

Chapter 763

The Greatest Enemy of All

The underground city of Cardinas was ruled from the Citadel of Pillars, if ruled was even the right word. It had been a harmonious place for centuries before the cultists and then the messengers burrowed down from the surface world. They had paid the price for their intrusion, each in their own way, but that was little comfort to those left living with the ramifications. Or dying with them.

The central room of the citadel's top floor had been the council chamber, but was now the war room. There was no council anymore, just Lorenn, the others having fought valiantly and died horribly. Anything organic the elemental messengers got their hands on was fed as compost to their perverse tree.

Lorenn had seen the tree in that early battle where they had come so close to victory, only to fall disastrously short. That was when they had the numbers and the territory to mount an offensive. Now the elemental messengers had both and what remained of their populace had only a losing battle for survival.

The other cities were lost, as was most of Cardinas. Less than ten thousand of the Brightheart Smoulder had survived yet that fraction felt so large crammed together in the citadel cavern, especially with the cultists taking up their own space.

Lorenn stood alone in the middle of the room, the heidelshoe-shaped desk arcing around her. In front of her was a model of the city, every cavern and tunnel. It tapped into the natural array to maintain a live depiction of the city's state, which grew increasingly dire with each cycle. Most of the map was covered in sickly green, the influence of the elemental messengers. It showed where the roots of their foul tree had burrowed through the rock and its vines crawled over every surface.

Lorenn looked up through the glass ceiling at the fire blazing across the ceiling of the cavern. It was said that the cycle of flaring and dimming reflected something called 'the sun' on the surface world, but that interested her not at all. The surface world had given them the cultists and messengers, so it could keep any other horrors it had to itself.

One side of the double doors swung open to admit Marla. Marla was a fire aspect, her skin markings, eyes and even hair the yellow-orange of steel in a forge. With the bold glow against her dark skin, she was extraordinarily beautiful. Lorenn had always been jealous, the smoky greys of her own ash aspect being far less appealing. Marla was a physical embodiment of what it meant to be a Brightheart.

“Councilwoman,” Marla said without preamble. “I’ve completed the assessment of our food supplies. With only two growth chambers left, we can only last a few weeks. A month at the outside.”

“Even with the new rationing levels?”

“Yes, Councilwoman. We need to—”

“We’ve talked about this, Marla. That discussion is over.”

“And so are we, Lorenn! We can’t feed our own people, let alone these cultists from the surface.”

“If not for those cultists, Marla, there would be no one left to feed. You think I keep our agreement with them out of honour? If you can tell me how to hold this cavern against the elemental messengers, I’ll cast them out myself.”

Marla glowered, then looked down, unable to meet Lorenn’s eyes as she voiced her suggestion.

“We’re trying to defend too much ground,” she said. “That’s why we are forced to ally with the cultists. If we retreat to the remaining growth chambers, our own forces are enough to hold them.”

“Those won’t fit more than a third of our remaining population. Less if we don’t want to overcrowd the chambers and their ability to produce food.”

“Yes,” Marla said, steeling her resolve to meet Lorenn’s eyes. “But those are numbers we will be able to feed.”

“At the cost of leaving most of our people to die.”

“If we do nothing, *all* of our people will die.”

Lorenn’s stoic expression cracked, tears welling in her eyes.

“All of our people will die anyway,” she sobbed. “I don’t see... I don’t know what to do!”

Marla was startled at Lorenn’s breakdown for a moment, then rushed forward to gather her in a comforting embrace. Lorenn stiffened for a moment, then leaned into Marla. Lorenn was uncertain how long they stayed like that, holding each other silently.

“Maybe...” Marla said before shaking her head and trailing off.

“What?” Lorenn asked.

“The hole the elemental messengers dug to the surface. Perhaps we could try and fight through and lead our people up.”

“No,” Lorenn said. “The tainted power of the natural array has the monsters and elementals in a frenzy. We couldn’t get past that with all the population in tow, even if we

somehow got them all past the elemental messengers. The only way to escape that way is if we took only our fighters and abandoned the populace entirely.”

Marla nodded. Neither had to say that they would die with their people before fleeing alone. They looked at each other, their expressions soft, only to harden at the approach of a familiar but unwelcome aura.

Lorenn had gathered herself together by the time Beaufort arrived. The elf was the head of the Cult of the Builder’s forces and their uneasy ally. The gold-ranker had given up his essence powers and was some manner of semi-artificial monstrosity, although he only revealed such on the battlefield. In his normal guise, that of a beautiful elven man with long blond hair, his aura revealed no such thing.

“Has Marla convinced you?” Beaufort asked.

“Of what?” Lorenn asked.

“Come, now, Lorenn. The choice may be hard but the calculation is easy. If you retreat to the growth chambers, you buy yourselves time and can abandon our uneasy alliance. All it will cost you is your honour and most of your people.”

“No, Beaufort,” Lorenn said. “Our alliance stands.”

“That’s good because I bring the single resource that we need the most yet possess the least.”

“What’s that?” Marla asked, her voice heavy with suspicion.

“Hope from above,” Beaufort said smugly.

“Your allies from the surface?” Lorenn asked, unable to keep the hostility from her voice. Despite their grave need, she could not bring herself to be happy at the prospect of more surface invaders.

“Not allies,” Beaufort said. “Not of mine. They’re enemies, including a man who is, perhaps, the greatest enemy of my Lord Builder on this planet. We call him the Defier.”

“Then why do you seem happy?”

“Because he will help us. It is his nature.”

