

Chapter 808

Alienness and Familiarity

The air was hot and heavy, despite the deluge of rain. A gold-rank messenger, Mahk Den Kahla, floated in the air, his aura pushing aside the downpour. That didn't help visibility, the sky filled with a grey haze. He could only make out a handful of the countless massive stone spires that rose from the rainforest below like arms grasping at the sky. At the top of each spire was an ancient ruin; castles, temples and palaces brought low by the weather seemingly long ago.

Mahk knew that wasn't possible, of course, the territory having existed for less than two weeks. This strange zone was full of strange things, and rules that changed with each new territory. Annoyingly, many of the territories muted his perception significantly, this one included. Any magical sense he pushed out was soaked up by the rain, leaving only his mundane perception.

His ordinary senses fared not much better, despite their gold-rank strength. The rain and the humid haze it failed to put down cut off his vision, making only the closest few spires visible at a time. His ears fared little better, hearing nothing but the rain as it fell around him. He could taste the air, heavy but fresh, clean and not entirely unpleasant. That made it unique in the wet, hot murk of this wretched territory.

Mahk had arrived in this latest territory with his retinue of silver-rank messengers. Some had been corrupted like himself, only to wake up in this place. Some had woken beside him while others he'd picked up along the way.

Then there were the new messengers, more released from stasis with every territory he claimed. They were blank slates, recognising none of the values that should be intrinsic to their kind. That absence in them left Mahk unsettled. He would protect the true messengers, within reason, but not these uncanny replicas of the real thing. They were weapons to be used; resources to be expended.

There were more than messengers in the territories, however. Every territory boasted different living anomalies and the same undead. The anomalies were varied and seemed tied to the zones in which they originated. The undead were a different story and perhaps held clues to the situation Mahk found himself in.

The undead were mostly brighthearts. Mahk had paid little attention to the occupants of the underground realm he and the other messengers had invaded, but clearly, something had happened to them. Not only had so many died, but they had been brought back as deathless monsters. The presence of some stitched-together abominations spoke

to the involvement of necromancers, confirmed when Mahk had met one himself. Unfortunately, the fight had been hard enough that Mahk had been forced to kill him, leaving his questions unanswered.

Most disturbing were the elemental messengers turned undead. Mahk's memories were little more than hazy flashes but he was sure he had been one of them, but the living version, not the undead. At first, he had thought some of the others were corrupted, killed and then raised, but soon realised that wasn't it. He saw more of these animated messengers than should have been possible. Between that and all the blank slate messengers, someone or something was producing new messengers.

Between the living anomalies and the undead, neither threatened a gold-rank messenger, even the gold-rank abominations. The living anomalies had been a joke, boasting gold-rank auras but strength that lingered at the lesser stages of silver. Some were barely stranger than bronze.

Two weeks later, that was no longer the case. His silver-rank minions had gone from cutting them down like servant races harvesting crops to moving in groups with readiness and caution. Mahk mostly employed the blank messengers to deal with them now, throwing away their lives because it was too slow otherwise. Claiming the territory replenished their number and more anyway.

Mahk was unsure of where he was or what was happening, but he knew enough. It was a dimensional space and it could be conquered, so conquer it he would. He was not the only one with this objective as the Undeath priest proved, so perhaps there were allies to be found. The only issue would be conflict with other gold-rank messengers over who would claim final dominance.

After seeing the state of the territory, Mahk had almost left and sought another. The reason he didn't was that it had already been claimed, meaning the anomalies had already been cleared out. The more he considered a future battle for dominance with other messengers, the more he reconsidered spending the lives of his messenger army. Once he eliminated the territory owner, he would get their land and forces at no cost.

He had sent his forces to scout for the owner. The odd message windows told him that his challenge was active, so they were here somewhere. His silver-rankers each had a group of blank messengers they could sacrifice if they needed to escape. The more time he spent in this territory, however, the more unease crept into his mind. The Undeath priest's territory had a feel about it, an echo of the Undeath god. This place had a feel to it as well, a mix of alienness and familiarity.

That unease was making Mahk worry about his silver-rankers. Communication was always an issue, their speaking stones lost during their corruption. Normally they compensated with flight, visibility being clear in the sky. In the blinding rain that didn't work.

Pushing aside his concerns, Mahk continued his own search. As hours passed and he failed to find any of his people, those worries came back, gnawing at him with uncharacteristic doubt. Finally, he spotted a splash of colour against the bleak grey of the rain; a plume of rainbow smoke rising from the rainforest canopy.

Mahk's gold rank speed had him crashing through the trees in a flash. What he found was a group of messenger bodies scattered through the dense undergrowth. Little remained of them as they were actively dissolving when he arrived, but he'd moved fast enough to catch a few details. Their bodies all showed signs of burn wounds, suggesting fire powers or some variant. Most of the corpses were blank messengers, an acceptable loss, but the woman leading them was not. Losing a true messenger was an unacceptable stain on Mahk Den Kahla's own dignity.

