

Chapter 815

Unorthodoxy

The shimmering dome of aura was impenetrable to magical senses, even those of a gold-rank messenger like Fiola Min Kath. She was sitting in one of the trees, having shaped a throne in the branches with her plant manipulation powers. It was an uncommon power amongst messengers, but that rarity did not translate to respect. Messengers admired powers that worked in the sky.

Fiola had watched Mahk Den Kahla lead the other gold-rankers into the dome one after another, none of whom had returned. Created by Boris Ket Lundi's aura, the dome blocked sight and sound but not physical passage. Whatever was happening in there, Mahk and Boris did not want the rest of them to know until it was their turn. She was the fifth and final gold-ranker, so her turn was next.

She considered running. She would get a head start if she picked her moment while they were inside the dome. Boris Ket Lundi was strong, but no faster than others of their kind. She could escape if she could reach another territory, one that had more life than a desert with few scraggly trees clinging to a mountaintop. Perhaps they wouldn't chase her at all.

She could have been imagining the grim fate waiting for her in the dome, but Boris Ket Lundi had not been shy about killing their own kind. Strength might have been the way of the messengers, but it still did not sit well with her. She did not like her fellow messengers, as a rule, but that was not the same as feeling nothing as they died. Not that she showed any reaction, of course. Empathy was a dangerous sign of weakness.

If she fled, where would she go? Escaping the immediate danger was all well and good, but was it a true escape? She lacked the strength and knowledge to leave this strange place alone, meaning death would find her, sooner or later.

Indecision made the choice for her when Mahk Den Kahla once again emerged from the dome. He looked in her direction and spoke her name. She floated from her throne, the leaves and branches untwisting to resume their natural shape. She floated down to stop in front of Mahk, just outside the dome.

"Am I going to die in there?" she asked.

"That depends on the choice you make, Fiola Min Kath. It won't be an easy one."

"What kind of choice?"

Mahk stepped back through the shimmering dome, leaving Fiola floating alone. She turned her head, looking to the distant horizon. Then she turned back and followed through

the dome. Her body tingled as she passed through the barrier. Inside, Mahk was floating towards Boris who was painted in the shining gold-silver wetness of messenger blood. The four gold-rankers that came before were now a pile of corpses, their blood trickling down the slope. A hole had been dug to collect it so it didn't run out of the dome.

Fiola didn't move far from the edge of the dome, primed to flee.

"They didn't choose well, then," she said, looking at the dead messengers.

"No," Boris said. There was usually a playful un-messenger-like lilt in his tone, but it was wholly absent now. "It's time to see behind the curtain, Fiola Min Kath. You have to choose between everything you've ever known and everything you've been taught to despise."

"Which one gets me killed?" she asked.

"You tell me," Boris challenged.

She looked at him for a long time. His oddly well-fitted clothes, his choice to stand on the ground instead of float.

"You're Unorthodoxy," she said.

"Yes."

"It seems obvious in hindsight."

"So much does," Boris said with a hint of the usual playfulness.

Fiola turned her gaze to Mahk Den Kahla.

"You too?"

"I was offered the choice first," Mahk said.

"Then you are a traitor," she accused.

"Yes," Mahk said. "I am not surprised at the others choosing the way they did. You were the only one we suspected might go the other way. That is why I brought you in last."

"You should have brought me in first. A pile of messengers is not a good look from someone trying to recruit."

"I said the same," Mahk told her as he tilted his head to indicate Boris. "He insisted."

"Whichever path you ultimately take," Boris said, "making this choice has consequences. It's important that you can make it honestly."

"Why do you think I am the one who will turn traitor?"

"Every gold-rank messenger has seen the cracks in the façade, although some do so long before rising to gold. Most don't care and keep climbing the ladder. They keep chasing power on the road laid out before them, not seeing the invisible gates. But there are those who chart their own course. Some see the traps and realise they can never earn

power, only be given it. Others realise they are slaves and long to be free. A precious few even manage to develop empathy."

Boris looked at the dead messengers and sighed.

"Most of them die," he continued. "Ambitious, empathetic or yearning to be free, it's all the same thing to an astral king: a threat. The vast majority of these rebellious thinkers are put down by their astral kings before they can cause trouble. But a few manage to modulate their thinking. Hide their divergent thoughts, even from themselves. Eventually, they meet one of three fates."

Boris glanced at Mahk before continuing.

"One, they suppress those thoughts so long they stop having them and become good little messengers again. Two, those errant thoughts and feelings grow until they draw the attention of the astral king. They die. Three, they meet someone like me. Someone who can offer them a way forward that doesn't force them to choose between being a slave and a corpse."

Fiola looked at the dead messengers again.

"I can see why they refused you. Your pitch is not very compelling."

"I'm not trying to entice you. I'm going to give you the truth and then let you choose."

"Between joining you or joining this pile of the dead."

"Yes."

"Then I have two choices. Be loyal to Vesta Carmis Zell who will kill me if I don't, or be loyal to you, who will kill me if I don't."

"Yes," Boris said. "But you are choosing between getting killed now and getting killed later, and loyalty to me has a clock on it. Once we are free of this place, you will be free of me."

"To do what? Roam the cosmos until I'm hunted down as a traitor?"

"Very little of you know about the Unorthodoxy is accurate. You've been taught that we are a scant few, existing in the hidden crevices of messenger society. But where are those crevices, exactly? How can we exist at all? Messengers can't exist without astral kings, and the astral kings keep our kind in line."

"You're saying that's all a lie?"

"Not all. Messengers need astral kings when we come into being, like a child needs a parent. Where now there is the brand, they once guided us in marking ourselves. No obedience, no alien eye inside our souls. Freedom instead of servitude. That is how the original astral kings did it, those who were not messengers themselves."

“Not messengers?” Fiola asked. Her expression of shock was mirrored on Mahk’s face.

“Yes,” Boris said. “Our genesis came from the original astral kings, who were not messengers at all. Back then, there were no limits on rank because that is a function of the brand, which didn’t exist. When messengers transcended to become astral kings themselves, they were the first to institute the brand, enslaving their own kind. At first, there was war and rebellion. Slave armies against the free. The free lost. We cared about our people. We wouldn’t use them, wouldn’t sacrifice them the way our enemy did. The survivors went into hiding and the indoctrination programs began. In victory, they didn’t just kill freedom but the very dream of it. In time, the leaders of the enemy became the Council of Kings. We became the unorthodoxy.”

“You speak as if you saw it for yourself,” Mahk said.

“Yes, I was there. I keep myself from progressing to diamond because we need agents who can move without the attention. A gold-ranker is powerful enough to be an asset without being the potential threat a diamond-ranker is. Only at diamond-rank can we begin to resist the brand, which would have drawn scrutiny I could not afford. My rank allowed me to deceive Vesta Carmis Zell and reach this place.”

“How did you deceive her?”

“Vesta Carmis Zell would have known if I wasn’t branded. She was desperate for powerful messengers with elemental powers, so I had one of our astral kings brand me. She then obtained some rather hilarious concessions for placing me at Vesta Carmis Zell’s temporary service. I was hoping to have the brand removed by now, but things haven’t gone my way.”

“You’re saying the Unorthodoxy has astral kings?” Mahk asked.

“Yes,” Boris said. “I know this is all a shock, Mahk, but do try to keep up. Astral Kings are rare, but they are also immortal, which complicates war. You can ravage their resources, but you cannot kill them. They exist as universes forged from souls, which remain inviolable. They may only be a fraction of the size of universes created by the Builder, but they cannot be destroyed and they do not fall to entropy, however long you wait. There are too many astral kings for anyone to keep track of. Over time, as the number of astral kings rises, the Unorthodoxy astral kings have been slipping back into the general population.”

Fiola looked at Boris searchingly. What he was telling her was outrageous, flying in the face of everything she had ever been taught. Just because Boris admitted as much didn’t mean he wasn’t lying.

“Population,” Mahk said, echoing Boris’ word. “A *population* of astral kings.”

“Transcendents are all immortal,” Boris said. “Not just ageless, like us, but truly unkillable. They have their own level of interaction, as above us as our cosmic community is above those living their entire lives on some rock, hurtling around an ember. Diamond-rank is the threshold. The borderland between them and us.”

Mahk looked shell-shocked, not even noticing when he drifted down to where his feet were on the ground. Fiola looked hurt and angry.

“Everything you’re saying makes us seem so small,” she said.

“Yes,” Boris agreed. “The concept of messengers as the ultimate beings of creation, the messengers of the cosmic will, is laughable. A truth that all diamond-rank messengers realise eventually. That’s the greatest danger they represent to the astral kings. And when they realise that the brand on their souls means they can never become astral kings, that danger becomes unacceptable. The astral kings either have to accept them and remove the brand, or put them down. Of course, removing the brand doesn’t mean a diamond-ranker will just leap into transcendence. Most diamond-rankers set free to become astral kings fail, just like essence users or any of the other half-transcendents floating around the cosmos.”

Fiola shook her head.

“You haven’t given me any reason to believe any of this,” she said.

“I don’t expect you to,” Boris said. “I’m offering you the chance to see the truth for yourself.”

“And if I turn you down, you’ll kill me.”

“I’ve told you far too much to let you go.”

“You didn’t tell the others. Otherwise, Mahk Den Kahla wouldn’t be so shocked.”

They both turned to look at Mahk who standing on the ground, staring at nothing. He snapped out of it and looked at Boris.

“You didn’t tell me any of this,” he said. “You didn’t tell any of us.”

“I mentioned at the start that some messengers find the cracks in the indoctrination. Fiola Min Kath was already on the path of a free thinker. You were not. You didn’t see until your rank let you, and even then, you ignored it. I had to open the cracks in your mind with a hammer and chisel. You were still programmed to respond to authority so I pushed you through by force of will. But it wasn’t that hard, which is good. At least you responded to it, unlike...”