“He’ll help you?”

“He’ll help you. He may keep us alive, albeit as prisoners, if only because we helped you first. Even if he kills us, it is better to die fighting an enemy of the Lord Builder than as mulch for the elemental messengers and their filthy arboreal project.”

“And how do you know this Defier is coming?”

“We call him the Defier because over and again he has kept our lord, the Builder himself, from obtaining that which he desires. He even stole some of the Lord Builder’s power. We felt him coming, likely when he used his aura in battle.”

“It sounds like he’s not your enemy,” Marla said. “Or that you aren’t his. It sounds more like he’s the enemy of your weird god and you’re just the flunkies he carves through.”

“The Builder is not some mere god,” Beaufort said, his tone a warning. “I will admit that the second part of your statement is not entirely without accuracy. The Defier has demonstrated a consistent ability to overwhelm our lord’s vassals.”

“How powerful is he?” Lorenn asked.

“That is a question with a complicated answer. In some regards, he is but a silver-ranker. In others, he may be the most powerful being on this planet.”

“How do we get him to be the second thing, then?” Marla asked. “One more silver-ranker won’t help us.”

“You might be surprised,” Beaufort said. “Many have underestimated the Defier and paid the price, even the Lord Builder. We left the astral space because we knew we would die there if we did not find a way out. We had hoped an alliance with you would be enough, but it was not. I am going to have to restrain my people to prevent them from attacking him on sight, yet I will put my faith in the Defier. The Lord Builder hates him, yet also acknowledges him. What you choose to do is, as always, up to you.”

Marla and Lorenn looked at each other.

“I will leave you to decide how to respond,” Beaufort said and gracefully withdrew.

Marla went and closed the door before discussing it with Lorenn.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“We can’t trust him,” Lorenn said.

“No. But he seemed oddly confident in an enemy.”

“It could be a ruse. Stopping us from abandoning the cult and holing up in the growth chambers.”

“Perhaps. But as that would be just prolonging the inevitable, is there anything to lose by waiting for this Defier?”

In the wake of the gruelling battle, the expedition was resting. Once the crawlers were back in acceptable shape, they would set out, but until then they were taking a well-earned break. On a conjured platform sticking out of the wall, Miriam was once again probing Jason with questions about astral kings.

“So, your familiars are Voices of the Will, like Jes Fin Kaal?”

“No,” Jason clarified. “Colin is a voice. Shade isn’t, but Gordon and Farrah are somewhere in the middle. They have a bond with me, but it’s not the full-blown connection of a voice. Farrah, can you let Miriam ID you?”

Farrah wandered over from her conversation with Clive to shake Miriam's hand.

Farrah Hurin

- Race: Outworlder (Human)
 - Essences: Fire, Earth, Potent, Volcano
 - Voice of the Will (Nascent)
 - Transition to Voice of the Will unavailable.
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“Colin was only able to make the transition because he got a significant boost from eating the world-taker worm queen. That allowed him to overcome my shortcomings as an astral king by going through a metamorphosis.”

“I’m not going to become a messenger if I become your Voice of the Will, am I?”

Farrah asked.

“Colin didn’t,” Jason pointed out. “Besides, the process is voluntary. I won’t pressure you into going all the way. I’m all about consent.”

Farrah shook her head and wandered off, muttering about childish boys. Jason was about to resume his explanation when Amos Pensinata appeared in a blur of speed.

“I need a gold-rank team, no time to explain.”

Miriam raised an eyebrow at Jason who nodded confirmation. Miriam immediately started barking orders.

“Arabelle Remore! Your group is on Amos Pensinata. Right now!”

Amos became a blur once more, shooting off down the shaft. Arabelle, Gabriel, Emir and Constance followed a moment later.

“We need to know what that’s about,” Miriam said.

“Lord Pensinata has the best senses in this expedition,” Jason said. “I asked him to push out his range to see if he could pick up anything ahead of us. Looks like he saw something time-sensitive.”

“I’ll deploy a silver team to follow and relay information.”

“Yeah,” Jason said, suddenly morosely. “That’s a good idea.”

“What’s wrong? You disagree?”

“It’s not that, it’s just... you did the raising one eyebrow thing. I still have trouble getting it right. I’m meant to have all this perfect physiological control, yet I still can’t do it more than half the time. At best.”

She watched him wiggling his eyebrows with grim determination.

“You are a very odd man, Operations Commander.”

The messengers had better magic than was available on Pallimustus. This included the communications orb that Jes Fin Kaal had used to communicate with the powers of Yaresh while negotiating the expedition details. Another such orb was being used by three gold-rank men, further down the shaft beyond the expedition's location. One of them held it in hand as an image of a messenger floated over it, berating them.

"...not slowing them down enough, priest."

"They're your beacons," the man holding the orb said. "If the monsters they attract aren't good enough, what do you expect us to do? Import bigger ones?"

"We don't have the numbers to make our way down in force," the messenger said. "We have to navigate downwards with extreme care and patience. Even with the delays Jes Fin Kaal engineered, we will be pressed to set up in time. You need to slow them down more."

"And what exactly do you suggest?" the priest asked. "An arrow sign pointing up that reads 'this way down?'"

"Don't be flippant with me, priest."

"And don't you tell me to do something you have no idea how to accomplish, just because your plan isn't working properly. Or do you have any better—"

The priest dropped the orb and launched himself down the shaft mid-sentence. His two companions sensed the rapidly approaching gold-rank auras almost as fast and likewise fled, one of them snatching the dropped orb as he went.