

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?”