Their gazes went to the pile of bodies once more. A few wisps of rainbow smoke rose from the bodies as the bottom messenger was breaking down into raw magic.

“Fiola,” Mahk said. “Boris Ket Lundi took a different approach with me. He pointed out that Vesta Carmis Zell was not going to let us live, however this went. Not after the way we failed and were corrupted.”

Fiola nodded, absently, eyes still on the thickening plume of rainbow smoke.

“We should use a ritual to preserve them,” she said. “It’s a waste of resources.”

“I took their lives,” Boris said. “I can at least leave them their dignity.”

“You sound like one of the lesser races,” Fiola said.

“Now that we’ve come this far,” Boris said, “that is the last time you say ‘lesser races’ in my presence.”

Chapter 816

Messengers Don't Have Hearts

Garth and Jameela were standing atop a hill of red desert rock. Their vast forces spread out on the plateau they were overlooking.

"So, the messengers want this soul forge, whatever that is," Garth said.

"According to the Magic Society researchers, yes," Jameela said. "And it seems that Asano is the biggest threat to that objective. He also has the ability to claim it."

"Do we?"

"I don't believe so. We could only acquire it with the help of the messengers, and they will not hand it over. To return to their leadership without it is likely worse than dying down here. I don't believe we could use it anyway. The transformation zone itself, once reunited with reality, remains the prize."

"Then we can let them have it, so long as the zone itself still goes to us."

"I would counsel caution. We are unlikely to understand any magic they use to that end."

"Yes. And promises don't always need to be kept."

Garth turned to look off at the distant mountain where the messengers were lairing. Three of them were flying in their direction. The two priests waited and watched until the messengers were floating in the air in front of them. The one Garth had spoken with before, Boris Ket Lundi, was flanked by the other two.

"I sensed the death of the rest of your other gold-rankers," Garth said. More accurately, he'd sensed the aura dome into which they'd been led one by one, and then their dead bodies when the dome dropped.

"Neither of us are fools," Boris said. "We can make a deal to stay out of your fight with the adventurers, but you would doubtless expect us to turn on you when you were weakened. Now we lack the strength. However many silver-rankers we have, and whatever the cost of bringing low your enemy, we no longer have the strength to turn on you."

"You expect me to believe you gutted most of your gold-rank strength as a show of trust?" Garth asked.

"Naturally not," Boris said. "I chose the way that served my own ends as well. But the affairs of my people are not your business. How the results affect you are your business."

"Handing over your territories, and the messengers that come with them, would make for a better show of trust."

“Trust goes both ways, High Priest. If we slaughter our strongest warriors and hand over the territories, that leaves you with no incentive to accede to our modest requests. Jason Asano must not survive the battle.”

“Killing Asano falls within our interests as well, I can assure you.”

“I want more than assurances, High Priest. I want details.”

“You are not in a position to negotiate,” Jameela said.

Boris did not shift his blank expression but he glanced at Jameela briefly before turning back to Garth. Garth nodded his acknowledgement.

“You are not in a position to be a threat,” Garth said, “but you could be a bother.”

“We could be more than a bother,” Boris said. “I am confident that we can escape your camp.”

“Is that so?”

“Your avatar is powerful, but it is neither close nor fast. Not enough to stop the three of us, or our forces if they start fleeing now. We chose you because our desire for Asano’s death makes for the less uneasy alliance. If you prove that assessment wrong, you will find us on the other side of the upcoming battle.”

“You’re bluffing,” Jameela said. “You want Asano dead and he knows it.”

“And I know Asano. The last time he was in a transformation zone, he allied with the man who killed his brother and lover. He is not afraid to work with his foes.”

“And what fate befell this foe of Asano’s in that space?” Garth asked.

“Jason Asano, silver-rank at the time, was pulled into that transformation zone along with a slate of his gold-rank enemies. When the space returned to reality, two people escaped intact. One was Asano, the zone now in his possession. The other was a gold-rank vampire that went on to lead the vampires of that world in a war for domination. But despite that seeming fearlessness, she hid after leaving the transformation zone. She did not dare show her face again until Asano had left that universe entirely.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Garth said. “You could have just said that Asano’s enemy died inside. Instead, you told me that story. Why?”

“I said that two people escaped that transformation zone intact. There was another, but I would not call him intact nor his departure an escape. Asano’s enemy did die, yes, but the vampire trapped his soul in a blood clone that now serves her as a slave.”

“It doesn’t sound like allying with Asano while still being his enemy is likely to turn out well for you.”

“Thus, I came to you first. But if you truly think we have no position to negotiate from...”

“You do,” Garth said, “but walking away from us complicates things for you more than you are suggesting, messenger.”

Boris snorted a smirking laugh.

“And how is that, priest?”

“Asano wants the soul forge while we are willing to let you have it.”

The smirk dropped from Boris’ face.

“How did... do you even understand what it is you’re talking about?” Boris asked

“There is a way for you to still take it while we keep the territory?”

“What? Oh, yes, that’s not an issue,” Boris said. His expression made plain that he was hastily reorganising things in his mind. “That’s just a matter of the right ritual as you consolidate the transformation zone with reality. The only challenge there is convincing you to let us set off some magic I guarantee you won’t understand while the transformation zone goes through the transition.”

“Our god’s avatar is the seat of our territorial power,” Garth said. “Undeath instilled it with the ability to claim the zone. You don’t have close to the power to interfere with that. You will need to excise this soul forge of yours while being very careful not to interfere with the god’s work. If your imprecision costs you because our god puts a halt to your magic, we will consider that your failure, not a violation of our deal.”

Boris looked troubled as he considered Garth’s words.

“Allow me to discuss this before giving you an answer,” he said.

“Be quick,” Garth said. “Your leverage is as lacking as my patience.”

Boris scowled but held his tongue. The three messengers floated away and a shimmering dome appeared around them. Inside the dome, Boris grinned.

“This is going great!”

“How so?” Fiola asked.

“He must have found out about the soul forge from someone they captured and interrogated.”

“I share Fiola Min Kath’s confusion,” Mahk said. “A ritual to extract the soul forge while this dimensional realm is being reinserted into reality would take immense research by astral magic experts.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Boris said. “The priest is lying about letting it happen anyway. He definitely doesn’t believe it’s as easy as I made it out to be. We’re in the same position we were in the first place, making bets on who can betray the other one more effectively. He just thinks he’s found some extra leverage.”

“I’m not sure I understand the plan,” Fiola said.

“Of course you don’t,” Boris said. “I didn’t tell you all of it. Now, it’s about time we went back out there. Remember to look stern.”

The dome dropped and the three messengers floated back to Garth.

“We can accept your terms,” Boris said, “so long as you make absolutely certain that Asano is dead. If he interferes in the ritual and causes your god to foul it, that *will* be a violation of our deal.”

“Asano will die,” Garth said.

“How?” Boris asked.

“That is our concern.”

“Not good enough. I’ll give you one of my silver-rank messengers. You can take for yourself their power to isolate themselves with an enemy in a dimensional space. Isolate Asano from his allies and kill him yourself.”

“Take their power?” Garth asked.

“I have neither the time nor the interest for playing games with you, priest. I know what you can do because I know what you are.”

The red lights in the eye sockets of Garth’s skull face flared brightly.

“Oh, calm down,” Boris said. “I’m an ancient wanderer of the cosmos; you think you’re my first zemravore?”

Garth’s eyes dimmed, Jameela’s gaze panning between Boris and Garth. Boris and Garth stared at one another in silence for a long moment.

“Very well,” Garth said. “I have heard of the duelling powers possessed by many messengers. Just make sure the messenger you bring me has one. This plan will suffice.”

“No,” Boris said. “It won’t. You don’t know Asano. Don’t underestimate him because he’s silver-rank. He’s elusive, dwelling in shadows and hiding his aura even from gold-rankers. And he’s died before. You have to kill him, then keep killing him until it sticks. Take your undead with you. The ones you animated personally are linked to you like familiars.”

“Don’t lecture a high priest of Undeath on how raising the dead works, messenger.”

Boris bowed his head in acknowledgment.

“Foolish of me, in hindsight,” he said. “My point is that your undead are connected to you, and will therefore be able to join you into the sealed space. Take an army of them and don’t give Asano anywhere to hide. Dig out every crevice and cut into every shadow. He will only have so much area to work with in a sealed space. Deprive him of every place he might go to ground and drag him into the light. Only then can you make the difference in rank come into play.”

“You believe he can hide from my senses?”

“I know he can,” Boris said. “He’s hard to pin down; even catching him in an isolation power will be a trick, but that is the beginning of the fight, not the end. Victory will only come when he’s dead for good. Do not dismiss what I said about his resurrections. He’s been killed by the Builder’s first servant and even the Builder inhabiting a mortal vessel. It will take more than—”

“I’ve heard you,” Garth said. “Stop belabouring the point. Leave us now before you try my patience further. Go, and return only with your messenger sacrifice.”

Boris’ expression said he didn’t want to leave it at just that, but he turned and flew off. The other messengers followed and the two priests watched. When he was confident they were out of even gold-rank earshot, Garth spoke to Jameela.

“What do you think?”

“There is unquestionably something strange between the messengers and Asano,” Jameela said. “How close it adheres to what these messengers have presented is the question.”

“You interrogated the essence users about this adventurer and the messengers. Did you learn anything relevant to this question?”

“When the messengers invaded the elf city, they became obsessed with killing Asano. The researchers weren’t certain why.”

“That holds with what I know of messengers. They rarely care about any but their own kind as individuals. Those that do, they obsess over destroying. Usually for having affronted their dignity in some way, besmirching their precious sense of superiority.”

“Related to the fact that Asano can claim this soul forge of theirs?”

“That seems likely. I think we can at least believe that their desire for his death is true. They simply want us to do their work for them, and let the adventurers soften us up in the process.”

“Then they will wait for Asano’s death before betraying us.”