He looked around, his senses slightly less muted under the partial shelter of the rainforest canopy. He saw the bodies were all dissolving simultaneously, not staggered at all, meaning they were not breaking down naturally with time. Someone had used a loot power to plunder the magic from them, triggering their dissolution all at once. This meant that it had only just happened, putting whoever or whatever was responsible close by.

He didn't even get a chance to start looking before he heard a voice behind him. It was a male voice with a heavy accent.

"I did not hit her, I did not."

He spun around to find a messenger floating between the trees in his direction, his shoes brushing the undergrowth. He had strange clothes, more fitted than most messengers preferred, along with shoes instead of sandals or bare feet. His face showed amusement instead of proper messenger stoicism and he nodded a too-casual greeting at Mahk.

"Oh, hi Mark."

"How did you know my name is Mahk?"

The messenger stopped, surprise on his face. When he spoke again, his accent was suddenly gone.

"Wait, that's really your name? Wow, it's all coming up Boris today."

The Undeath avatar struggled against the golden chains that had burst from the ground like spring grass to bind it. More chains kept emerging, wrapping around the avatar until it was all but mummified.

Gary looked around to see the others had already crossed the shadowy veil of the territorial boundary. He wasted no time and followed, joining the group of silver-rank adventurers. Rufus was there and had taken charge of the group. Korinne Pescos was also present, but was not doing well after losing two members of her team. She'd put their undead bodies down herself.

Korinne had been all but catatonic until they stumbled across Rosa, another member of her team. It had brought some spark back to Korinne's dead eyes but she remained distracted and morose.

The last members of the main group were Claire and Hannah, the elven Adeah twins from Rick's team. Other than them, Gary's army of golden-eyed messengers floated in the sky above them.

"That won't hold it long," Gary said.

He lifted his hammer to point along the shadowy boundary line.

"We need to cross into the first adjacent territory that way. It's close enough that the avatar might not chase us here before we cross over. If it does, that territory is a lightning field that muffles perception. We may be able to lose it there."

"What's a lightning field?" Claire asked.

"You'll see soon enough," Gary told her. "We have to go."

"You're sure you don't want to stay and fight?" Rufus asked.

"It's pointless," Gary said. "Me and the avatar are each too tough for the other to kill. We need to gather enough gold-rankers to tip the scales, and we won't do it standing here. Now, no more questions. Get moving, all of you."

The silver-rankers started moving at pace, Gary keeping easy pace with them. Behind them, pale messengers came pouring through the boundary. An equal army of messengers swept down from the sky to meet them, their eyes shining with golden light.

As they ran, Claire moved close to her sister and activated a privacy screen.

"Is it just me, or is that demigod extremely sexy?" she asked.

"It's just you," Hannah told her.

"I don't think it is."

"He's covered in fur!"

"I can live with that."

"He's twice as tall as you."

"I can *definitely* live with that."

Pallid messengers flew up the mountainside while undead scrambled up the slope beneath them. At the base of the mountain, several Undeath priests looked up, watching their forces ascend.

"What power do you think is up there?" One of them wondered.

"It doesn't matter," another of them said. "Whether it helps us or we merely keep it from the brighthearts, it advantages us."

"How many brighthearts were spotted?"

"Around a dozen, and three times that in elemental messengers."

Neil and Dustin erupted from their hiding place along with Durrum and three other elite brighthearts. They had been hidden underground by Durrum and Kurik, another earth-type brightheart. The ground exploded up, showering the priests in a dirt cloud and blasting them with force. The adventurers and brighthearts struck hard and fast, going for the kill as fast as could be managed with silver-rankers.

The forces the priests had sent up the mountain had turned around, beckoned back at the moment of the attack, but they failed to return in time. With the priests dead and the territory claimed, the pallid messengers went from enemies to neutral, flying upwards aimlessly. Without control, the undead went from a focused weapon to a mindless, leaderless mob.

This left the undead ripe for a pincer attack. Although the brighthearts and adventurers lacked numbers, they had the tactical advantage. The brighthearts at the top of the mountain swept down while the ones at the bottom moved up, grinding the mindless, aimless undead between them.

None of the messengers involved themselves; the ones at the top of the mountain stayed where they were. The pale messengers, previously under priest control, hovered in the air, confused. They didn't turn into elemental messengers under Durrum's command but they regained some of their colour as Undeath's influence diminished.

"I admit that I was wrong about the messengers," Neil said. "I was against using them even as a distraction, but it has been working out. My concern is that Durrum will command them into battle."

They watched as Durrum went on a rampage, at one point using the severed leg of one undead to beat another apart. Even when the enemy were done, their animating force dispersed, Durrum didn't stop. He stood over them, venting his berserker rage with conjured stone spears, a stone hammer and even his bare hands. He pounded already

crushed skulls into the rocky ground and tore inert bodies limb from limb. The adventurers looked to Kurik, Durrum's best friend. He looked between them and Durrum with concern and nodded.

"You know that Pebbles is a few bricks short of a wall, right?" the rabbit asked. He, Neil and Dustin were standing in one of the sleep chambers below the control room of the lightning mesa.

"Am I meant to know what that means?" Dustin asked.

