

## Chapter 809

### The Reason We Have To

Mahk Den Kahla found the messenger in front of him a worrying oddity. His mannerisms were bizarre, with none of the dignity he would expect of a messenger, especially a gold-rank one. Even his clothes were strange. Mahk had woken up in clothes not his own, but very much in the typical messenger style. This Boris Ket Lundi, as he introduced himself, wore clothes reminiscent of the servant races.

"I think it is clear which of us is the superior messenger," Mahk said. "Surrender your territories to me."

"I can't do that."

"You can and you will."

"Vesta Carmis Zell sent me here. Me and several others. To finish what you started."

"My astral king would never tolerate the likes of you."

"I don't belong to her. She bargained us from other astral kings because we have what she needed: Elemental powers that can resist the influence of the natural array. You do realise that is what corrupted you?"

Mahk frowned.

"Yes," he admitted.

Boris turned to look at the great tree jutting up somewhere past the horizon, so vast and distant that there was no guessing the true size. Mahk followed his gaze, feeling the distant echo of the tree's power.

"Did you know the natural array is a part of this place?" Boris asked.

"I can feel the power coming from the tree, but I sense no elemental energy."

"You won't at this distance. But someone has to get a lot closer before all this is done, Mahk. It will only end when someone confronts that power. Someone who hasn't already fallen to its corruption."

Mahk continued staring at the distant tree. Although many territories held mountains and other features that rose higher than the boundary veils, no such terrain was visible. Only the tree could be seen; the tree that filled Mahk with uncharacteristic doubt. Normally, the eternal presence of his astral king steeled Mahk's resolve in moments of uncertainty. Vesta Carmis Zell's touch still lay upon him, but he could feel the divide between them. In this place he was alone.

"It can't be me, can it?" Mahk asked softly.

"No," Boris answered gently.

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The plan was to link Jason's five disconnected territory clusters. It would consolidate his area of control, make it easier to defend, and secure the messengers belonging to those territories. It would also establish a dominant position in the lower third of the transformation zone's map, giving them a base from which to expand upward.

The first step was connecting Jason's territory with those originally claimed by Amos and Gabriel. This would secure the now-free messengers in those territories from being taken over by an enemy. Jason and Jali successfully contacted the newly awakened messengers in the first target regions, convincing them not to attack the silver-rank teams he portalled in on sight.

Those teams went to work expanding the two territories towards one another, Jason swooping in at the last moment to claim each one. At the same time, gold-rankers expanded out from Jason's original domain, ultimately unifying the three territories into one.

This left two territories under Jason's control still isolated. One had belonged to the Builder cult and held minimal strategic value. The messengers that awakened there were already dead. The last territory became the new priority. Originally claimed by Councilwoman Lorenn of the brighthearts, control of the messengers she had awakened there was up for grabs if an enemy challenged for the territory and won.

That challenge came sooner than Jason and his allies would have liked, but not as soon as they feared. Having consolidated the first three territories, they were ready to move on to the next. Jason loaded up those willing to travel through his soul realm, which was not everyone.

The Builder cultists balked, refusing to submit themselves to that much of Jason's power and control. Amos Pensinata also held back, but they needed to leave the core area with defenders in any case. Marek Nior Vargas also stayed, despite his familiarity with the soul realm. He would not risk his people like that unless Jason forced him, which he did not. Marek was willing to at least stay behind and defend their main territory with the cultists and Amos.

The group had been confident in meeting any challenge, having a large force of gold and silver-rankers at their command. Even without using messenger slaves, they were confident. The challenge came from undeath priests, the most likely candidates, but in greater numbers than anticipated. Not only did they have more essence users, but they led an army of pallid messengers and undead.

Numbers alone were not enough to deter adventurers. It deterred their allies a little, but they didn't worry about that. The silver-rankers focused on the minions while the gold-rankers went for the priests. Jason's new affliction, ghost fire, ravaged any undead it touched. His weren't the divine flames of the goddess of Death, but they still devastated the unliving elements of the enemy forces. It didn't harm the pallid messengers, but they were touched with undeath energy. Jason's aura suppressed such energy, diminishing their strength considerably. Once Gordon's butterflies got going, they fell in droves as well.