“Yes. I suspect their weakness is feigned. The group we have seen may just be a fraction of their true strength, with their true force gathered in the territory they still hold. The ones they killed here were probably political opponents of Boris Ket Lundi. He consolidated his strength while passing it off as a show of humility and trust. But there is no humility in a messenger.”

“How will you deal with them?”

“I won’t. However great they have deluded themselves into believing they are, our god has sent his power into this place. Whatever their schemes, the avatar is a wall no winged beast can fly over.”

Garth stared at the shadowy figure, standing alone before the full might of the undead army.

“We both have areas within our territories with environmental weapons,” Jason’s voice came from Shade’s body. “We’ll fight on neutral ground. A cleared but unclaimed territory.”

“Where?”

“There’s a forest made of stone adjacent to both of our territories. It hasn’t been cleared yet. I suggest that our demigod and your avatar do so. Supervised by a selection of gold-rankers on each side so we can be sure that neither of us attempts to ambush the other’s divine combatant.”

Garth’s skeletal face didn’t react, despite his surprise that the enemy had gotten that close. The territory in question had been scouted. The more complex the terrain, the greater the advantage of thinking fighters over the mindless undead that made up the bulk of Garth’s forces. The stone forest was acceptable. It was harder for the undead to navigate than empty desert, but some cover made it harder to wipe them out in swathes with wide-area magic. He suspected the enemy had chosen it knowing they would reject anything too disadvantageous to the undead.

“I am aware of the territory,” Garth said. “Our avatar will clear it alone.”

The response was a moment coming, Garth assuming Asano was consulting with his allies.

“That is acceptable,” Jason’s voice finally came. “Under the condition that it is observed from our side. If there is some hidden weapon in the territory, we cannot allow you to claim it.”

“Acceptable,” Garth echoed. “I will send the avatar in an hour. If your observers are not in place, that is your failing.”

Mahk carried the unconscious silver-rank messenger. They were trained to be obedient but also trained for loyalty to the astral kings. These had come into conflict upon discovering that their leaders were all now Unorthodoxy. The combination of being indoctrinated to obey and seeing what happened to those who didn’t made the bloodbath short. This was one of the rebellious ones, left alive for a grimmer purpose.

He delivered the messenger to the high priest of Undeath, uncertain of what would happen. The priest marched down the hill he always seemed to dwell on, going down the side opposite his own forces. Mahk didn't care if Garth wanted to keep his nature hidden from his priests and followed along, still carrying the silver-ranker.

Garth threw off the robes draped around his bizarre body, revealing a skeletal, hunchback form. Two extra legs and four extra arms, all wrapped around its body, had been bulking it out under the robes. The limbs unfurled, uncovering a rib cage containing four stony sockets held in place by bone struts, all where internal organs would be on a living thing. Inside each socket was a living, beating heart, held in place by bone spikes stabbed into them. Each side of the rib cage swung open like a door and the spikes retracted from one of the hearts. Garth reached in, plucked it out and tossed it aside like the crust of a stale sandwich.

At a gesture from Garth, Mahk approached with the unconscious messenger in his arms. Garth directed him to hold it up and Mahk did so, his hands slung under its arms. One of Garth's hands shot out, burying itself in the messenger's chest. A moment later, the messenger erupted into rainbow smoke, her body gone but for a beating heart, gripped in Garth's hand. Garth placed the heart in the empty socket and bone spikes stabbed into it.

"You can go," Garth told Mahk as his ribs closed and the limbs started curling around his body once more. Mahk floated in place with a confused expression, staring at Garth.

"What is it?" Garth asked, irritated.

"Messengers don't have hearts," Mahk said.

"I don't care."

Chapter 817

Will He Be Broken

Two cloud vehicles shot through an unclaimed territory, hovering a few metres over the ground. The territory was an icy expanse, but far from a barren waste. In the distance, castles made of ice sparkled in the sun. Plant life was abundant, in shades of white blue and grey over the traditional browns and greens.

Of the two vehicles, one was larger and more colourful. Painted in vibrant sunset hues, it ranged from warm shades of orange, gold and red through to cool purples, blues and teals. The other vehicle was encased in hexagonal panels of slick dark red, like blood under glass. Between the panels, the white cloud the panels were set into was visible.

The driving spaces for the two vehicles were as different as the exteriors. While they were both situated at the front of their respective vehicles, with large viewing windows, the similarities ended there. In Emir's cloud vehicle, the design was extremely minimal and made entirely of clouds. There was a chair, to either side of which was a ball of mist, hovering in the air. These balls were the only control mechanism, Emir having one hand in each as he piloted the vehicle himself.

The cockpit of Jason's cloud vehicle showed no trace of its cloud vehicle nature. It looked like someone who understood nothing about complex vehicles but was very enthusiastic about buttons had gone mad with power. There were two seats, each of which contained a Shade body that was acting rapidly to work the vehicle's numerous control mechanisms. There were buttons, switches, toggles, levers and lights, all in a hodgepodge mix of anime mecha, seventies aeroplane and mad science lab.

On the rooftop lounge of Jason's cloud vehicle, Miriam Vance was wondering why it had a rooftop lounge. Jason was sitting next to her, watching the terrain rush by with a mixed juice drink and a huge grin. The drink had a little umbrella and a bendy straw. Their chairs were comfortable cloud recliners, side-by-side so they could look ahead as the vehicle moved forward. They each had a side table for drinks, with another table between them.

"We should be getting blasted by air much more at this speed," he said. "I have an invisible mist shield redirecting it. I let a little in, though, because I want that sense of motion. The mist covers the whole roof, in fact."

"I figured that might be the case when our high-speed, open-air passage through a snow field was pleasantly warm."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Jason said, then took a long sip of his drink. "Ooh, that's some good stuff."

"You don't seem especially worried about what we're heading into," Miriam observed.

"Well, you can't go getting excited every time something like this happens."

"I rather believe you can."

"Don't think I'm not taking this seriously. I know the stakes are more than just life or death. If we lose here, we'll all die and a disaster of massive proportions will hit the world. But in my last transformation zone, the world would end if I didn't win and my only allies were all my gold-rank enemies. This time I've got resources, allies, power and a plan that someone other than me came up with. I've even got a mountain fortress in the shape of my own head. The only other thing I could ask for might even be on the cards. I've been talking with Clive and... well, that's for after. Assuming we win this fight, we still need to clean up the rest of the territories while the anomalies keep growing stronger. It's going to get dangerous even for the gold-rankers by the time we're done."

"We have Xandier."

"Yeah, but I don't think you like putting all your eggs in one basket any more than I do."

"No, I do not. But, as you said, that is for another day."

"Exactly. Today we have a climactic battle for the fate of see article one. I'm not saying that this is old hat, but I've been through it enough times that I know the best thing I can do is be rested and centred. I'm sure I don't need to tell you that anxiety, anger and grim determination make you feel powerful, yet make you weaker."

"You do not," Miriam agreed. "Being calm and mindful, without becoming placid and passive is easier said than done. Especially given what we face today."

"You get used to it. Would you like a scone? I'm going to have a scone."

True to his word, Jason was soon biting into a scone slathered generously with jam and cream, letting out a moan of pleasure.

"Shimmer berry jam," he mumbled happily, spraying crumbs. "I made it myself while I was convalescing in Rimaros."

He swallowed his mouthful and grinned.

"The greatest triumph of my time there," he said.

"Your greatest triumph?"

"Yep."

"Did you forget that you convinced the Builder to end his invasion and leave this world?"

"Nope. I stand by my statement."

Miriam looked from Jason to the tray on the table between them.

"I guess I'd better have one of these scones, then."

"How confident are you in this plan?" Jason asked.

"That sounds like a nervous question," Miriam said. The scones had proven oddly effective at diminishing her nervousness. "What happened to moving past anxiety?"

"There's a lot of people asking that question in this vehicle," Jason said. "Out loud or not."

"Well," Miriam said, "let's start with the fact that you can portal between disparate territories you control, sight unseen. That, as far as I'm aware, is an aspect of the unique connection you have with territories. Perhaps messengers could match it, connecting to the territories through their ritual magic, but we don't have any with portal magic to test. Then, we add the ability to pack up almost all our forces in your soul realm and jump them from one territory to another. Also, as far as I'm aware, unique."

"You think the Undeath priests won't know about it?"

"They might. We've clashed with them enough times to have had losses. It's possible they kept some alive and interrogated them. More likely, though, any information they had is from those they captured who hadn't joined up yet."

"Meaning they would know about much of what we can do, but nothing revealed after entering the transformation zone."

"Yes. This includes the ability to transport a large and relatively weak silver-rank force through unclaimed territory using cloud vehicles. Since we suggested the territory agreed upon for the battle, they will likely be looking for traps and plots we've put in place. Having our demigod and some of our key gold-rankers there to observe, they hopefully won't anticipate us smuggling most of our forces across dangerous territory to hit them in their own backyard."

"Letting us challenge the main force while Clive sets his plan in motion."

"Yes. The high priest will call back the avatar immediately, I'm certain, but Xandier can stall it while Standish's plan weakens it. We want to clear out as many of the undead and messengers as we can in that time, leaving the priests until the avatar regroups. Your power will be critical during that stage."

"I know."

"Be that as it may, I find drilling the plan into people's heads over and over leaves at least a small chance they'll actually follow it. Once the avatar rejoins the main force, both

hopefully weakened already, we take down their priests and weaken the avatar further, teaming up with Xandier to kill it. That is about as far as we can optimistically anticipate having some control of how this battle goes.”

“Assuming the inevitable chaos factors haven’t already sent it careening off the rails by that point.”

