messenger opened her mouth to release a feral, hissing roar, her face twisted with rage. Jason didn't react, waiting for her to stop before continuing as if nothing had happened.

“Once we are all inside the distorted reality space, we will all have to compete. Our people, your people and the undead. The winners take everything and the losers lose everything. That is the only offer I can make you. Every other path I see leads to your people and mine joining the ranks of the dead.”

The messenger wasn't happy but turned and floated back to her people while Jason stayed in place. The gold-rank messengers gathered in a huddle. They did not speak, and while they made occasional grunts, snarls and hisses, Jason did not believe that was their means of communication. He sensed a complex interplay of elemental magic that he believed to be their language, his ability to sense it even teasing at his translation power like words half-heard through a wall. Finally, she returned.

“Will you let us in?” Jason asked. “We will need access to the natural array to perform our magic.”

More reluctance on the messenger's face didn't stop her from making a jerking nod.

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.

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."

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.

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.

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."

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...”