The battle was not a one-sided affair, however. The undeath priests were experts in wielding a less powerful but more numerous force against their enemies. The strongest weapon the priests had was an understanding of their opposition. The priests had a completely expendable army while the adventurers would be maimed with every loss. Messengers and undead were sent in suicide rushes, willing to trade five, ten or even twenty of their own if it meant a kill. The priests had less personal power, but they could use the undead as weapons, detonating them in explosions of bone or poison gas.

The adventurers and their allies understood the mathematics of attrition. If they were willing to take the losses, they would certainly win, but at a price. The priests bet on them not being willing to accept the sacrifice, and they bet right. While Jason and his companions devastated the minion army, they quickly learned not to push too hard. Anyone who advanced too boldly found themselves swarmed by enemies willing to trade deaths twenty to one.

The adventurers were elites amongst elites, learning fast and reacting effectively. They switched to a more conservative approach, watching each other's backs and pulling each other and their allies out of danger. They suffered casualties but managed to escape any deaths, although there were many near misses.

Adding to the danger were the priests. Their malignant powers made healing less effective or even harmful, something Jason could also accomplish. It could be dealt with by healers with the right expertise and power, which they did have. It couldn't be dealt with swiftly, however, diminishing the power of the adventurers.

In the end, neither side was willing to push hard enough for total victory. This was not the underground death city where the priests could replenish their undead forces all but infinitely. While they were willing to sacrifice their minions there was a limit, especially with adventurers devastating those forces. Building them up again would take time and they could not afford to lose them all here.

On the adventurer side, they weren't willing to spend the lives it would take to secure a complete victory. They already held the territory, so their priority was keeping people

alive. Even if the priests managed to slink away with much of their army still intact, the territory was retained.

In the aftermath, Jason worked on removing the malignant power of the Undeath priests on their wounded. Different powers excelled at removing different afflictions, and Jason's was perfect for this situation. His ability, Feast of Absolution, specialised in eliminating curses, diseases and unholy power, the exact kinds wielded by the priests. He's been using it in the battle, but now he was joining the healers for a more dedicated approach.

The power even circumvented some of the traps such afflictions held for ordinary cleansing, as that was not what his ability did. Rather than cleanse, it consumed, devouring the malignant magic to fuel Jason's power. The result left the patients grateful to Jason, but also wary.

As Jason worked, Miriam Vance approached him.

"Did we manage to save everyone?" he asked.

"Almost," she told him looking weary. "We lost a cultist and a couple of brighthearts, all silver-rank. That's damn near a miracle for a fight like that. We brought the best down that hole with us, and it's paying off now. And those brighthearts might not have the best training, but they're seasoned. I couldn't have asked for better forces to command."

"The priests can't say the same," Jason said. "They're all about expendability."

"They'll most likely seek out unclaimed territory. Rebuild their forces by collecting more messengers and undead, animating anomalies as they go."

"Agreed," Jason said. "I have my shadow familiar tracking them, so he'll confirm it or alert us if they do something unexpected."

"We don't have time to wait for them to rebuild and come back," Miriam said. "We left minimal defenders in the larger territory we just unified and we need to reinforce them before someone else comes knocking at our door."

"You want to follow the priests. Finish the job."

"We'll recover to full strength faster than they will. Our people were hurt and shaken, but giving up the victory kept everyone alive. Even slow, painstaking healing is faster than animating a new army. A second round will have us at the advantage, especially if we're the aggressors."

Miriam followed Jason as he moved to the next group of afflicted. His power made their life force visible, vibrant red tainted with sickly colours. The taint streamed out of them, moving through the air in twisted tendrils for Jason to devour, absorbing them into

his outstretched hands. It cast his face in shifting, corrupted light, his nebulous eyes shining.

“If we chase, it’s into an unstable situation,” Jason said, resuming their conversation. Miriam blinked, his casual tone at odds with his villainous appearance.

“I’m sorry, what?” she asked.

“I’m saying that pursuing them into unclaimed territories is a bad idea,” he said. “The living anomalies are strong, now, and those priests aren’t fools. If we have to fight them and the anomalies at the same time, they’ll bleed us in a three-way fight. Even with their diminished forces, they can afford to soak losses we can’t. They’ve just shown us that a battle of attrition is fighting on their terms, not ours.”