“Yes. We’re planning to come as close to killing a god as it’s possible to get, today, so chaos is inherent and far more than I like could go wrong. If they guess what we’re up to, or the messenger forces floating around choose to participate in unanticipated ways, things will get very messy, very fast. That will happen eventually, though, whatever we do. Sooner or later, we’ll all have to improvise. The strength of this plan is that we have broad objectives that everyone knows and can fight for, even if things go splound-shaped. Eliminate priests and—”

“Splound-shaped?”

“A splound is a fruit,” Miriam said. “It grows in lumpy, unpredictable shapes.”

“Is it tasty?”

“No,” Miriam said. “It’s very bitter.”

On the upper slopes of their mountain, Boris, Mahk and Fiola looked to the distant undead.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t have reached out to Asano?” Mahk asked.

“There are too many ways it could go wrong,” Boris said. “Our contact could be discovered. Even if it wasn’t, Garth is no fool. If he got a sense Asano was trying to let himself be caught, he’d almost certainly back off from that plan.”

“If Asano doesn’t know the plan,” Fiola said, “what makes you confident in him?”

“Jason Asano has been walking through fire from the moment he stepped beyond his own little life on his own little world. At some point, you just have to trust that he’s not going to burn.”

“I’m not sure I like hinging victory on a metaphor,” Mahk said.

“I have been around for a very long time, Mahk Den Kahla,” Boris said. “In all of that time, I’ve seen only a handful of people that can truly shake the cosmos. Bethlin the Reaver. Zithis Carrow Vayel. They’re rare, but you come to recognise the signs. There is no way the World-Phoenix knew what it was getting when it stepped in to alter Asano’s course, but it knows now. They all see the signs, just as I do. It’s why he’s gotten their attention, and why his next battle will be the one that marks his place in the cosmos. Will he stand tall or will he be broken, like the Builder?”

Floating slightly behind and to either side of Boris, Mahk and Fiola shared a look. They both had a sudden sense of being caught up in something much larger than them, which was something a messenger was never meant to feel.

Atop his hill, Garth contemplated the battle ahead. The avatar and a retinue had been dispatched to the battle site, crossing the territorial boundary. His link to the avatar, through the power Undeath bestowed to them both, did not cross the boundary. Garth had considered going himself, but he wanted to stay with the main force. There was nothing the enemy could do to the avatar, and if they somehow attempted some trickery, he needed to command the larger forces. He'd left one of his subordinate priests to control the avatar.

His faction held a massive unified territory now, but it was not under Garth's control. Only the avatar was able to handle the strain and had been imbued with the knowledge and power to unify the entire zone. So long as they could destroy their rivals, this bizarre dimensional detour in their plan would turn out better than they could have hoped. Not being connected to the territory, however, meant that Garth would not be immediately warned when things went wrong.

To address the communication issue, Garth had set up a relay. Next to him, a skull was resting atop a short spear stabbed into the ground. The skull could relay voices between itself and another skull set next to the territorial boundary. That way, a messenger could come through and report quickly. One did just that, crossing the border and rushing to the skull.

“High Priest, the adventurers and their allies are doing something. Their demigod has attacked the avatar.”

“And the rest of their forces?”

“We have still only seen a fraction of them, but we’ve observed them doing something strange. They’re bringing out our priests they’ve captured alive and started executing them.”

“Why? They have to know that won’t impact our morale.”

“I don’t understand either, High Priest. The priests are rising into revenants and immediately attacking the adventurers who are forced to fight them. Even with the enemy prepared, revenants are hard to kill—”

“—because they’re infused with the power of the Undeath god,” Garth said.

His mind raced over the possibilities. What did the enemy hope to achieve? Garth had lost people, and until he had found the avatar, they had not arisen as revenants the

way they normally would. Once they had found it, their power to rise again had been restored by tapping into the power of—

“They’re trying to drain the avatar!” Garth managed to snarl, despite not having a throat or even really a mouth. “We have to—”

“High Priest!” Jameela called out as she rushed up the hill. He turned to look and saw her pointing in the opposite direction to the dimensional boundary. Two strange vehicles were speeding across the desert, floating yet kicking up plumes of dust and sand from their sheer speed.

“Recall the avatar!” Garth yelled at the communication skull. “We have to consolidate our forces before they can!”

He started loping down the hill faster than his awkward body seemed like it would be capable of. The battle was about to begin.

Chapter 818

Risking Everything

In the battle that took place in the underground city of the brighthearts, the priests of Undeath had largely held back. They had what amounted to an infinite supply of the unliving to throw them at the enemy until the enemy crumbled. This was not the case when the two cloud vehicles came barrelling over the rocks and sand of the desert, trails of dust thrown up in their wake.

Undeath priests came in different varieties, from somewhat ordinary essence users to bizarre undead mockeries. This included higher-order undead, like vampires commanding armies of deathless ghouls. There were liches; highly intelligent undead with powerful tricks to escape final destruction. Liches all wielded potent magic, be that the essences they had in life or more eldritch and alien powers. Others were less common forms of undead, such as the zemravore, Garth. There was a being that looked to be made of solidified shadow, in the shape of a human but twice as tall. It used magic to turn the zombies and skeletons around it into shadowy, ethereal entities that were harder to cut down.

Although there was no shortage of undead oddities amongst the priests, most were still amongst the living. Employing necromantic essence combinations banned by the Adventure Society, their powers were not focused on direct combat but on creating, commanding, and enhancing the undead. The overall undead minions under their command were fewer than they had access to in the last massive battle, but their direct participation made each undead much stronger.

The Undeath forces were situated on a plateau, looking down on the desert where the two vehicles were approaching. The priests stirred their minions into action, bolstering them with magic and sending them into the attack.

This meant descending the plateau, the edge of which led to a mix of steep slopes and outright cliffs. This was not a challenge to navigate as the weakest of the undead were silver-rank. Most of the army in the brightheart city had been bronze, but anything that weak had been annihilated by the transformation zone's living anomalies.

Some undead simply leapt off, unfussed about the landing. Others were empowered in various ways, allowing them to handle the terrain. Simple skeletons were turned into skeleton mages through the necromancy of their masters. Runes carved themselves into the bones of the skeletons, lighting up with different coloured magic. Dark smoke shrouded their feet and carried them into the air, at which point they started flinging simple

projectiles of fire, electricity or shimmering force. These weren't potent attacks, taken individually, but their raw number made for a storm of magic landing on the two vehicles, still kilometres distant.

Vampire priests drained the life out of brightheart and messenger prisoners they had claimed for the purpose, using that life force to make their ghouls faster and stronger. The emaciated figures scrambled down the steep mountainside off the plateau's edge.

Zombies and other macabre creations of the undead priests were given a variety of enhancements. Some grew wings of rotting flesh and took to the skies, or claws that dug into stone, letting them climb down vertical cliffs at speed.

Alongside the undead, the messengers claimed by the undeath priests were on the move. The pallid messengers claimed by the priests had proven amongst the weakest variety, compared to those claimed by other messengers or the brighthearts. That changed when those messengers were handed over to the avatar of Undeath. The meagre undeath they had been given by the priests had been bolstered with divine might, making them both more corpse-like and more powerful. Even in the avatar's absence their new strength remained, shown off as they soared through the air, leaving trails of purple sparks in their wake.

Another factor of the messengers gaining more power from the avatar was that they now enjoyed enhancements from the auras of the Undeath priests. Although the messengers were still technically alive, the potent undeath energy inside them responded to the aura powers the same way as true undead.

Necromancers whose powers came from essence abilities, meaning most of the priests, almost always had aura powers that bolstered the undead. This wasn't the specific transformations and extra powers from their other abilities but baseline enhancement of the undeath energy animating them. This was a massive force multiplier for the undead minions, and the reason Garth needed to hunt Jason down.

The rooftop lounge of Jason's vehicle had closed over, armour panels emerging from the cloud-stuff to shield it from the rain of magic projectiles. Jason and Miriam had gone inside, joining the Shades in the piloting room that Jason was still deciding between calling a cockpit or a bridge. He thought cockpit was more accurate but he really wanted the spaceship vibes.

Rather than look out the windscreen, Jason closed his eyes and connected his senses to his cloud vehicle. The vehicle was a spirit domain, giving Jason near total power within it. That did not extend to outside the vehicle, but he was able to use it like a signal

booster for his aura, affecting the aura itself and the magical perception that used it as a basis. It wasn't a raw strength upgrade but something that impacted specific aspects. For his perception, he was able to multitask better inside his mind, actively observing more at once. For his aura, it made it harder for the Undeath priests to push back against with their own auras.

Jason's aura carried with it not just his aura power, but also all the aspects of his aura he had developed. This included the power he had learned from the goddess of death to diminish undeath energy. This made his aura anathema to the Undeath priests, whose auras were all infused with it.

Jason's power to affect the undead bordered on divine. Death had shown him how to reshape his aura with an effectiveness that mortals could normally not touch upon. It was the kind of gift that gods offered their followers temporarily before taking the power back. Death had shown Jason how to effectively bestow that gift upon himself. Added to the god-adjacent power of his spirit domain that he was using to bolster his aura and Jason wasn't confronting the undead like a mortal but in the manner of a god.

Jason was not a god, however. Using their tools in their way made it possible for an aura face-off against all those priests, gold-rankers included. The problem was that Jason lacked the one thing that truly made gods what they were: infinite power. His aura was still the basis for everything he was doing, and while it was implausibly strong for his rank, that rank was still silver. That he could effectively pit himself against the priests at all was a borderline miracle, complete with the divine tools to make it happen.

Jason's limits meant that he was unable to dominate the undead forces the way Death had with her miracle. He reached a spiritual stalemate with his foes, where they couldn't suppress his aura but could shield their undead from it. In turn, Jason couldn't weaken the undead beyond their normal baseline, but he could stop the priestly auras from making them stronger.

He couldn't shut down the specific enhancements of the undead from various priest powers, be it transformations or the blood-fuelled enhancements to vampire ghouls. But the aura powers enhancing the basic undead energy flowing through them all was shut down, negating the force-multiplier of raising their baseline power.

