

Chapter 771

The Impossible

Jason, Clive and Miriam sat in the council chamber with Beaufort and the two brighthearts, Lorenn and Marla. The adventurers explained the Builder invasion, the messenger invasion and the expedition. Some of it Lorenn had already learned from Beaufort, although it was clear his explanation had been coloured differently in certain parts.

Beaufort then took his turn to recount the cult's story. It amounted to invading Cardinas but having no interest in the natural array. Instead, they fought their way into the local astral space, which was a rather unique one. Where other portal effects were disrupted by the array, the astral space aperture was extremely solid. Clive postulated that the astral space had formed alongside the array and could be the key to understanding how to stabilise it.

"I'm going to need to study that astral space," he said. "Trying anything without understanding how it relates to the array would be foolhardy. The failure to do so may be what went wrong with the messenger's attempts to hijack the array in the first place."

"That won't be easy," Lorenn said. "The astral space aperture is unclaimed by the messenger tree, which cannot tolerate its power, but we are cut off from it."

Marla stood up and moved around the horseshoe desk to the floating model of Cardinas in the middle. She pointed out the chamber that glowed with shifting red, yellow and orange light.

"This is the astral space chamber. You see how it's cut off from us by messenger-held territory but remains unclaimed. The energy there repels the messenger tree somehow. We don't know much else as we only have access to this projection, created by the echo array. If the chamber falls, it will be marked by the green, which represents the tree's domain."

Beaufort continued his story. The cult had been fighting for access to the astral space and the arrival of the messengers had been their opportunity. The brighthearts had been scrambling to react to a second incursion and the messengers quickly became the priority. The natural array was sacred to the brighthearts, and while the cult had ignored it, the messengers aimed straight for it. The brighthearts refocused their defenders on the messengers and the cultists were able to make their way into the astral space and seal it off from the inside.

“Our plan from this point was the usual,” Beaufort explained. “Use our astral magic to sever the astral space from this universe so the Builder could claim it. It didn’t work. The astral space proved a little too unique and our astral magic didn’t work.”

“Didn’t you have people capable of adapting it?” Clive asked.

“Our people can use the magic,” Beaufort said, “but our magic users have only so much expertise. Much of the magic required is built into the artificial components of their bodies. They don’t fully understand the magic they’re using.”

Clive let out an exasperated groan.

“Mr Standish,” Miriam said. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t bemoan a lack of competence in our enemies.”

“I’m just so sick of it,” Clive complained as he ran his hands over his face. “Why is everyone so stupid?”

“That’s a little hurtful,” Jason said.

“I’m just saying that if you’re going to use magic, the fundamental energy of the cosmos that is the most powerful and therefore dangerous thing there is, then maybe you should learn how it works before sticking your hand in it and wiggling about.”

“We were trying,” Beaufort said defensively. “We were still working on how to adapt the magic when you, Asano, convinced the Builder to leave this world and take no further astral spaces. We were trapped underground and couldn’t get back to a fortress city on the surface, so we were left stranded.”

Lorenn looked at Jason.

“You forced a great astral being to back off?” she asked him.

“More ‘convinced’ than ‘forced,’” Jason said. “‘Bargained,’ maybe. The Builder and I have a history.”

“So Beaufort has told me. Yet all you tell me are stories of making alliances with your enemies.”

“Yes,” Jason said. “I’ve done it before, and every time it feels like swallowing poison. But sometimes you have to do something ugly to prevent something worse.”

Lorenn nodded.

“That, I understand,” she told him. “As the messenger tree overtook more and more of our domain, the Builder cult came to us with an alliance.”

“We were close to being cut off from everything by the elemental messengers,” Beaufort said. “If we weren’t going to claim the astral space, we needed to return to the surface and look for a way to rejoin the Builder. The elemental messengers had control of

the tunnel the messengers had dug, and those regular messengers were waiting at the top. As for our digging machines, the brightheart had long destroyed them.”