“But if we could afford losses...”

She left the sentence hanging but he didn’t respond, focusing on healing the next group. Seeing he would keep ignoring her, she finished her thought.

“Jason, if you lift your moratorium on using our own messengers—”

“We don’t have messengers. I’ve set them free, Miriam. They’re not anyone’s to command but their own.”

“If you and Jali Corrik Fen asked, I think they would fight.”

“You’re probably right.”

Jason and Miriam stared each other down until she sighed.

“Jason, principles—”

“Are not how we win, I know. They’re the reason we have to. Don’t give me the hard choices speech, Miriam; I’ve walked that road and left a trail of bodies behind me.”

“Then what do you suggest, Operations Commander?”

“I want to take a multi-faceted approach. You agree that the priority is linking this territory with the main one we’ve unified already?”

“Yes. Once we can defend them as a collective whole, things will get a lot easier. We can afford to ignore the remaining territory for now. With no surviving messengers attached to it, it’s strategically all but worthless.”

“Agreed. I suggest we balance our forces between this territory and the main one. We don’t do any expanding other than to unify what we already have. Rick and Sophie are both out scouting for others, and finding more allies before taking the priests on again could tip the scales. More allies will play to our strengths while throwing messenger slaves at them will not. That’s how they fight, and they’ll be a lot better at it.”

Miriam nodded.

“That’s the best argument for not using the messengers I’ve heard.”

“More than not using enslaved child soldiers?”

“You’re the Operations Commander, Jason. Ethics is your area. I’m the tactical Commander, and my area is how to win.”

“I don’t believe you’re that callous, Miriam.”

“I have to be, with this much at stake. You seem determined to be soft, so I have to be hard.”

“And we meet somewhere in the middle?”

“Ideally. If we’re not going to recruit messengers to fight them, what will we do about the priests? I don’t think leaving them be and hoping more of our allies show up is a good approach.”

Jason let out a chuckle. As he was in the middle of devouring the dark power out of people, it came out as more than a little sinister.

“Miriam, you said yourself that they’ll take longer than we will to recover. I’d like to see if we can’t extend that timeframe. Not a direct attack but a harassment campaign. Attacks of opportunity, nibbling at their weak points. Striking from safety; shaving their numbers and getting out. Not enough to stop them rebuilding, just slow them down and frustrate their leadership. Exhaustion by a thousand cuts.”

“You want to do it yourself,” Miriam realised.

“I can hide from gold-rankers. Move alone and undetected. Since we all joined up, my role has been little more than showing up in freshly cleared territories to claim them. Since I’m jumping all over the place anyway, ducking in to annoy some priests isn’t out of my way.”

“Unless you make a mistake, get caught, and everything comes apart. Our leader and our territories gone. Yes, you have the skills and the power to evade and escape, but there are no guarantees. When the odds of failure are small but the price of failure is everything, it’s not worth the risk unless the risk is absolutely necessary. Which it isn’t.”

“You’re saying the captain shouldn’t go on the away mission.”

“I have no idea if that’s what I’m saying.”

“Would it help if I put on a red shirt?”

“I hope you talking nonsense means you’ve decided not to go risking your neck.”

“It does. You’ve talked me around, Tactical Commander, but I at least want to participate in clearing the territories some more. The anomalies are getting feisty and I haven’t had the chance to fight enemies like this for a while.”

“So long as you don’t do it alone.”

“Deal. I still think my strategy of harassing the priests is sound, though. See if you can’t assemble a small group that can handle that. Keep it small; we don’t want to divert too many resources, and stealth matters more than power.”

“I believe Lorenn has some brighthearts that may fit the task. They have ash and earth affinities, with powers more suited to stealth than fighting. Drifting on the breeze, moving through the ground, their auras blending into the elements around them such that even gold-rankers have trouble sensing them. Not as strong in a stand-up fight, but they’re the best scouts and assassins the brighthearts have, according to Lorenn.”

“That sounds perfect. We have them here?”

“Lorenn was lucky enough to assemble a good number of them on the way to finding us.”

“See what she thinks about using them, then. They’re her people, so let’s not just deploy them on her out of hand.”