While Jason was flooding the battlefield with his aura, Miriam had been using his communication power to issue last-minute commands to their forces. Most of them were on the larger vehicle belonging to Emir.

"How are you doing?" she asked Jason.

“Not as well as I’d like,” Jason said as he opened his eyes. “I’ve put a dent in the priests’ ability to give blanket strength upgrades to their minions, but that’s about it.”

“I’ll take it,” Miriam said. “It’s a miracle you can do even that much, given how many gold-rankers have to be pushing back on you.”

“Miracle adjacent,” Jason corrected. “The goddess of death provided me with a trick built for purpose and she didn’t muck about. My team were pretty cranky when they heard what I traded for it, but they don’t understand the magnitude of what she showed me. And it’s not even the loss they think it is. Assuming we win.”

“And if we don’t win?”

“Then it won’t matter either way.”

“True enough,” Miriam said and then moved to peer out the windscreen. “I’m not seeing a good spot to establish a beachhead. It’s all just open ground leading to that plateau the undead are pouring down.”

Something solid hit the vehicle, rocking it heavily. The vehicle was moving smoothly forward again a moment later, the hover bus having what amounted to perfect air suspension.

“Damage?” Miriam asked.

“We’re good,” Jason said. “The armour panels offer resilience and the cloud material disperses force. The extra features I picked up from that noble house in Rimaros have worked out much better than expected. We’re holding up almost as well as Emir’s vehicle, so I’m expecting him to ask about them once we’re done.”

Miriam nodded and turned back to the view through the windscreen. Magic projectiles were falling like hail and undead waterfalled off the plateau in the distance, moving down to the flatlands.

“We need to start setting up before the enemy brings their full power to bear,” Miriam said. “Since nowhere in this barren dust flat is better than any other, we may as well stop here.”

Adventurers, brighthearts and cultists spilled out of the two vehicles after they pulled to a stop. They were on an unremarkable flat of barren red rock, the dust they kicked up dry and chalky on the tongue. The sun beat down hard, blinding glints flashing off any glossy surface, from lacquered armour to polished blades.

Under Miriam’s direction, they formed a defensive perimeter. It was manned on all sides but focused on defending from the front and above where the enemy was attacking.

The battle was yet to reach an earnest clash, still consisting of ranged attacks pouring in from the Undeath side. The wave of minions heading their way would arrive soon enough.

For now, the undead were harassing with projectile attacks from the enhanced undead and the pallid messengers. The messengers had picked up new abilities after being claimed by the avatar and could now fling purple energy projectiles. The ubiquitous assault was endurable, thanks to Jason preventing the power scale of the enemy from ramping up under the auras of the priests.

The adventurers and their allies only made token counterattacks, saving their strength for the battle to come. With a tsunami of undead heading their way, it would come soon. In the meantime, they defended the space where the two vehicles were breaking down, returning to their cloud flasks. It would take time to turn the vehicles into strongholds.

Miriam was barking out orders as combatants rushed around them. The brighthearts lacked the strength of the adventurers, but they were using their elemental powers to set up defensive emplacements. Trenches with walls of stone spikes waiting for anyone who leapt over. Shelters where ranged attackers could duck in and about between heavy and total cover. Tunnels allowing safe traversal between different areas of the defensive line.

Emir and Shade were standing by the cloud flasks still sucking in the cloud stuff of the vehicles. Jason stood next to Miriam, looking like a human-shaped void portal with his cloak wrapped around him. The inside of his hood was dark, indicating his eyes were closed as he concentrated on challenging the priests with his aura.

“With the possible exception of when the avatar arrives,” Miriam told Jason, “this will be the most precarious part of the battle. We have to hold this position long enough for our twin fortresses to set up.”

“Then it’s time to see if I can’t go slow them down some more,” Jason said.

“I still don’t like letting you go out there.”

“I know. But until I have a spirit domain up and running again, they’re pushing me back in the aura battle. I’m holding on, but I’m slipping and the enemy is getting stronger by the moment. My ghost fire will be more impactful than my aura, but I can’t just sploosh it out like the goddess of Death. Mine is a pale imitation of her miracle. I need to get out there if I’m going to use it, and you know that. It’s not like I’ll be the only one you’re sending out there to make trouble.”

“Risking them is risking a soldier. Risking you is risking everything.”

“And so is keeping me in a box when letting me out could be the difference between victory and defeat.”

Miriam let out a resigned sigh.

“I know. Get moving. Just make sure you come back, and that it was worth letting you go.”

Chapter 819

A Dangerous Power

Garth had a dangerous power. It didn't come from his stolen hearts but was inherent to his nature as a zemravore. He could kill his aura, eliminating it entirely. This made him utterly invisible to aura senses, even those of a diamond-ranker. There simply was no aura to sense. This left him exposed, however, in ways that an aura that was only hidden did not.

Auras formed a natural shield against many powers. Sometimes it was something relatively ordinary, such as telekinesis not affecting enemies unless their auras were suppressed. Other powers were far more sinister and did not work at all unless the aura could be bypassed. Those were the most dangerous, but usually found in the hands of those as insidious as the powers themselves. The adventurers and brighthearts were unlikely to pose such a threat. It was the Builder cultists and potentially the messengers he had to watch out for.

Garth was still angry about the messenger having seen through him. Like every form of undead, a zemravore had both strengths and weaknesses. Garth had taken pains to hide that such a thing as a zemravore existed at all, even from his own people. But messengers lived forever and saw countless worlds. There was no telling the scope of any messenger's knowledge. Garth himself had proven many times that the knowledge accumulated over an ageless existence was not to be underestimated. He did not enjoy being on the receiving end of that truth, but in his long unlife, it was far from the first time.

The messenger's knowledge made using his aura killing power a greater risk than normal. Garth could sense him for now, the messenger not hiding his presence while observing from his mountaintop. But once Garth's aura was gone, his magical senses and ability to track the messenger would go with it. Magical perception was tied to aura projection, so no aura meant no magical senses. He would be reliant on his mundane ones, which would at least retain their outstanding gold-rank levels.

He would not be able to track Asano through aura senses either, but that had already been proven futile. Asano's aura covered everything from the adventurer's defensive point to the plateau, along with the soon-be-a-meat-grinder battleground in between. Any well-trained gold-ranker could hide their presence within a strongly projected aura, and Asano could demonstrably do the same. Whatever Boris Ket Lundi may have lied about, he told the truth about Asano's strength and aptitude for aura use.

Garth moved with the ground army of undead minions, surrounded by those he had animated personally. They were, on average, stronger than the rank-and-file undead. This came from crafting them with care and taking his pick of the superior base meat. There were few basic undead amongst them, mostly a few messenger zombies that he had gotten his hands on satisfyingly intact. Mostly they were custom creations, fusions in which he attempted to get more out of the weaker brightheart bodies by blending them with messengers or monsters.

Garth fit in amongst them, his normal robe replaced with layers of tattered and dirty cloth crudely wrapped around him. With only his skull face showing, he easily blended amongst his creations. Only if someone realised that there was one undead with no aura and looked closer would he stand out.

The minion army moved like a tsunami, crashing into the seawall of the adventurer's defensive line. They had put up surprisingly strong defensive emplacements, probably the work of the brighthearts and their damnable earth-shaping. If they hadn't reinforced the wall to their citadel chamber so well, they would have been overrun before the transformation zone had ever been triggered.

Powers were being flung both ways. Even though Asano's aura had weakened, the adventurers still had the power advantage, all the casualties coming from the undead side. That was nothing new, however. The Undeath priests knew how to use their expendable numbers to bleed an enemy, burning through their mana pools and health potions to leave them exhausted. That was when the mistakes would come. If they were lucky, the enemies would get overconfident at their early advantage and one or two could be baited into overextending for an early kill.

The broader strategy was not Garth's to command, however. Only once Asano was handled and the avatar had returned would he resume control of his forces. He had designated one of his priests to control the avatar for the moment, although the man did not have true control. Only Garth himself had been given that privilege by his god, but he had directed the avatar to follow the other priest's directions for now. It should be enough to prevent the avatar from mindlessly rampaging if it returned while Garth was absent, still dealing with Asano.

To do so Garth was on the hunt. The hope was that Asano would join the battle to make use of his anti-undeath powers, and he did not disappoint. The ghost fire, reminiscent of the damnable white flame of the Death god, had started appearing amongst the undead even before they reached the defensive line. How Asano convinced Death to share even an echo of that power didn't matter for now, and once he was dead it wouldn't

matter at all. For now, the ethereal flame was a signal flare by which Asano marked his position.

It would take more than just that to pin him down, of course. The flames lighting up across the battlefield showed that Asano was jumping around, never staying long enough for danger to find him. Garth was a patient hunter and did not rush; he would need to learn the ways of his quarry before he could make the kill.

In the many years Garth had been killing his own aura, the perception loss that came with it had led him to see things that most people missed. Relying on mundane perception alone, he had realised that aura-based stealth techniques left dead spots, not in the wider aura but in how the people around them behaved. There were certain tell-tale signs in the behaviour of someone whose aura was being manipulated to make them overlook someone nearby. Quirks of body language and odd little movements. It was harder to spot when people were spread out, but in a crowd or a thick melee, it became much easier.

With the flames and watching for reactions, Garth had two references for pinpointing Asano. The ghost fire that he could see across the battlefield and the behaviour he could observe up close. His next step was to start plotting out Asano's pattern and he quickly identified the two chief factors guiding Asano's movement. The first factor was where the defenders needed assistance. When the defence was pressured, ghost fire would frequently start spreading through the attackers, weakening the assault.

The second factor was Asano was acting randomly to be unpredictable. The problem with this was that attempting to be random often accomplished just the opposite. Actual randomness did not match the idea of what was random in people's minds. Even those who knew about this still fell into less than random patterns when their minds were occupied with things like sneaking through an army of undead.