“Last I checked, you and the regular messengers were allies,” Jason pointed out.

“An alliance based on usefulness and power. If we handed ourselves over to the messengers now that the Builder is gone, we would have no leverage. The messengers would only accept us as slaves, yet we would not be acceptable slaves to them. They only take slaves who are broken and have accepted messenger superiority.”

“I’m familiar with their practices,” Jason said. “They wouldn’t take you because of your loyalty to the Builder.”

“Yes. There are no forcibly converted amongst my people. We sacrificed those in the early fighting against the brighthearts. All who remain are true servants. None would be acceptable slaves, so the messengers would kill us. That left the other tunnel up, where the Adventure Society is waiting. I know they will likely kill us as well, but we at least have a chance at survival. I bet the lives of my people on mercy. Your mercy, Jason Asano.”

Jason grimaced.

“Your boss told you to try that, didn’t he?”

“The Lord Builder observes you still,” Beaufort admitted. “He saw a weakness and told me to exploit it.”

“You openly admit it?” Miriam asked.

“He knows it doesn’t matter,” Jason said, not taking his eyes off Beaufort. “If my mercy was so fragile that the Builder’s opinion could break it, it’s not worth relying on. He also knows that what waits for them on the surface isn’t good. Letting them live isn’t the same as setting them free.”

“The cultists are detestable,” Lorenn said. “It was not an easy choice to accept them, but we are not warriors. Our losses against the cult and then the messengers showed us this. Until the invaders came and the array was disrupted, no monsters attacked our chambers. The elementals were placid, even working with us in the forges and construction yards and growth chambers. We had known nothing but century after century of peace. We needed the Builder cult to teach us war.”

She turned a cold gaze on Beaufort.

“They taught us. Fought for us. But we do not forget why they came here in the first place, or how many they killed before they started protecting us.”

Lorenn and Marla told them the story of their people, starting with the Builder invasion. Much of that had been covered by Beaufort and she focused on the messengers. They had arrived in the midst of the brighthearts already fighting a war they were not

expecting or ready for. The messengers punched their way directly into the most sacred space in Cardinas, the natural array chamber, and worked their terrible magic.

The results went horribly awry. The messengers fled, many of them left behind as their own failed workings twisted and corrupted them. The damage had been done, however, and worse than the messengers themselves was the tree they left behind in the natural array chamber.

“After the cult joined us we made one attempt to purge the tree when the messenger numbers were still low. We reached the chamber, and that is the only time we saw the tree itself, a twisted, ugly thing. But we failed to take the chamber back. The gold-rank messengers were too strong. That was the beginning of the true days of horror.”

She paused, a pained expression on her face.

“The tree roots burrowed through stone to invade the rest of our domain. The growth chambers were first. We didn’t know why until we realised it was taking anything that was or had once been alive.”

“Organic matter,” Jason said. “Using it as base material to make more messengers?”

“Yes,” Marla confirmed. “It seems to prefer plants, but meat will do. The tree’s roots spread and the messengers grew in number. Our every loss was their gain. The main city chamber was where we made our stand. Without it, and the growth chambers attached to it, most of our people would die.”

“And die they did,” Lorenn said. “We, so far as I know, are all the brighthearts that exist. Almost all of us died in three cycles.”

“A cycle is their equivalent of days,” Beaufort explained.

“We thought it was over,” Lorenn said. “With that many bodies, the messengers would be countless. And their numbers did grow, as you saw. But something about all that death took a turn. The bodies were tainted and started to rise. Spiritual remnants appeared; echoes of departed souls mirrored by death magic. The roots withdrew and a gulf of death opened between us and the messengers. This chamber, and the two growth chambers attached to it, are on the far side of the main chamber from everything else.”

“The roots couldn’t grow around?” Miriam asked.

“It seems not,” Lorenn said. “We suspect the expanded distance is too far from the natural array.”

“Or maybe the tree didn’t think of it,” Jason said. “Trees aren’t known for their developed problem-solving skills.”

