

Chapter 774

It Happens Because I Want It To

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

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

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

“It was tempting fate!”

“Fate isn’t real.”

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

“What is destiny magic?”

“I’m not entirely sure!”

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

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

“Talking to you makes no sense.”

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

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

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

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

“What have you learned?”

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

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

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

“Ringers?”

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

“How likely is that?” Farrah asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are we ready to begin?" Lorenn asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How?” she asked.

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

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

“You don't have to.”

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

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

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

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

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

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