As the flames continued to dot the battlefield, Garth observed that the distribution was more even than truly random. Rather than leaving odd gaps or the occasional concentrated clump, the flames were spread fairly evenly. That gave Garth what he needed to start making predictions. By moving into the larger gaps, he would hopefully, sooner or later, find himself waiting when Asano appeared.

It was a plan that still had long odds, but Garth was willing to play them. He had no doubt that Asano was both sharp and wary, so any more active approach brought more chance of being noticed. Rather than risk Asano retreating to safety, Garth would be patient.

The battle raged on, the undead pushing past the defences one after another. Undead bodies didn't pile high because the priests detonated them like bombs, pressuring the defences all the harder. The infrastructure like bunkers, trenches and spike walls were excellent for having been so hastily, but they were still improvised. One point of weakened defence could easily spread to an entire section.

The pressure on the defence mounted until the tide of unliving seemed on the brink of breaching the defensive line. So long as the line held, the adventurers and their allies had effective defensive formations and could efficiently shuttle the injured to the healers. Once the line broke, the battle would become an ugly mess where the defenders would start seeing casualties.

Everything changed as the two growing mounds of cloud-substance the defenders were protecting solidified into a pair of massive fortresses. The significantly larger of the two was a set of five towers set amongst an area of walls, bunkers and attack platforms that the defenders withdrew into as soon as they appeared. The improvised defences were abandoned in favour of something more structured.

The brighthearts once again proved their work. Those with earth powers had built the infrastructure in the first place, but it was the fire and magma types that destroyed it. As undead overrun the abandoned shelters, those shelters started melting or glowing with such heat that the undead storming through them combusted on the spot.

The massive multi-tower fortress did not stop at defensive measures. Atop each tower was a dome that grew brighter and brighter until it discharged a massive ball of energy. The spheres shot into the approaching horde and exploded in a massive area. Dimming after each shot, the domes immediately started charging for another.

The other fortress was a cloud pyramid, covered in dark-red hexagonal plates. Some of the plates retracted into the cloud stuff, replaced with massive stylised eyes. The eyes shot out beams that came in two varieties. One was thick and shot out with a deep, resonant hum. It cut lines through the undead horde, gouging out trenches and annihilating the unliving. The other beam was much thinner, accompanied by a high-pitched buzz. It struck one undead, and then immediately started chaining through the enemy forces. Each struck undead exploded on the spot, turning the beam into a violent game of connect the dots.

Most of the beams shot from the pyramid were orange, and effective even against the most heavily armoured abominations. It would occasionally shoot out blue beams that proved more effective against the less common ethereal undead. These were mostly the minions of the priest who himself was a shadowy giant.

The appearance of the fortresses also saw Asano's aura restored to full strength, further blunting the undead wave. The timing was perfect for saving the defenders from a costly collapse and the turn in the battle was immediate and clear.

Garth knew that Asano had to be taken off the board *now*. He was beginning to have doubts about his strategy when he got his own lucky timing. Not only was his latest guess at Asano's next destination right but it was exactly right. Asano rose from the shadow of an undead, almost within arm's reach. Asano, being this close, noticed the aura gap that Garth was occupying and turned his attention Garth's way.

Asano wasn't a match for Garth's gold-rank reflexes, although he was startlingly close. Garth was surprised at how fast Asano reacted, but it wasn't fast enough. He reached out, placed a hand on Asano's shoulder and activated the power bestowed by his newest heart.

Miriam said a rude word.

-
- Party leader [Jason Asano] has been dimensionally isolated.
 - Party interface and communication functions will continue due to access to the spiritual domain of [Jason Asano].
 - [Jason Asano] cannot be contacted via party chat due to dimensional isolation.
-

Miriam had been ducking in and out of the front lines, alternating between commanding the defenders and adding her gold-rank power to the fight. She returned to a bunker made out of cloud-stuff, the defensive structure oddly beautiful with its swirl of sunset colours.

The worst case was Jason dying, making everything else pointless. Dimensional isolation was definitely better than that, but it still wasn't great. She felt Jason's aura vanish from everywhere but his cloud pyramid and the strength of the undead shot up immediately.

Miriam started spitting out orders in response, mobilising assets she'd been holding in reserve. The initial defensive infrastructure was abandoned in places where it had already been compromised, allowing a smoother withdrawal than if the defenders waited for collapse. The sprawling complex of Emir's massive cloud fortress became the new front line when other places had been pushed back. She directed Amos Pensinata to focus on aura attacks, doing his best to disrupt the priests now that Jason was not holding them back.

After putting out the worst fires, she concentrated on what had happened to Jason. Dimensional isolation sounded like the duelling powers used by messengers. The pallid messengers hadn't had that power before, but that wouldn't be the first new ability they'd demonstrated today. But, as they were all silver-rank, challenging Jason was pointless. Even at their full strength he could easily handle one, and their new power had come with an attendant weakness to Jason's undead suppression.

It wasn't hard to detect where Jason had been. There was a near-empty space in the battlefield where most of the undead in it had vanished at the same moment the notification appeared. Only a handful of skeletons and zombies were left standing around before they resumed their charge forward. Pulling back from the front line of fighting, Miriam opened a voice channel to Hana Shavar, the High Priestess of Healer, and Clive Standish.

"Commander?" Clive asked, sounding distracted.

"I don't have time to be deployed elsewhere," Hana said. "The undead just got a lot stronger and the injured are coming in thick and fast."

"High priestess," Miriam said. "You've campaigned against the messengers more than most. Are you familiar with their challenge powers?"

"Yes. Why? We aren't fighting messengers. These pasty-looking ones the Undeath priests claimed can't use that power. Or can they now?"

"I don't know," Miriam said. "Is it possible the Undeath priests found a way to awaken that power in their messenger slaves? Then modified it so that a large group of them could challenge one person?"

"Questionable," Clive said. "Very little is impossible when you really get down to it, but I would count it unlikely. To the best of my understanding, the duel powers are predicated very heavily on the concept of balance."

"He's right," Hana said. "I've never seen a challenge power that could affect anyone of a different rank, let alone multiple combatants versus one."

"Maybe if they found a way to have the ability gauge balance on actual power and not on rank?" Clive postulated. "Perhaps a group of their silver-rank messengers could challenge a gold-ranker together."

-
- [Neil Davone] has requested access to the private chat channel.
 - [Clive Standish] has given [Neil Davone] access to the private chat channel.
-

"Who is distracting the high priestess when we're already scrambling to heal everyone?" Neil demanded.

"I had a question," Miriam said.

"Is this about Jason and whatever ridiculous thing he's gotten into now?" Neil asked.

"Yes," Miriam said. "I'm deciding how to respond to—"

"You leave him alone, that's what you do," Neil scolded. "It's Jason; he's always going to get locked in an astral space or an underground chamber that's slowly flooding. Or he'll get killed and resurrected in a different universe; it doesn't matter. We don't have time to worry about whatever fool came looking for trouble and is about to get a melodramatic sack full. Jason will do what Jason does, and we need to do what we do. You, priestess, get back to healing. You, commander, get back to commanding and leaving the healers alone."

➤ [Neil Davone] has left the private chat channel.

"He knows we're both higher than him in the chain of command, right?" Miriam asked Hana. "He's lower than you in the church hierarchy as well."

"He's a journeyman priest, so a lot lower," Hana said. "It didn't seem like he especially cared. Also, he's not wrong. If you'll excuse me, commander, I need to return to healing."

➤ [Hana Shavar] has left the private chat channel.

"We're not exactly one of those teams who does what they're told," Clive said, his tone not particularly apologetic. "And Neil is right. We have neither the time nor resources to mount some kind of investigation and rescue of Jason. All we can do now is trust him. If you're that worried, see if Shade is around. He'll know more than anyone else."

➤ [Clive Standish] has left the private chat channel.

➤ Private chat channel has been closed due to lack of participants.

"Shade?" Miriam asked.

"What can I do for you, Tactical Commander?" Shade's voice came from her own shadow.

"What is happening with the Operations Commander?"

"I am now cut off from communication with Mr Asano and my bodies that are with him, so I can only speak for up until the moment he was sealed away. He was abducted into a dimensional space by an unusual undead. It had no discernible aura, so I cannot confirm its rank. Based on its ability to eliminate its own aura and use a power rarely seen

outside of messengers, I suspect it may have been the Undeath high priest, Garth. Whom I now suspect of being a zemravore.”

“A what?”

“A rare form of undead that can eliminate its own aura and steal powers by claiming the hearts of the living.”

“Claim the hearts of the living?”

“Yes.”

“Is that a metaphor?”

“No, Tactical Commander. It is a gruesomely literal statement.”

“And they use these hearts to use the powers of whoever they belong to.”

“Just the one power per heart, as far as I am aware.”

“But that power could be the duelling power of a messenger.”

“Indeed it could.”

“But the high priest should be gold-rank. How could he use a challenge power on a silver?”

“Zemravores can use the powers they have stolen at their actual rank or a lower one. They mostly use it for schemes that involve leaving deceptive power traces. It's an interesting loophole, and what convinced me that a zemravore is most likely what we're dealing with.”

“Interesting? It means that Asano is locked in a dimensional bubble with a gold-ranker!”

“Yes, but I believe that this situation may have been engineered by someone antagonistic to the high priest. My guess would be the messenger Boris Ket Lundi.”

“What makes you think that?”

“He is the only one who plausibly knows enough about Mr Asano, messengers and zemravores. He also has access to the Undeath priests, given that he and his messengers appear to be residing on that mountain over there. Someone had to convince the high priest to claim the heart of a gestalt physical-spiritual being.”

“Why does that matter?”

“Because the high priest has now used that heart, which means he is about to experience something exceedingly rare for an undead: indigestion.”