“The messengers made some attempts to cross the death chamber and attack us,” Marla said. “They failed. We can hold them at the gates long enough that they draw too many of the dead and are forced to withdraw.”

“Eventually they seemed to give up,” Beaufort said. “That was when they started digging the shaft up to the surface and you know what happened from there. Their initial scouting party to the surface didn’t come back and they’ve been quiet since. Until you showed up. We believe they were consolidating in preparation to move up in force, processing the organic matter they’d already taken and spawning as many of their kind as they could. I knew you were coming because the Builder warned us. When the messengers started swarming up the shaft, we knew you were close.”

“What I would have liked to do,” Jason said, “is evacuate everyone. Write off the expedition, get all the brighthearts out and then say to hell with it and evacuate Yaresh. Let the natural array explode and take the messengers with it. But I don’t think it’s that simple anymore.”

“We’re fairly certain that the surface messengers have sent people other than us down here,” Miriam said. “Some of their own kind that already had elemental powers and can resist being corrupted. More importantly, the god of Destruction has taken an interest.”

“I don’t think Destruction’s goal is to make sure the array blows up,” Jason said. “I think his goal is the tree. I think he wants it to become some kind of apocalypse beast that devours every living thing on this planet. Even just doing a vast amount of damage before it gets stopped would satisfy him.”

“What we’re saying is that we can’t leave the array alone,” Miriam said. “We have to deal with it and then we can *all* go to the surface.”

“Losing the array is a blow our people may not recover from,” Lorenn said. “We have already lost so much. But I have accepted that if we are going to last as a people, we need to leave our home behind.”

“And we’ll take you,” Jason said, then inclined his head at Beaufort. “We’ll even take them. But the array must be dealt with. As for your people, I had an idea of how we could maybe do something for them. I can’t promise anything, but we can at least look into it.”

Clive had left Miriam and Jason to strategy while he worked on exploring whether Jason's idea was viable. Roped into helping were the Magic Society research team and some of the brightheart magic experts. Along with a staggering understanding of elemental magic, they understood how to manipulate the echo array that could, in turn, influence the

natural array. He'd been given a large room along with all the magic supplies that the expedition, the brightheart and even the cult could muster.

"The idea," Clive explained, "is to create an area where the elemental energy that pervades the magic here is excluded. We'll be running some viability tests, but the basic premise is to use the messenger device to isolate the elemental aspects within a small area and absorb them with the excellent elemental mana lamps our new brightheart colleagues have provided."

"We're trying to create a space where we can open a portal?" asked a member of the Magic Society group.

"We are," Clive confirmed. "Opening a portal to the surface most likely won't be an option, though. Transportation portals are the most susceptible to elemental interference, and we won't be able to completely excise the elemental energy. We're hoping to make our dimensional storage useable and pull out all the supplies we were forced to stash."

He panned a stern gaze over the group, lingering on the brighthearts.

"What I'm going to tell you next stays in this room. I know that Marla has already explained the need for secrecy, so I won't harp any further. We are going to try and establish this portal viability zone to evacuate the civilian population."

"That's not possible," one of the brighthearts said. "Portals have limits and opening and closing enough of them to move ten thousand people would turn the most carefully refined ambient magic zone into pure turbulence."

"Correct," Clive said.

"Then what aren't you telling us?" the brightheart asked. "For one thing, where would the portal lead? You just said yourself that transportation portals won't work, and I haven't heard about any other underground cities nearby. Are you looking to send the whole population into the astral space? That's not an environment that most of the population will survive for long."

"All true," Clive agreed.

"And even if you got portals working, enough of them in quick succession would undo any preparation we made to balance out the ambient magic. It would only work if you had one portal that could stay open and accept any number of people through it."

"Yes," Clive said.

"If all you're going to do is stand there and agree that everything you want to do is impossible, then what are we doing here?"

"The impossible, obviously," Clive said.