

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 offsidiers. 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 offsidiers 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.