Chapter 820

Bit of an Odd Bloke

As soon as the bony hand landed on Jason's shoulder, the world around him swirled into incomprehensible nonsense, like a stick of dynamite going off in a drum of paint. Jason was both familiar and inured to dimensional displacement, so was already moving when the world reformed an instant later. He kicked out behind him, hitting something solid enough that he moved rather than it. He span, spotting an undead creature draped in ragged cloth, only his skull face and skeletal feet showing.

"Garth?"

"Hello, Asano. We meet in person."

The monstrous high priest wasn't moving, seemingly happy to talk, so Jason stopped as well. It gave them both a chance to look around and take in their surroundings. They were standing on a walkway of black and white marble, inside a building straight out of an MC Escher drawing. It was the size of a castle but filled with open space, crossed with walkways, stairwells and arching bridges to nowhere. It was a place of impossible geometry; optical illusions made manifest. None of it had any discernible purpose and shouldn't have been physically possible. Jason could feel the dimensional anomalies that turned illusion into reality.

Jason's void cloak was never affected by the wind and there was none in this space. The air was dead still, chalky on the tongue and dry with the scent of age and abandonment. Yet his cloak whipped around him as if he stood in a gale, impacted by the dimensional anomalies whose proximity to one another stirred up astral winds beyond the touch of mundane senses.

Jason had developed an instinct for understanding astral phenomena and suspected he could perceive enough about the dimensional anomalies to use them in the fight ahead. All he needed was enough time to explore and examine them with his magical senses, which meant stalling for time. He hoped the Undeath priest was a talker, and he seemed to be from the one time they had spoken previously. This time he would not have the safety of using Shade as an intermediary, however.

The dimensional castle was crawling with Garth's undead, for now wandering mindlessly on stairwells and over bridges. Only the walkway Jason stood on was clear, other than for Jason and his foe. Jason couldn't sense any aura, but that was unsurprising. Any gold-ranker with stealth powers should be able to elude him.

For the moment, the priest seemed happy to join Jason in taking in their battleground. When he saw the priest look his way, he faced his enemy in turn. Jason's nebulous eyes of blue and orange met the red glow in the eye sockets of Garth's skull.

"You know," Jason said, "I've been accused of looking sinister from time to time, but I think you've got me beat."

"I'm standing right in front of you," Garth said. "Even so, you're still full of cocksure bravado. You are not hiding behind a familiar this time, Asano. You are mine to deal with."

"You should be careful with statements like that," Jason said. "My friend Clive's wife said the same thing, and that turned into a *whole* mess. I mean, worth it, but still."

"What gives you that confidence?" Garth asked. "I must confess curiosity about what makes you so special. Everyone from my god to my rivals have warned me about you. Not to underestimate you. The importance of killing you. The fact that you, of all our enemies, are the one that can claim this realm and threaten our actual objective."

"I can tell you that, but let's make it a show-and-tell. I'm curious as to how you pulled us in here. This is a messenger duelling power, right? Or something very close. How did you get that power, and how did you get it to work on someone of lower rank than you?"

"Stealing power is a part of my nature," Garth said. "Normally that is something I take great care to hide."

"But not from someone you're about to kill?"

"But not from someone I'm about to kill," Garth confirmed.

The rags wrapped around Garth's body were torn apart as he unfurled all six arms and four legs.

"Strewth. You were playing Skeletor when you were secretly General Grievous the whole time. Not sure that's an upgrade, to be honest. Are you packing lightsabers? I think that'd clinch it."

"I answered your questions. You have yet to answer mine."

"That's fair; my bad, bloke. It was what makes me special, right? It's not just one thing, really. It's more of a situation where I've been in the wrong place at the wrong time so much that now I *am* the wrong place and time, for whatever poor sod trundles into my path. Which, today, happens to be you."

"Clearly, you have something to rely on in this fight. Something significant, based on what I keep hearing about you."

"Would you believe rakish charm?"

"I've spoken to you for some time now, so... no."

Jason laughed.

“That stings a little, I’m not going to lie. Is it weird that I kind of like you? I’m still going to kill you with the great plan I’m definitely not lying about having, but I think we’ve got a good rapport going here.”

“You still haven’t told me the source of your confidence. Is it the power to rise from the dead? I have been warned to kill you until you stop coming back to life. Are you expecting to die, have that fulfil the release condition of the power trapping us here and then flee when you resurrect?”

“No, although now that you say it, that’s pretty good. Wow, thank you. That’s a good plan. I might..”

Jason felt an aura start to rise from Garth, but it wasn't a simple aura projection. It came in fits and starts, like an engine trying to turn over in the cold before finally erupting into life. Jason's jaw dropped, although Garth couldn't see it, shrouded in the dark of Jason's hood.

“You were stalling,” Jason said. “You weren’t just suppressing your aura. You completely turned it off somehow. You were letting me talk so I wouldn’t hit you with a soul attack.”

“You can make soul attacks? The Adventure Society lets you get away with that?”

“It’s not a matter of ‘let’s’ as much as—”

Garth became a blur and one of his bony hands passed through Jason’s head.

Garth’s hand hit no resistance as it passed through Asano’s head, his claw-like hand jutting out the other side. Asano leapt from the side of the walkway they were on, his head unharmed as if Garth’s arm didn’t exist. Garth held out all six hands and a chunk of bone shot from each, going only a short distance before exploding into Razor shards. The tiny blades peppered both combatants but injured neither. Garth’s skeletal frame was unaffected by his own power and Asano’s cloak absorbed them harmlessly.

That exchange had taken place in less than a second, both men blindingly fast. Garth shot larger bone spikes from his hands to intercept Asano, but the strange environment proved tricky. Rather than falling down, Asano fell up, throwing off Garth’s prediction. Most of his attacks missed Asano, only one spike impaling his leg. Asano rose out of sight, moving behind a solid set of stairs.

Garth was not going to underestimate Asano. He had the rank-advantage but he was more general than warrior. His body had been built to serve as a vessel for his god's power, and it was usually when filled with it that he waded into battle himself. By contrast, Asano was clearly experienced at facing more powerful opponents. Whatever the magical

boon to his speed was, it allowed him to face a gold-ranker without being entirely outclassed.

Garth was going to take his time. He would catalogue Asano's defences one by one before taking them, and Asano, apart. He already had an amount of information to go by. The cloak intercepted weak projectiles, which was not too burdensome. It ruled out less powerful blanket attacks, meaning precise strikes would be called for.

To hit Asano with precision, he would need to get past whatever trick Asano had used to avoid his initial strike. Intangibility was the obvious answer, but Garth dismissed the possibility. There would have been some feedback, if only to Garth's newly restored magical senses. It was more likely space manipulation, which didn't bode well. If Asano was versed in using dimensional forces, their battlefield would be to his advantage.

He already knew that Asano could jump between shadows, and they were not in short supply. There was no clear source of light, but the arches and walkways cast shadows onto one another in ways that never quite made sense.

The final question Garth had about the powers he had seen from Asano was his speed. If Asano lost that, he would lose the fight. It was a powerful enhancement, allowing him to almost rival a gold-ranker. That suggested a power that traded off limits or conditions for power, which Garth could potentially exploit. There might be conditional triggers for the power, a lengthy break between uses or a mana cost so high it could only be used in short bursts.

Garth ran the possibilities through his mind, planning out how to test his ideas in future exchanges with Asano. There would be many, as silver-rankers were hard to put down. Some gold-rankers could put one down quickly, mostly assassin types, but that was not Garth. He would dig out Asano's secrets and counter his abilities until, in the end, Asano would die. How quickly was a matter of how annoying he was to bring down.

Inside Jason's soul realm, Marek Nior Vargas slowed his descent through the air until he was floating in front of a portal. With him were two other gold-rank messengers. They all looked at the avatar of Jason standing by the portal, which was situated in an English-style country estate garden.

"I've been trapped in a challenge power by a gold-rank undead who stole it from some messenger," Jason said. "I'd appreciate it if you could jump out and help me."

"Appreciate it enough to let us finally leave?" Marek asked.

"Honestly?" Jason said. "I've been working on that for a while. I have a diamond-rank friend who is approaching the goddess Liberty about smoothing things over so I can let

you go without my own people dragging me over the coals. That's been happening while we're on this little expedition."

"Then we will aid you, Jason Asano."

Marek flew through the portal which started making crackling, hissing and fizzing noises. He was flung back out, a tree exploding as he passed through it, barely slowing down. He did finally come to a stop, at the end of a hundred-metre gouge his passage had dug in the ground.

In the strange dimensional space, Jason closed the portal that was still making strange sounds like electrified popcorn.

"Well, that didn't work."

With his aura back, Garth could spread his senses through the pocket dimension. His ability to sense magic was thrown off by the ubiquitous dimensional energy, but he could feel a clear link to all of his undead. This proved disorienting as his eyes and his magical perception pointed in different directions to the same undead. When one of his undead was destroyed, it took him several seconds to look around and find it.

Asano was on a walkway that, to Garth, was at a ninety-degree angle. Garth tossed an experimental bone spear and it went nowhere near Asano, shifting direction several times in the air. Asano looked to be draining life force from the destroyed undead, despite the fact that it shouldn't have any. He guessed it to be an affliction specialist trick, given their propensity for making things vulnerable to their powers, however implausible.

Asano was being guarded by familiars. One was a swarm type, some kind of lamprey-leech hybrid accomplishing the unlikely task of drinking blood from Garth's lifeless minions. Even though they shouldn't have any. The other was a strange floating creature surrounded by orbs that alternated shooting beams and transforming into shields.

As a zemravore and not an essence user, most of Garth's necromantic abilities came from ritual magic. He did not have the power to easily boost his minions, something he relied on subordinate priests for. On the contrary, Asano's aura was suppressing them and setting them alight with his damnable ghost fire.

Slow, Garth decided. He didn't know how Asano had even an echo of Death's flame but he would find out over the course of Asano's slow and excruciating demise. Then he would animate him taking little care in the ritual. Asano's body would be a weak undead, quickly torn apart by his own friends.