"He's worried that Durrum is unstable," Neil said. "Which is an appreciable concern, but it won't help anyone if he hears you talking like that."

"You've got bigger issues than what I have to say," the rabbit told him. "Or did you not see the fist-shaped hole in the wall there?"

Neil and Dustin looked to the dent in the wall surrounded by spiderweb cracks.

"And what did you say to inspire that?" Neil asked.

"Nothing," the rabbit said. "He was in here alone. I was in the control room with his mate Kurik when we heard the thump and came down to check. Kurik took him up top to cool off. Thanks for assuming that it was me, though. Real sense of camaraderie you've got going on."

Neil frowned.

"You're right," he said. "I apologise."

"Yeah, well, no worries. We're all pretty bloody stressed. If that guy loses it, we're all knee-deep in brown, you know that. I can control the lightning from in here, but it won't shoot at the bloke who owns the place."

"How did you find that out without testing it?" Dustin asked.

"It pops up on the monitors when you point a drone at him. Of course I wouldn't try to shoot him with lightning. What I did try to do was tell you before the last territory that Pebbles was ready to flip his lid. Now he's not just ready; he's halfway gone. You're the ones that put him in charge, so you're the ones that have to fix this."

"Happy to dump this all on us rather than take part then?" Neil asked.

"I already tried shooting him with lightning and that didn't work at all. It's time for you fellas to have a crack."

Neil's hands balled into fists. He closed his eyes, took a calming breath and unclenched his white-knuckled hands.

"Just stay out of his way," Neil told the rabbit. "We'll figure this out."

"No worries there, mate. I'm not going anywhere near that nut bag."

“Durrum, we need to stop,” Neil said, atop the lightning mesa. He and Dustin stood with Kurik as Durrum paced back and forth. He was more a bundle of energy than the lightning hitting the circle of rods above their heads.

“You fear my power,” Durrum snarled.

“Yes,” Neil admitted freely. “That power is affecting your mind and you’re too smart not to realise that. I know you feel it, Durrum. You’re a good man. A sensible man. That’s why we agreed to follow you in the first place. Just stop for a moment and consider what’s happening.”

“He’s right, Durry,” Kurik said. “You’ve always been the smart one. The thoughtful one. Just be who you are.”

Durrum scowled, then gave a reluctant nod.

“I’m... it’s hard to think. My head is so loud.”

Neil and Kurik shared a look.

“Durrum,” Kurik said. “It’s time we found the other groups. We need to consolidate what you have won for us with someone who can control it all safely. We need to get your head cleared.”

“You rest here,” Neil said. “If someone comes for this place, your power is what will stop them. We’ll start scouting for...”

He trailed off as Durrum went still, looking out from the mesa. The others followed his gaze but saw nothing under the cloud-blackened sky.

“Someone has come for this place,” Durrum said. “Tell the rabbit and the other controllers to send out a drone and get ready to fight.”

“Have they challenged your territory?” Dustin asked.

“No,” Durrum said. “And gods help them if they try.”

“Gary!” Neil yelled angrily. “Get that off him now!”

Lightning was attracted to the hammer the size of a large house with Durrum somewhere under it. Gary, a fraction of the hammer’s size, lifted it into the air and tossed it aside. A lightning bolt passed through the hammer and into him in the process, to no discernible effect. Everyone looked into the hammer-shaped crater to see no Durrum.

“Where did he go?” Neil wondered aloud.

“We forgot something,” Dustin said, drawing all eyes. “He’s an earth guy.”

Gary vanished under a pyramid of rock as stone spears shot from the ground to smash into and bury him. His hammer smashed a hole from the inside and he pushed his way out as if through thick spider webs in an old house.

"This is getting annoying," Gary grumbled. "Calm your man down."

"You did drop a giant hammer on him," Rufus pointed out.

"He attacked me first," Gary said.

"He's claimed too many territories," Neil said. "It's affecting his mind but we can talk him around. He has to come out of the ground eventually."

"Unless he tries something else," Rufus said, pointing. Everyone turned in that direction to see a horde of elemental messengers descending upon them through the sky.

"How are they flying without the lightning striking them down?" Gary asked.

"We have a rabbit living inside a big rock," Dustin said.

"What?" Rufus asked.

"We think he belongs to Jason," Neil said.

"Oh," Rufus said, neither needing nor wanting further explanation.

"I'm not sure we can get Durrum to stand down his messengers," Neil said as he turned to look at Gary's messengers behind them. "I don't want this to be a bloodbath between allies."

"It won't be," Gary growled.

He crouched down and plunged his hands into the muddy ground. He yanked them up again, holding onto a golden chain that he pulled hand-over-hand like he was raising an anchor. At the end of the chain was Durrum, struggling futilely as Gary pulled him from the earth and lifted him into the air by the neck.

Durrum dangled from one of Gary's hands. The big brightheart suddenly looked small, thrashing ineffectually while the leonid stood still as a mountain. Durrum's eyes burned with fury while Gary's anger was tempered steel.

"I challenge for this territory," Gary growled.