Unable to bolster his undead, the best Garth could do was order them to swarm Asano. Unfortunately, the mindless creatures could not parse the dimensional geography any better than Garth himself. They chased after Asano but ended up roaming helplessly throughout the bizarre building.

Garth watched as Asano handled the undead that found him in an almost leisurely fashion. The silver-rank undead were no challenge, only the rare golds prompting a real fight. The undead were no match for an essence user like Asano, but the battles did reveal more of Asano's power. Each new data point refined the model in Garth's mind of how to kill him.

Garth was at least grateful that his personally animated gold-rank undead had been pulled in through the link. He had been uncertain whether his zemravore abilities could deceive the parameters of the stolen ability to that degree, but they had come through. Losing the gold rank undead to Asano was costly, but worth it for drawing out his abilities.

While Asano fought his minions, Garth attempted to navigate the building himself. He saw Asano transitioning smoothly from one area to the next, completely confident in his direction. If Garth didn't get at least some sense of how to navigate, Asano would always be the one choosing when and where to clash.

Moving from one area to another was disorienting. Subjectively, it felt like everything was oriented normally, but it was just the opposite as Garth's vision told him one thing and his magical senses another.

While he moved, Garth kept an eye on Asano, watching as he revealed his various powers. He was convinced now that Asano's speed was maintained by draining life force from the fallen undead, even though they shouldn't have had life force to steal. The solution was to cut off the supply.

Garth decided to get rid of his minions, although he did not do so immediately. His gold-rankers could still tease out more of Asano's powers and, if he chose the right moment, he had a heart power that might well be able to end the fight on its own. If his undead hadn't been so scattered and disoriented, he'd have used it already.

It was now clear to Garth that Boris Ket Lundi had gone to elaborate lengths to set the odds in Asano's favour. The minions he had insisted on were proving more liability than asset. As for the duelling ability power he had taken from the messenger Boris fed him, it was clear it had been chosen with care. Asano's knack for navigating the strange space was his biggest asset.

When Asano finally brought the attack to Garth, it was far from unexpected. He chose his moment well, though, with Garth distracted in contemplation of a dimensional anomaly.

Asano appeared from a shadow behind him, swinging a black-bladed sword. Garth managed to deflect the attack with a thick plate of bone on one of his many arms, negating whatever afflictions the attack had been intended to inflict. He was not quick enough to counterattack before Asano was gone again, disappearing back into a shadow.

It was not the last attack Asano made but the combatants fell into a *détente*, neither pushing for a conclusive exchange. Asano was struggling to land inflictions or inflict decisive damage while Garth could never pin Asano down. Between shadow jumping and moving through dimensional anomalies, Asano was a ghost. When he tried to follow Asano through an anomaly, Garth simply found himself alone with his undead, Asano somehow in another space entirely.

Garth was not idle in the face of Asano's hit-and-run tactics. His attempts to learn the nature of the anomalies were slowly starting to pay off and he was able to sometimes direct his undead accurately. He did so with care and subtlety, the instances of his directions going wrong helping hide his purpose. Asano, for his part, was paying less attention to the undead in his attempts to strike at Garth directly. Finally, Garth's patient efforts paid off.

It wasn't as many undead gathered into one area as Garth would have liked, but it was enough to surprise Asano when he stepped onto the walkway and saw them all. He only paused for a moment before weaving through them, manipulating space to dodge between them on the way to his next destination. The leeches, currently looking like a blood-red clone of Asano himself, followed along as the nebulous creatures flew overhead.

Watching as Asano ran along what was to him, a ceiling, Garth waited until Asano was fully surrounded by undead before activating his heart power.

Becoming a *zemravore* was something that happened in stages. It culminated in the claiming of a first heart power, with a ceremony marking the transition from the last vestiges of living to a true place amongst the undead. Garth had been proud of the heart chosen for him by the Undeath high priest he served. It came from a creature not native to *Pallimustus*, a celestial hound that had come to their world looking to smite the undead.

It had failed, falling to the very beings it had arrogantly sought to destroy. The Undeath priests ate its flesh, carved from the beast while it was still alive, a ceremonial final meal for Garth. Then he had taken its heart, the last of his skin, flesh and organs sloughing from his body as he took the final step from living to unliving. The final step from simply serving his god to embodying him as one of the undead.

Heart powers had come and gone over the years. It became harder to find replacements as he curated powers that suited him well. The stealth power was a perfect fit and other exceptional powers had come and gone. That first heart, though, the moonlight hound, had always remained. It was not just a nostalgic choice, either. As someone who commanded more than fought himself, who used forces that could be freely expended, he needed a power that made use of the undead at his command. Coming from a creature whose very nature was to destroy the undead, it offered Garth something that perfectly met his while offering something very unusual in the hands of a necromancer.

Garth activated the heart power, letting out a howl in a voice quite unlike his own. It had a pure and fierce quality that did not belong to the undead. The undead, in fact, could not tolerate it at all. Every one of Garth's undead minions exploded, in every area of the dimensional space. The undeath energy did not just detonate but was changed as it did, transformed by the stolen celestial power of the howl.

In the very instant the undead energy detonated, it changed from purple to a transcendent light of blue, silver and gold. All through the strange dimensional castle, undead exploded, flooding the space blinding, transcendent light. Nowhere was brighter than the walkway where Asano and his familiars had been surrounded by undead.

If his skull face wasn't perpetually doing so, Garth would have grinned.

Jason felt like he'd been hit by a train that knocked him into the path of a larger, faster train. The blast had not just annihilated his conjured clothes but the near-indestructible boxer shorts he had spent so much money on. His only remaining possessions were his sword, dropped to the marble floor, and the necklace holding his protective amulet and the shrunken cloud flask.

Even the floor had not gone unscathed. Transcendent damage had scoured the once smooth marble to leave a coarse, pumice-stone finish. Jason grimaced as his nethers scraped against it as he pushed himself onto his hands and knees. He had Colin conjure fresh robes from the biomass within his body, everything outside it having been annihilated. That included Gordon whom Jason could barely sense a connection to. A look over the messages waiting for him confirmed that Gordon had been killed.

-
- You have been struck by transcendent damage. Ability [Hegemony] has degraded the damage to disruptive-force damage.
 - All instances of [Guardian's Blessing] from [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] have been converted to instances of [Blessing's Bounty].

- [Blessing's Bounty] is providing an ongoing heal and mana gain effect when your life force and mana are already above the normal maximum. Ability [Sin Eater] allows your life force and mana pool to exceed normal values.
 - An instance of [Blood of the Immortal] has been consumed.
 - [Blood of the Immortal] is providing an ongoing heal effect when your life force is above the normal maximum. Ability [Sin Eater] allows your life force to exceed normal values
 - Vessel of familiar [Gordon] has been annihilated. Familiar [Gordon] is a lesser avatar and is guaranteed to resume the role of familiar when you summon a new vessel with ability [Avatar of Doom].
-

Jason grabbed his sword and pushed himself woozily to his feet. He had to be ready in case Garth had gotten his head around the dimensional maze and was en route to attack him. He looked around as the transcendent glow faded, rubbing his sore head in relief as he spotted Garth watching from, in Jason's perspective, the distant ceiling.

The red light in Garth's skull sockets flared, his equivalent of goggling wide-eyed. Asano's cloak was gone but he was standing without apparent injury, looking no more than groggy as he rubbed his messy hair. The transcendent damage hadn't even burned off his hair.

Garth's rage was pushed aside by a sudden sickening pulse from his chest. It was a sensation he knew: heart incompatibility. Some hearts, because of the power they held or the creature they came from, did not play well with others.

The solution was simple enough: get rid of the offending heart. It was another trap of the messenger Garth was increasingly determined to take revenge against. Garth opened the sides of his rib cage like doors and reached in to pluck out the heart. His hand snapped back, flung off the heart with a hiss and crackle of energy.

The heart power was still active. It was the nature of messenger challenge powers that they couldn't be interfered with until the power had run its course. Having never claimed a messenger heart before, Garth had no idea, until that moment, that this meant they couldn't be discarded while the power was active. He was certain, however, that Boris Ket Lundi had known exactly that.

That was the moment Garth realised that he wasn't fighting Jason Asano, and hadn't been from the beginning. Asano was an instrument, deftly played by the messenger as a distraction while he quietly slipped in the knife. The messenger had been fighting Garth long before Garth realised there was even a fight going on. The cuts had been invisible,

the wounds unnoticed. Asano wasn't even the death blow. Boris Ket Lundi had convinced Garth to deliver that to himself.

Garth had been warned long ago to never keep an incompatible heart. It was both poison and bomb, weakening him as it ticked down to the final, explosive destruction. But this heart could not be eliminated while both he and Asano were alive. Until the power ran its course, Garth was stuck with the heart. Boris Ket Lundi had destroyed him, all while relaxing on his distant mountaintop.

Garth looked at Asano who looked back with confusion. There was still a chance. He could force the fight with Asano; put him down before he was killed by his own poisonous heart. It wasn't much of a chance but it was the only one he had. He started moving, heading for the nearest stairs.

Jason's aura flooded out of the pyramid fortress and over the battlefield, cutting off the power enhancements coming from the Undeath priests.

➤ [Party leader \[Jason Asano\] has joined the \[Team Biscuit\] voice channel.](#)

"Sorry about popping off like that. I had a thing."

"Are you alright?" Humphrey asked.

"Yeah, no worries," Jason said. "I just need to grab some fresh underwear and I'll come help you fight some evil."

"Underwear?" Belinda asked.

"I didn't poo myself, just to be clear. It was an underwear mishap related to something else entirely. On an unrelated note, the topic of your wife did come up, Clive. Bit of an odd bloke, that high priest."

"You killed him?" Humphrey asked.

"Actually, he just kind of got lost and then blew up. It was weird."